

# CONQUER THE CHAOS

**Empowering Families with Executive  
Function Coaching**

With Katie Greenleaf, MA, LPCC



# **Executive Function: What is it, anyway?**

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# Executive Function

- For our purposes, let's keep it simple...
  - EF: neuropsychological processes needed to sustain problem-solving toward a goal.
  - Self management
    - self-restraint
    - self-awareness
    - self-speech
    - self-control of emotion
    - self-motivation
    - self-directed play for problem-solving.
- Kids with EF deficits may appear to be less mature (are age-inappropriate)
- Chronological age will not match EF age
- Any neuropsychological diagnosis (ADHD, ASD, anxiety, depression, etc) will come with EF deficits (does not work conversely—not everyone that displays EF deficits will have a neuropsychological diagnosis)

# Executive Functions vs. Executive Skills

## Functions: Knowing WHEN

- For example: Understanding the conditions that require planning

## Skills: Knowing HOW

- For example: Knowing how to use a planning tool, such as a planner

## Why should you know this?

- Understanding which one(s) apply informs your intervention, and skill intervention may look very different from function intervention!

For example: If your child's planning function is not activating, you will not see the independent use of a planner. If you are teaching and creating a routine around using the *skill*, you won't see improvement.

Therefore--make sure the child knows *how to use* their planner, and then move on to support the function of recognizing when to use it.

(hint: it's not just when the teacher says to use it)

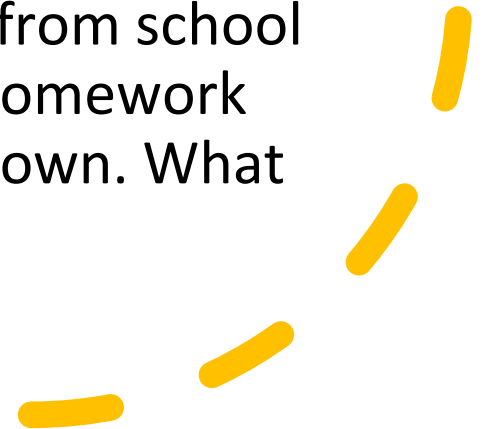


Appropriate  
EF  
intervention  
does not  
**demand**  
independence

- Independence is the outcome. Intervention must be done with fidelity and intensity.
- Supporting and strengthening EF is a marathon, not a sprint. You will be serving as a bridge from *can't* to *can*. This means you will be working alongside your child. This often feels uncomfortable to parents.
- Your way of 'being' with your child through EF intervention may sometimes feel like 'coddling.'
- Tip: Imagine you're serving as a surrogate brain. Talk through processes, and isolate thinking.
- 'Pitch in' and take some of the easy stuff off their plate for the sake of isolating their thinking process


# LISTEN UP IF YOU HAD THESE QUESTIONS...

- How can I get my kid to do any sort of executive functioning?
- How to also consider when adults also have executive functioning challenges.
- How can I help my child remember something?
- How can I make something they forget into a routine?
- How can I keep structure and get my kids to self-motivate through our after school schedule?
- Allowing my child time to wind down from school transition to home is difficult. Doing homework right away after school leads to meltdown. What should I do?



Here's why your child sometimes does things that don't make a lot of sense...

You say...



"Hey Sally, it's time to leave for school. Go upstairs and grab your shoes and your backpack, then meet me at the door."

What Sally does upstairs:

(picture a child playing in her room)

If you only  
remember one  
thing from  
tonight

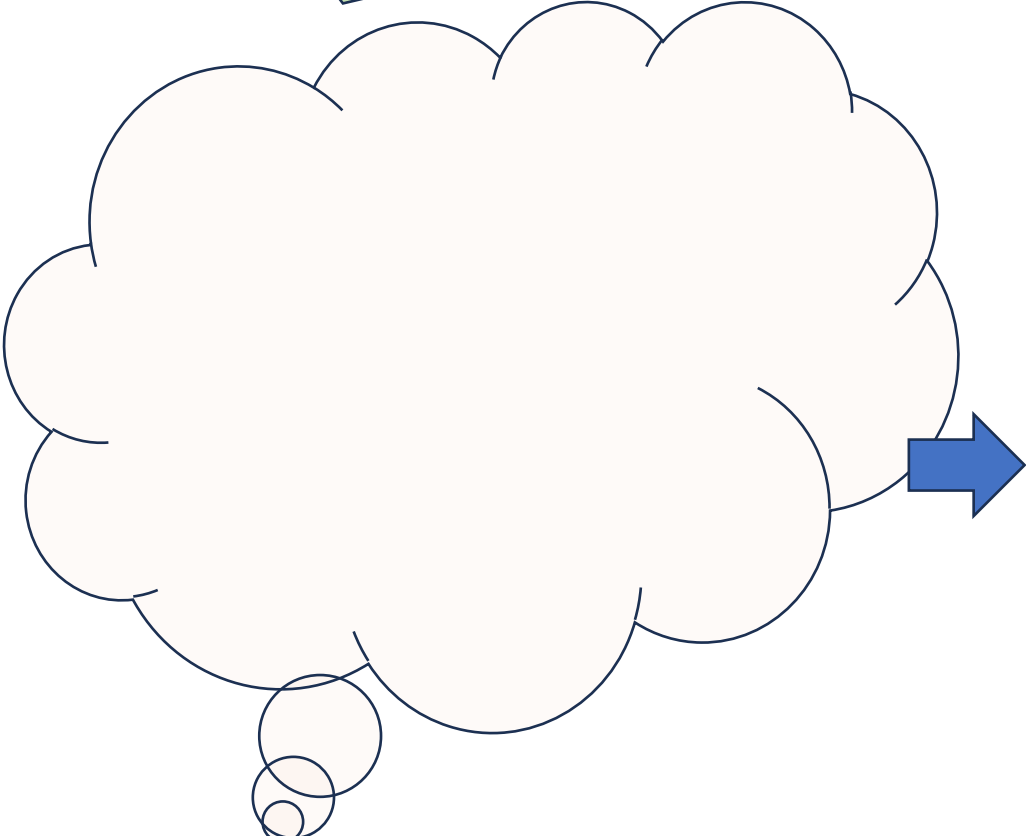
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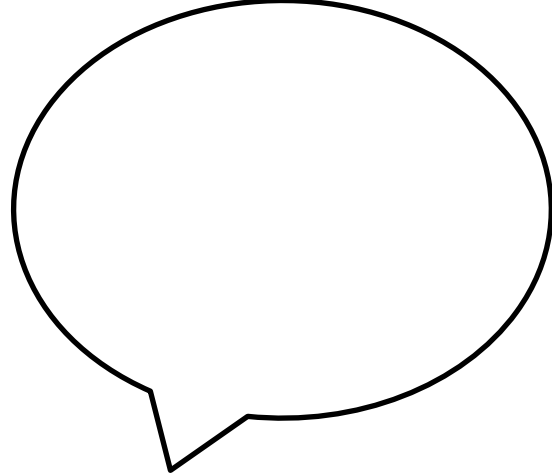
Tools we give kids that come from our own strong working memory:  
Lists  
Verbal Prompts  
Reminders  
Sticky Notes



Non-Verbal Working Memory Activates



'If, Then' thinking occurs. Contingency plans based on our visual



Verbal Working Memory Activates (in the form of self-directed talk)

# Executive function tools and strategies should be centered around visuals

Instead of this....

MY WEEK	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	TO DOS
MATH							
ENGLISH							
SCIENCE							
SOC. STUDIES							
LITERATURE						SUNDAY	NOTES
MUSIC / ART							
ELECTIVE							
ACTIVITIES							

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Use this

**GOAL OF THE WEEK**

**THIS WEEK'S PRIORITY**

**MORNING ROUTINE**

**SCHOOL**

**STUDY**

**LEAVE SCHOOL**

**TO-DO LIST**

**POSITIVE HABIT MAKER**

**WEDNESDAY** | **THURSDAY** | **FRIDAY** | **SATURDAY**

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# Planning and prioritizing

- Sit down together with your child and complete a visual of the day on a daily planning sheet. (The time blocking is your visual)
- If the day goes off track, it's fine! The idea is to adjust the visual when life forces us to adjust and be flexible.
- Walking through your day visually is a mental dress rehearsal. You can identify problems before they happen and contingency plan

## DAILY PLANNER

TODAY'S DATE: January 30

DAY: Tuesday

### NEED TO DO

- Clean work zone.
- Math worksheet
- Go to Dinner for Grandpa's Birthday
- 
- 
- 
- 
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- 
- 
- 

### WANT TO DO

- Watch youtube
- Play Fortnite
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

TIME	PLANS & SCHEDULE
6:00 am	
6:30 am	Wake up
7:00 am	Morning Routine (Tap at)
7:30 am	Leave for School
8:00 am	
8:30 am	
9:00 am	
9:30 am	
10:00 am	School
10:30 am	
11:00 am	
11:30 am	
12:00 pm	
12:30 pm	
1:00 pm	
1:30 pm	
2:00 pm	
2:30 pm	
3:00 pm	
3:30 pm	Ride Bus Home
4:00 pm	Snack
4:30 pm	youtube
5:00 pm	Worksheet
5:30 pm	Get ready + clean work zone
6:00 pm	Leave for Dinner
6:30 pm	Dinner with
7:00 pm	Grandma
7:30 pm	Come home
8:00 pm	Play fortnite
8:30 pm	Get ready for bed
9:00 pm	
9:30 pm	Sleep
10:00 pm	

# Internalizing time:

required to have good  
time management, to  
learn to pace, to learn  
to check our work,  
improves focus

## To feel time, start by making it visual

- For tasks where your child tends to get lost in time, “space out,” gets distracted, struggles to finish:
  1. Create a ‘chunk’ of time on an analog clock, then set a timer for halfway through
  2. When your child is audibly alerted of the halfway point by the timer, remind them that this is what it *feels like* to be halfway through this chunk of time. Prompt to consider whether the task is halfway finished.
  3. If not, re-adjust the clock and timer, and keep going.
  4. The more trouble your child has with focus, the smaller your chunks of time should be.



# Planning: Start with a sketch or photo

- Plan backwards. Start with Finished: 'Plan your work, then work your plan.'
- Make sure all criteria/requirements are depicted in the finished sketch
- Steps is a detailed to-do list that comes directly from the finished sketch

**Steps**

1. Read Book  
- 546 pages  
at 5.5 hours to finish
2. Keep a list of page #'s when you read interesting or inspiring things
3. Choose Scene
4. Find a shoe box with a lid
5. Build Characters and scenery out of clay and paper
6. Give scenery in Box
7. label lid
8. Type paragraphs
9. Edit & Revise
10. Print & put in folder
11. Attach list of page #'s

Maybe... - I will only use construction paper  
 - The printer is out of ink - I will type paper in study hall

2



**Finished**

And then... Put Box with Backpack, put Essay in EA folder in Backpack & Turn in Before class APR 18

1

# Chores

- **Example: Cleaning your room**

1. Divide room into 'zones.' Clean each zone so that it looks exactly the way you want it to.
2. Take a photo of each zone and post somewhere in that zone so your child can see if they **matched the photo** once they feel they've completed the task
3. Use the photo as your 'finished' visual. Then create specific steps **with** your child to match the photo. Coach your child through the steps

### Steps

1. Put stuffed animals into bins in cabinet
2. Take stuffed animals to basement
3. Clean up art supplies and take to hallway
4. Take dirty brushes and water to the kitchen sink
5. Throw away all trash
6. Take all toys to the playroom and put away
7. Mom – purchase shelves, bookcase, file drawers, new blinds and table with chairs, organizer baskets
8. Mom – set all new furniture up and hang blinds
9. Put all art supplies in buckets and bins
10. Bring toys from playroom back and organize in new cabinets

**Maybe...** I'll go with mom to pick out table, maybe I'll find some toys to donate. I should replenish art supplies, throw away old dried up markers and paints

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### Finished

**And then...** I'll post photos in my zones to match when cleaning

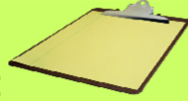
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# Planning, staying on task, mastering routines, identifying and removing what is hard for your child

- Help your child do ‘mental dress rehearsals’ prior to performing a task.
  - obstacles can be identified
  - contingency plans can be made
  - your child gets to practice, and is much more likely to be successful.
- Show your child the photo of the space where they will be performing the task.
- Have them ‘tap out’ what they will do and in the order they will do it.
- This is one of the most important interventions you can do with your child.
- Tips:
  - ✓ A visual schedule should include actual photos wherever possible!
  - ✓ Clip art does not support non-verbal working memory. Choose a sketch or drawing over clip-art if it’s not possible to get a photo.

## Morning Routine – Good Morning!

Don't forget to:



1. Hang up your belongings
2. Turn in your homework
3. Move your clip for lunch count
4. Get your journals and materials
5. Get today's morning work
6. Work quietly until the bell rings.







# Keep in Mind

Behaviors (meltdowns, defiance, refusal, procrastination, appearing unmotivated, lying about having completed a task or assignment) are all red flags that tell us we need to adjust our course of action and re-think our expectations.

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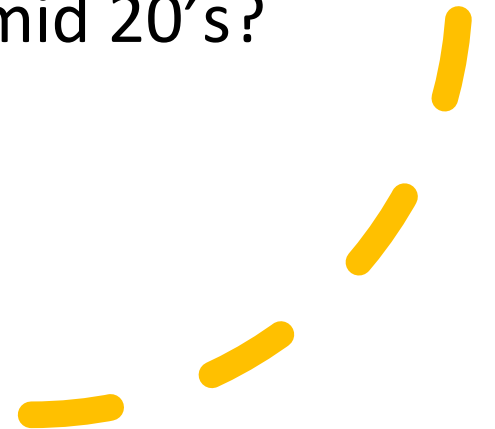
If you find yourself saying or thinking these things, you need to adjust the lens you see your child's difficulties through...

- I'm not asking you for much, it's a simple chore
  - See? You threw a fit, put it off, made a big deal out of it...and then it only took you 10 minutes to actually do it!
  - This really shouldn't be so hard
  - You better start doing this without me reminding you because *NEXT YEAR* the teachers will expect even more
  - No more (insert preferred activity here: screen time, playing with friends, spending time in your room, etc) until you start cleaning your room when I ask you to.
  - When you start working *with* your child to master skills and routines, rather than *reminding them* that they need to master skills and routines, they will start to master skills and routines. Eliminating pleasure is not a part of an effective plan.
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# LISTEN UP IF YOU HAD THESE QUESTIONS

...

- How often should a child go to a counselor/coach to learn/practice executive functioning skills?
- How to also consider when adults also have executive functioning challenges.
- Is it fair to expect that these skills will not be fully developed until my child's mid 20's?



**Neuroplasticity is a  
critical concept in  
executive function  
intervention**

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# Here's Why...

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- Your brain has a miraculous ability to change. And if you know how, you can train it to do so.
- The brain changes in some way every single day you are alive.
- There isn't much benefit to considering when executive capacities will be 'fully developed.'
  - Based on old research and old ways of thinking
  - Everything we do/don't do/say/think/experience changes the brain.
- Chemical, functional and structural change
- **BOTTOM LINE:** Any intervention used to improve executive function should to be repeated and consistent. Eventually, your child will demonstrate independence without prompting.

# LISTEN UP IF YOU HAD THESE QUESTIONS (continued)

- What are some practical tips to use to improve executive functioning for a pre-teen with ADHD to manage symptoms at home—especially completing tasks, following directions, organization?
- What are the best ways to model EF for kids with ADHD?



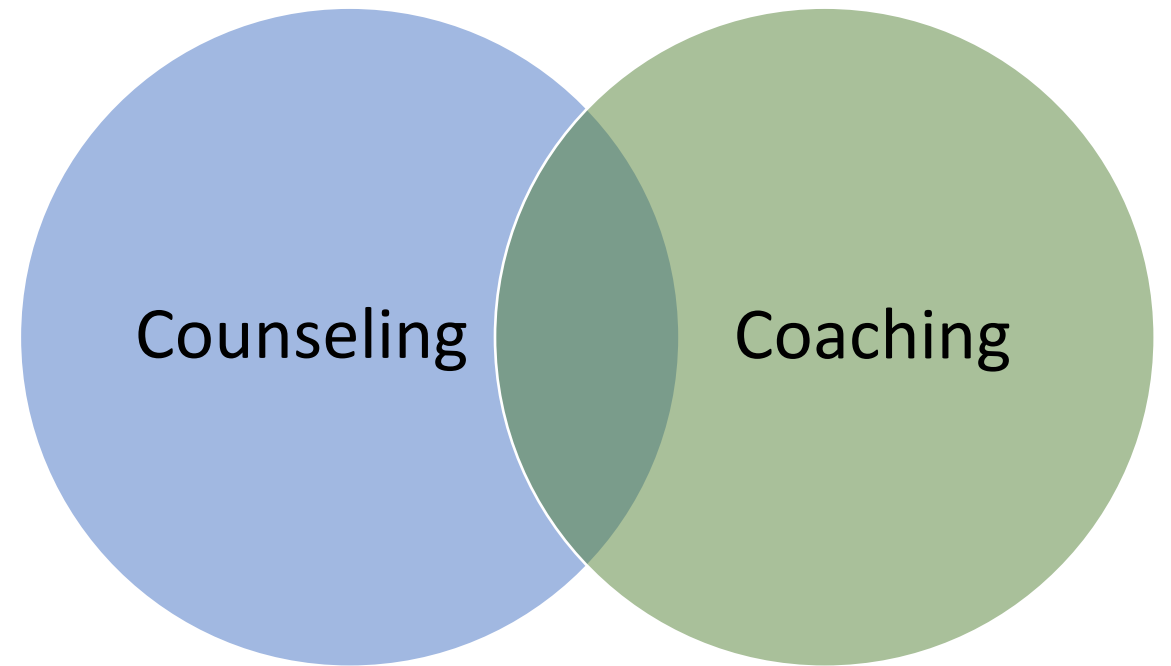
# Hot Topic: Let's talk about ADHD

- The most common form of ADHD is now known as the Combined Type.
  - (There is no ADD—only ADHD, with inattentive, hyperactive, and combined presentations.)
- 60% - 75% of people diagnosed with ADHD will be placed in this type at some time in their childhood or adulthood.
- This type of ADHD involves significant problems with:
  - sustained attention
  - persistence toward goals
  - resisting distractions along the way
  - inhibiting excessive task-irrelevant activity (hyperactivity)
  - inhibiting actions, words, thoughts, and emotions that are either socially inappropriate for the situation or inconsistent with one's goals
- The observable signs of ADHD present the same way EF challenges present.
  - Russell Barkley has proposed that ADHD be re-named Self-Regulation Deficit Disorder, and considers this to be synonymous with what he describes as Executive Function Deficit Disorder
  - ADHD and EF deficits are essentially referencing the same thing

# Counseling vs Coaching

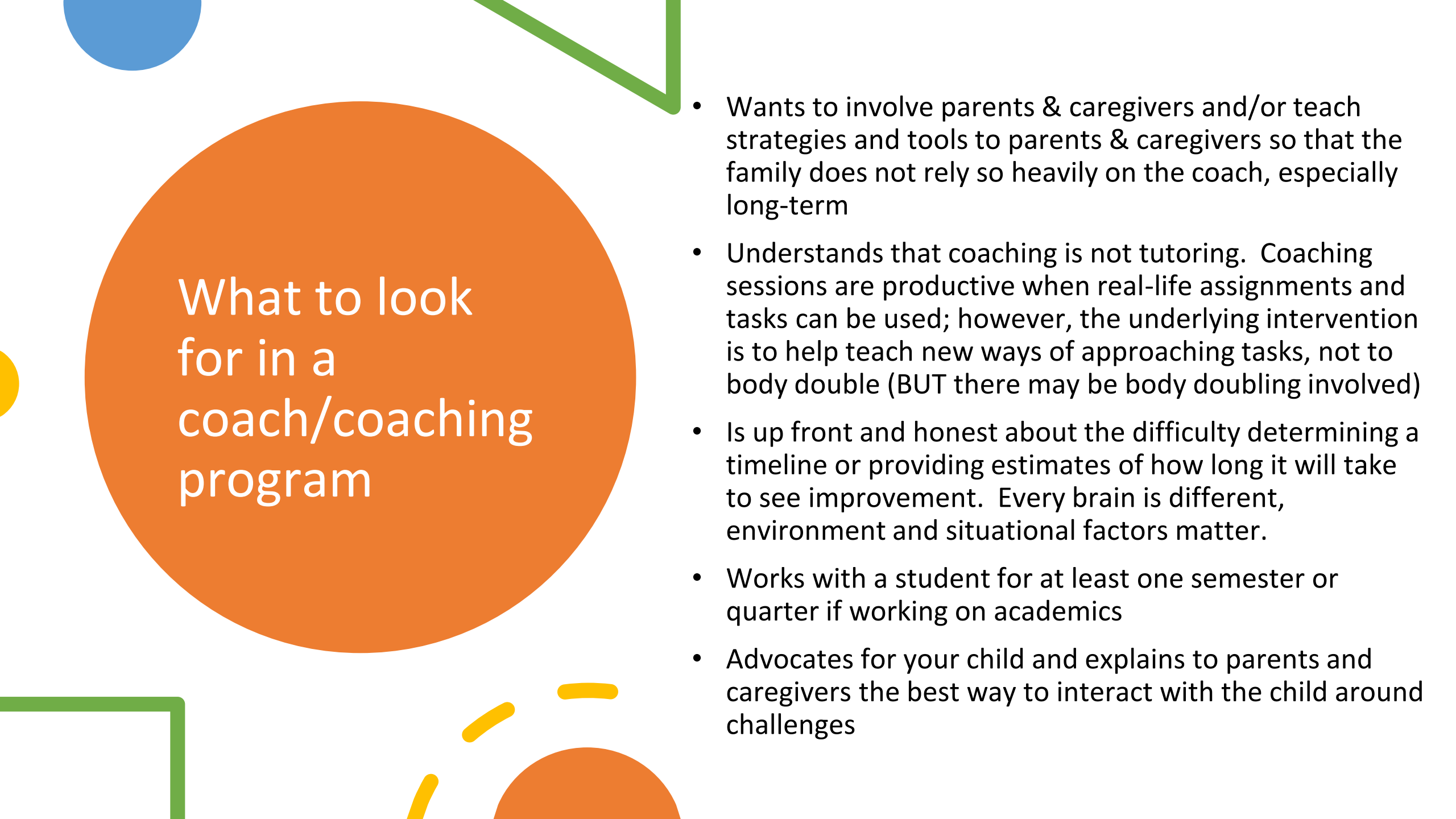
If your child presents with symptoms that would benefit from traditional counseling (such as depression and anxiety) but also struggles with executive function:

- In general, a coach would likely struggle to make a lot of progress with your child
  - Neurologically not possible to strengthen EF while in an emotional state
- In general, a counselor who is not strong in executive function intervention could make enough progress to get your child to a state where coaching can be productive. (UNLESS the executive deficits are the root cause of symptoms and accommodations are not being made to ease up on expectations)
  - Good rule of thumb: Focus on treating symptoms IF you're also treating the root cause
- A counselor who specializes in executive function intervention could discern the relationship between presenting symptoms and executive function, and work to address both. (Most likely the best option if you need insurance to cover it)
- If your child is experiencing struggles with EF, but is otherwise coping well, a coach is a great option



Problems you may encounter: Licensed counselors who highly specialize in EF can be difficult to find, depending on your location. In general, insurance does not cover coaching by itself—'executive function disorder' is not a recognized diagnosis. Some insurance MAY cover ADHD or EF coaching if a medical professional provides a referral.





## What to look for in a coach/coaching program

- Wants to involve parents & caregivers and/or teach strategies and tools to parents & caregivers so that the family does not rely so heavily on the coach, especially long-term
- Understands that coaching is not tutoring. Coaching sessions are productive when real-life assignments and tasks can be used; however, the underlying intervention is to help teach new ways of approaching tasks, not to body double (BUT there may be body doubling involved)
- Is up front and honest about the difficulty determining a timeline or providing estimates of how long it will take to see improvement. Every brain is different, environment and situational factors matter.
- Works with a student for at least one semester or quarter if working on academics
- Advocates for your child and explains to parents and caregivers the best way to interact with the child around challenges

# Resources

- Fact sheet on ADHD and EF

[https://www.russellbarkley.org/factsheets/ADHD\\_EF\\_and\\_SR.pdf](https://www.russellbarkley.org/factsheets/ADHD_EF_and_SR.pdf)

- Link to other helpful fact sheets related to ADHD by Dr. Barkley

<https://www.russellbarkley.org/factsheets.html>

- Article on situational awareness for information on helping your child learn to 'read the room' and work on those self-management skills to excel in peer interactions and social situations

[https://www.efpractice.com/\\_files/ugd/78deb2\\_cff3b83279a14ab09cc491016cf09d48.pdf](https://www.efpractice.com/_files/ugd/78deb2_cff3b83279a14ab09cc491016cf09d48.pdf)

- Tool to determine your child's EF age vs Chronological age

[https://www.efpractice.com/\\_files/ugd/78deb2\\_8c2c4b498da64e0794d7a7b864b9eeca.pdf](https://www.efpractice.com/_files/ugd/78deb2_8c2c4b498da64e0794d7a7b864b9eeca.pdf)

- Jessica Minahan – amazing insight and guidance for kids with anxiety and EF challenges

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