

# Executive Functions

## What are Executive Functions?

The term “Executive Function” describes a group of important skills that help a person plan, organise, solve problems, remember information, follow multi-step instructions, and stay focused even when there are distractions. Executive functions grow and develop most quickly between the ages of 3 and 5, making this an ideal time to introduce activities that support this development. This resource provides practical ideas to help you support the children in your setting.



**Below are some activities to support executive functions that some children may find challenging in the Early Years.**

## Working Memory

**Goal:** Holding and manipulating information in our mind.

### Activities:

- “Simon Says”- Classic game that requires children to remember and follow rules, practicing listening and recall.
- Story Sequencing - Read a short story or show picture cards and ask children to retell or reorder them.
- Memory Tray - Place several objects on a tray, let children look for 10 seconds, cover it, and ask what they remember.

## Inhibitory Control (Self-Control)

**Goal:** Managing impulses and resisting distractions.



### Activities:

- Red Light, Green Light - Teaches children to stop and go on cue, building impulse control.
- Freeze Dance - Dance to music and freeze when the music stops.
- Opposite Game- Say “stand up” but they must sit down, or “touch your nose” but they touch their toes.

## Cognitive Flexibility

**Goal:** Shifting attention and adapting to new rules or perspectives.



### Activities:

- Sorting Games with Changing Rules - Start by sorting by colour, then by shape, then by size.
- Role-Play and Pretend Play - Taking on different roles encourages flexible thinking.
- What Else Could It Be?- Show a common object (like a spoon) and brainstorm new uses.

## Planning and Organization

**Goal:** Developing foresight and sequencing actions.



### Activities:

- Cooking or Snack Prep- Following a recipe together helps children plan and sequence.
- Treasure Hunt - Give simple clues that require thinking ahead or remembering steps.
- Block Building Challenges - Build from a picture or design their own structure before starting.

## Emotional Regulation

**Goal:** Managing emotions to achieve goals or get along with others.



### Activities:

- Emotion Charades - Act out feelings and guess them.
- Calm-Down Corner - Create a cozy space with sensory tools (soft toys, glitter jar, calm visuals).
- Story Discussions- Talk about how characters felt and what they could do differently.

Encourage reflection. E.g. “What helped you remember that?” or “How else could you try that next time?”.

Provide choice-making opportunities  
E.g. “Do you want to tidy blocks or books first?”.

## Tips for

## Everyday

## Integration

Use predictable routines to reduce stress and support self-regulation.

Model self-talk (“I need to remember to bring my water bottle, so I’ll put it by the door.”).