



Executive Function and PROMPT by Jennifer Moore M.S., CCC-SLP and Natalia Eva Mir M.S., CCC-SLP

Many times, we see that our children and young adults struggle to understand and achieve a selected goal. They cannot associate the necessary actions for a goal with the experiences from a previous activity, and at the same time they have trouble verbalizing the steps necessary to complete the activity. The mental processes needed to achieve a plan are called executive function skills. These mental processes allow us to automate (physically, mentally and emotionally) tasks in our daily lives. Some children struggle with the organization of these mental processes and therefore they procrastinate or become frustrated or overwhelmed with small tasks. Providing children strategies that show them how to map out the steps necessary to complete tasks can make daily routines easier and provide a framework to help them stay organized and achieve their goals as adults. Let's make an example of something that could happen at home. The successful completion of a simple direction such as "clean your bedroom" will involve complex actions in the child's mind. The child will need to:

1. Anticipate what must be achieved
2. Organize space, time, objects, people involved
3. Initiate actions related to the situation
4. Generate solutions if there is a problem
5. Monitor if the goal is effectively achieved or not
6. Modify responses if there are unexpected results.

If we could hear what this child is thinking when his mother is telling him "clean your room", we might find the following reflections: "I have to clean my room (**space**). It will take 15 minutes and later I can watch TV (**time**). First I will clean up my books and then the games and clothes (**sequence**). I need a big box to keep my books (**objects**). Maybe my brother will help me to find a bigger box (**people**)."

What are some strategies that we use in PROMPT to help organize these mental processes?

First we have to generate awareness about the activity we want to accomplish. Second, we give clear and consistent directions in simple phrases. Next we can help to promote the "future picture" of the plan and give verbal cues to generate more awareness. For those kids that have short attention spans, we can encourage the concentration by using a visual "first-then" display.

One strategy to help to sense time and space is to use a clock and set up "time checks". These could be at the ½ way point and completed point, marking it with a sticker or vibration sound. We could also stimulate the thinking process: How is this the same or different from the other activity? Would I use the same time, space, objects? What will happen if I don't have a box to keep my books? Could I keep them in another place? If the child encounters a problem, instead of telling them what to do, we ask them to analyze what happened and encourage them find the solution.



Another example of an activity to do at home with little children would be to "get the backpack ready for school". You could draw a visual sequence of all the steps involved in this activity. For example: to make separate drawings of a book, scissors, eraser and "backpack ready". You could explain the sequence using simple instructions: "first I put the book away, later the scissors, then the eraser and last the "backpack is ready". We can also work on problem solving or inferences while asking about possible problems we may encounter. For example: we can take one drawing out of the sequence and ask: What may happen if you forget the scissors? How could you solve it?

All the strategies mentioned above such as giving clear instructions, organizing the materials and actions, planning the activity, associating it with previous ones and analyzing the results, are regularly used during PROMPT sessions. They assist your child in developing cognitive-linguistic concepts and help to associate these concepts to auditory-tactile motor maps during the verbal productions.