



Inside TSA

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Executive Function at Elementary School

For most students, elementary school is the perfect place to experience basic executive function challenges. The general goal is clear: develop self-control; learn to read and write; and cooperate with other students. It is a very structured environment, with specific expectations and a gradual increase in the difficulty of tasks and so it is the perfect setting for developing good organizational and study habits. Many

children with EFD are not diagnosed until later in school because the structured environment acts as an outside executive helping them manage their time.

TS, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD) and EFD form a complicated alphabet soup for a grade school-aged child. A child may have EFD with any combination of tics, ADHD, OCD or learning disabilities.

Imagine being a 4th grader with TS. All of your energy is focused on preventing the embarrassment caused by your tics. When the teacher calls on you, you have no idea what she is asking because you were suppressing tics and not listening. She assumes you are not paying attention and this causes further embarrassment and may lead to additional stress and additional physical tics. Now you may be labeled as hyperactive when you are, in fact, stressed out from suppressing tics and unable to focus on the executive function tasks at hand.

If you are a child with OCD, you may react to the teacher saying the number 'four.' You are compelled by a neurological mandate to identify groups of four in the room and miss the rest of what the teacher says. Your attention, focus, effort, emotion management, memory and impulse control are derailed — again!

Memory and Mess: What Parents Can Do to Help

Children are rarely expert organizers, as this is something that they have to learn, it's not innate. Students with EFD are often perceived as uncooperative, lazy or unmotivated when they fail to hand in homework. Sometimes these students forget about an assignment entirely, but their parents often report that they've completed the work, but simply lose the piece of paper or forget to hand it in to the teacher.

The state of a child's book bag and desk can be signs of problems with EFD. "When a young student opens his/her book bag and the bag virtually explodes and the student seems to be nonplussed by the fiasco, this can be an indicator. If the same student's desk is also a mess and papers, books and other items are stuffed in without rhyme or reason that is another indicator for dysfunction, especially if papers and assignments are continuously lost or missing. It is

hard to complete a project when the assignment has been lost three times and the student finally gives up asking for a new copy because he/she is tired of being chastised for being irresponsible," Sarah said.

She suggests that a parent can help the child organize time and his/her environment.

"Create a chart that includes homework, chores and free time. Precision scheduling is not the goal — every minute

of the day does not need to be accounted for, but the tasks do. It is important to sit down and have a conversation with your children about how the structure of the schedule is set up as well as the tasks. Including them in the process will help them buy into it. The first to third graders will most likely not have lengthy tasks to complete, but the expectation that they will clean up after themselves when finished with an activity or toys is extremely important."

Parents expect to nag children about putting toys away, picking up clothes off the floor and doing



Sarah Crowther

Executive Function describes the process of making decisions, setting priorities and managing time. It is the BIG 'to-do' list that enables us to get things done. It is located in the frontal lobe of the brain that is often called the 'management center.' Executive Function Deficits (EFD) occur when there is an 'under reaction' in the brain to two key chemicals: norepinephrine and dopamine. EFD is NOT a lack of willpower or ordinary laziness! It is a neurological dysfunction.

Because about half of people with Tourette Syndrome are also diagnosed with EFD, TSA asked Sarah Crowther to talk about the impact that EFD has on students with TS. This article is based on Sarah's expert observations and insights. In the Spring 2011 issue of *Inside TSA*, we'll continue to explore TS and EFD with an article focusing on the impact of EFD on adults.

Sarah Crowther is the Director of Student Success and First-year Programming at Culver-Stockton College in Canton, MO. Before joining Culver-Stockton, Sarah worked in admissions at Landmark College, the premiere institution for students with learning differences and/or ADHD. Her area of expertise is executive function disorders in college students and she has made presentations on that topic at domestic and international conferences, including the recent 2010 TSA national conference.

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Nikki Burdine**

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**TS Awareness Month
Activity Recap**