



## **LEARNING AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING**

### **HOW PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF CAN WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN**

Psychology in Schools Team, Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

With thanks to Essex Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools - Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Services, Essex Family Forum, Essex Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Suffolk Parent Carer Forum (SPCF)

How would you rate your current understanding of skills such as planning, organising and remembering in children?



How would you rate your current confidence in supporting your child with planning, organising or remembering things?





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# Today's workshop

What is executive function?

Executive function differences

Supporting executive function skills

Supporting planning and organising

Supporting memory

Working together (parents/carers and schools)



# The Brain House

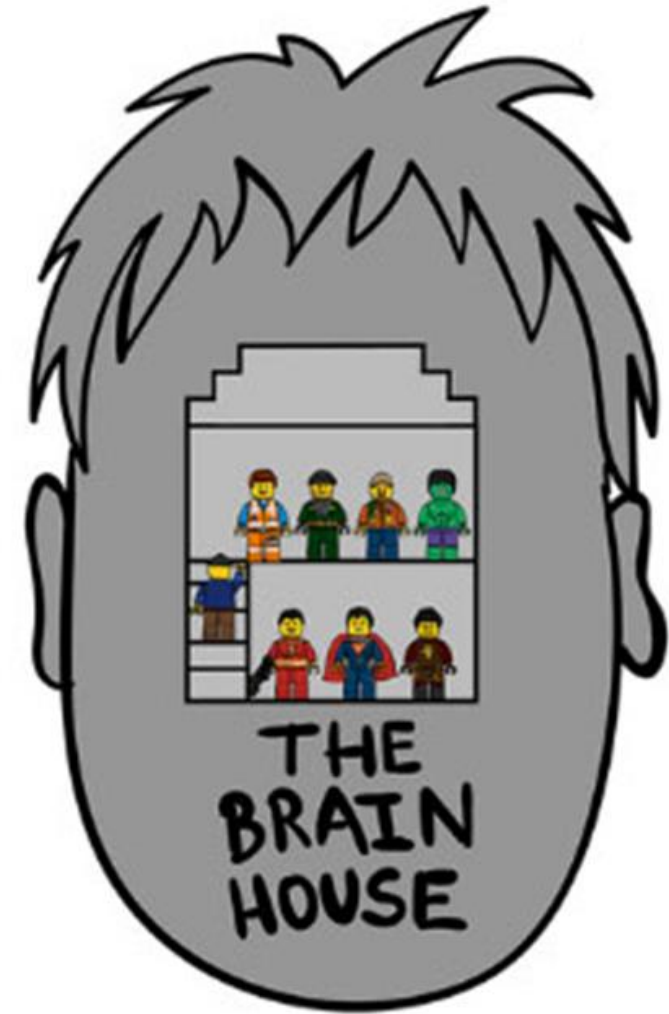
## Upstairs brain

- **The control tower – “executive function”**

## Downstairs brain

- **The alarm system – fight, flight, freeze or collapse response**

*Illustrated by Dr Hazel Harrison*



Some children may spend more time in their ‘downstairs brain’ when things feel overwhelming – with support, they can learn to feel regulated again

# What is executive function?



INHIBITION



ATTENTION



EMOTIONAL  
CONTROL



INITIATION



WORKING  
MEMORY



PLANNING

# Quick self-reflective question



# Executive functioning takes support – for all of us!



Some children find these skills especially hard to access in the moment – support and safety make the difference!

# How Executive function differences may present

Inhibition	Attention	Emotional control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May act quickly when overwhelmed or excited</li><li>• May struggle with waiting their turn</li><li>• Speaking/acting before thinking</li><li>• Interrupting in conversation</li><li>• May engage in activities that are not safe</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May find it hard to focus</li><li>• Easily distracted</li><li>• Finding it hard to remain on task</li><li>• May struggle to follow instructions</li><li>• Making errors in relation to information that may have been missed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Becoming overwhelmed and upset</li><li>• Swinging between high and low moods</li><li>• Emotions felt very intensely</li><li>• May need more support in order to manage emotions</li></ul>

# How Executive function differences may present

Initiation	Working memory	Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Needing more support to start activities</li><li>• May find it difficult to remain engaged</li><li>• May need more support to ask for help</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Incomplete recall</li><li>• May need prompts or support to retrieve information</li><li>• Finding it difficult to follow instructions</li><li>• Losing track of place</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finding it difficult to be organised</li><li>• May struggle to complete tasks to the end</li><li>• Finding it difficult to plan ahead and make big decisions</li></ul>

Activity: What strengths in executive functioning do you notice in your children?



Activity: What difficulties in executive functioning do you notice in your children?



Activity: How does this impact them at home and school?



# Brain house in neurodivergent children

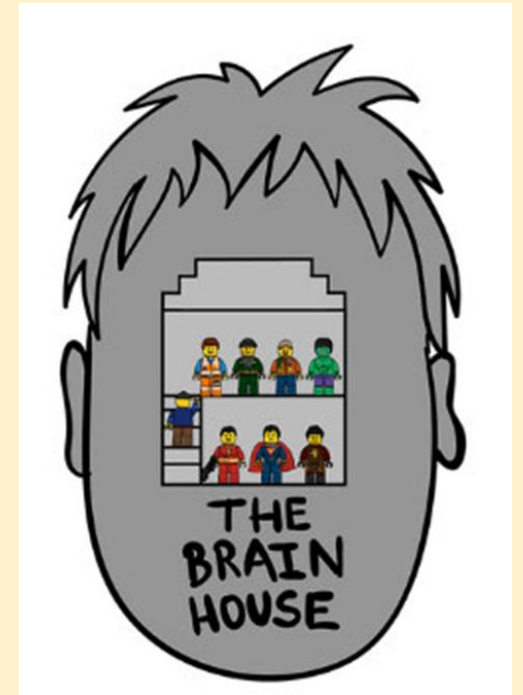
Processes sensory input differently – may need more or less input to feel regulated

May experience emotions more deeply and need co-regulation

May need help to identify and make sense of big feelings

May feel misunderstood or overwhelmed in environments not set up for their needs

Executive functioning differences



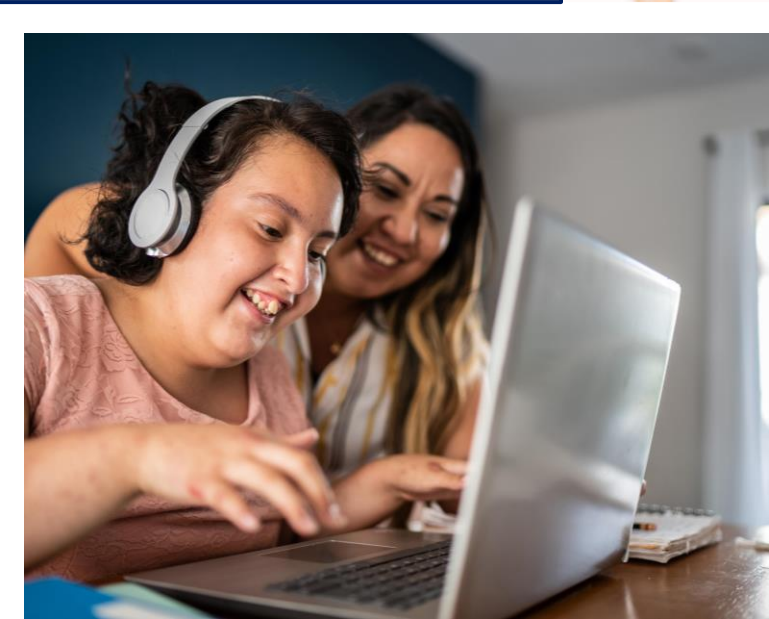
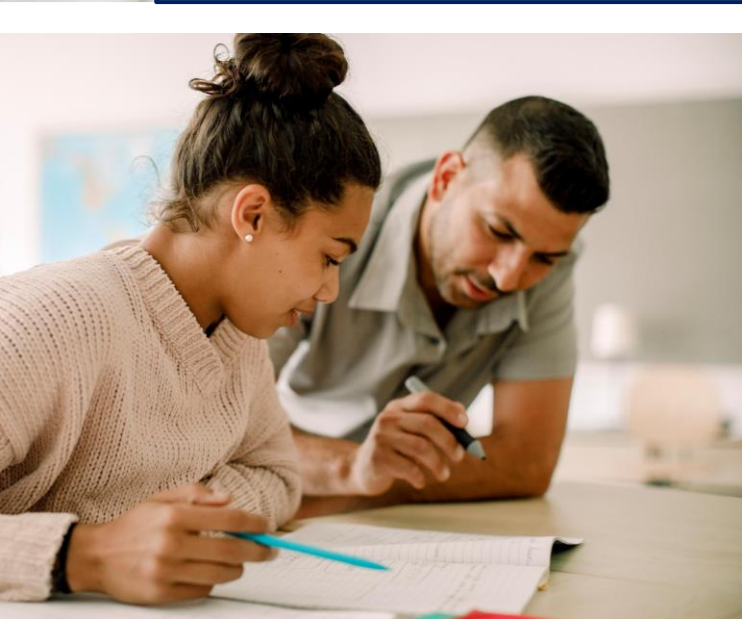
# Neurodivergence and Executive Function

- Both ADHD and autism are associated with similar executive function differences:
  - Attention
  - Flexibility
  - Working memory
  - Processing speed
  - Response inhibition
- *E.g. Townes et al. (2023), Demetriou et al. (2017), Willcutt et al. (2005), Sonuga-Barke (2003)*





## Supporting your child and students with executive functioning



# What is executive function?



INHIBITION



ATTENTION



EMOTIONAL  
CONTROL



INITIATION



WORKING  
MEMORY



PLANNING

# Large group discussion: What skills do you need to play Monopoly?



# The power of games!

- Playing games is an effective and fun way of helping your child develop executive function skills
- Games support turn-taking, flexible thinking and emotional regulation in a fun, no-pressure way
- Games for older children help practise high-level skills like planning and organisation
- Play builds connection and confidence – Both vital for executive functioning



# Small group discussion: What helps your children with their memory?



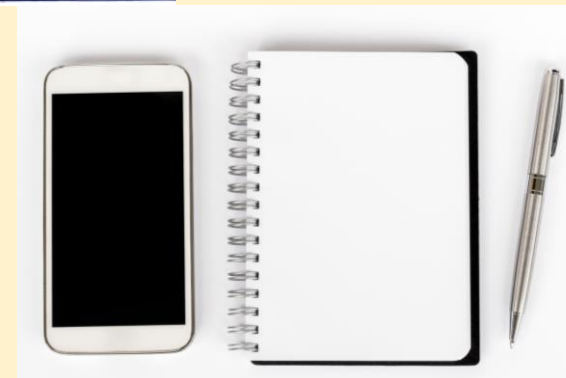
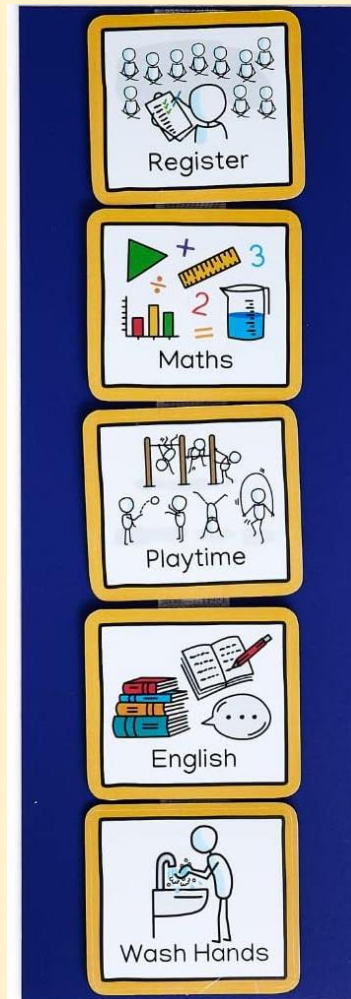
## Supporting memory

- Memory differences often relate to how information is received and retrieved – Not how hard a child is trying
- Reduce the amount of information to be remembered
- Break things down into small steps
- Re-present information if needed



# Supporting memory

- Using memory aids/visuals
  - Visual timetable
  - Wall charts for regular tasks
  - Voice recordings for instructions
  - Setting timers and reminders



## Supporting memory

- Other memory strategies
  - Repetition can help
  - Creating stories from the to-be-remembered information
  - Using rhymes or mnemonics
- Working memory training is available, but research shows this doesn't seem to improve 'real-life' memory



# Small group discussion: What helps your children with planning and organising?



## Supporting planning and organising

- Routines
- Making plans when feeling calm
- Using a checklist to simplify a task
- Using a calendar and/or planner
- Setting reminders
- Visuals, movement-based plans or co-regulation can reduce overwhelm



## Task initiation

- Not starting a task isn't always about motivation – It can reflect stress, perfectionism or uncertainty
- Start with the smallest, easiest step
- Start 'doing', then shift momentum to the avoided task
- Turn the task into a game
- Create the illusion of urgency but do allow for extra time
- Make space for sensation seeking
- Use their current interest to help to motivate them



## Prioritising

- Set a timer and support the child to describe what needs to be done for a task
- Write down the steps needed to complete the task
- Cut out each step and physically order the tasks in front of you
- Making steps visible can help the task feel less intimidating
  - Use pictures, movement and physical sequencing



# Scaffolding

- Model how to do it
- Ask open questions
- Encourage thinking out loud
- Give hints and praise
- Offering a range of possible answers
- Break it down into steps
- Pitch a task just above current ability



# When confidence takes a knock

- Repeated failures will impact on anyone's confidence and self-esteem
- Neurodivergent children may have experienced this due to others not understanding or supporting their differences
- This can make it difficult to engage in new tasks
- Create opportunities for success and scaffold to support this
- Focus on strengths and special interests



# Working together across home and school

- Share difficulties in executive functioning you are noticing both at home and school
- Discuss and formulate ways to support your children across both environments – Don't forget to share what already works!
- Have ongoing communication to evaluate strategies put in place
- Support should be needs-led




Small group discussion: What can school, and home do differently to support children in this area?



## KEY MESSAGES FROM OTHER PARENTS

“Understand your neurodiverse child's brain is wired different so don't expect them to respond or change to your ways. It's NOT a disorder it's just a different order to you.”

“Clear simple instructions. One instruction at a time. If they get overwhelmed take a step back, wait for them to calm and then approach them explaining the situation.”



“Ask for support. Do not try to do things alone”

“Have a good structure but allow flexibility and communicate to your school regularly”

“Every child is different. You've just got to find what works”

# Resources on Supporting Executive Functioning

## Key resources

- [Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children](#) by the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
- [How You Can Manage Your Executive Dysfunction · ADHD/ Autism \(youtube.com\)](#)  
Irene, The Thought Spot
- [Managing Impulsive and Risky Behaviour – Episode 6 ‘ADHD, A Young Person’s Guide’ – ACAMH](#)
- [Organising and prioritising - a guide for all audiences \(autism.org.uk\)](#)

## For schools

- [The EPIC Strategy Booklet: a guide for teachers \(adhdfoundation.org.uk\)](#)
- [Working Memory: A Practical Guide for Teachers](#)

## Books

- “The ADHD Teen Brain Organizer for school” – Paola Dabel 2024
- “Autism and everyday executive function: A strengths-based approach for improving attention, memory, organisation and flexibility” – Paula Moraine 2016

# Key sources of support and resources in Suffolk

- **Suffolk Local Offer**

<https://www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk/>

- **Parenting courses and more:**

[The Parent Hub - Suffolk County Council](#)

- **Parent/carer networks:**

- [PACT | Parents And Carers Together | Suffolk](#)

- [Suffolk Parent Carer Forum \(suffolkpcf.co.uk\)](#)

- **The Source Engagement Hub:**

<https://thesource.me.uk/engagement-hub/>

- **Suffolk Mainstream Inclusion Framework:**

[Suffolk Mainstream Inclusion Framework – Suffolk Learning](#)

# RECOMMENDED BY

## PARENTS FOR PARENTS ON THE ADHD/ASD PATHWAY

### THE CURLY HAIR PROJECT



Uses animated films, stories and comic strips to support young people on the ASD spectrum.

[The Girl With The Curly Hair - Autism Training, Animations, Books](#)

### PARENT WORKSHOPS

Workshop programme designed by the Psychology in Schools Team to support parents

Sign up here -



### ACTIVITIES UNLIMITED

Short breaks open to young people with SEND needs in Suffolk

<https://www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk/sort-breaks-and-leisure-activities/activities-unlimited>



### SENDIASS

A free support service which offers information and resources for supporting special educational needs and disability.

<https://suffolksendiass.co.uk/>

### NEURODIVERGENT ABILITIES GROUP (IPSWICH)

<https://www.neurodivergentabilities.org/>

Bespoke support tailored to help young people thrive in a neurotypical world.

Offers 1-1 face to face support in Ipswich. Also offers remote sessions and independent living support.



### SCHOOL SUPPORT

Find key staff members to understand and support your child. Roles who may be most helpful include SENCO, pastoral lead, teaching assistant, form tutor, head of year, mentor, thrive leader, school nurse, nurture group leader. They can consider reasonable adjustments.

ELSA:

Your school may offer ELSA intervention. A 6 session intervention supporting young people to develop their emotional literacy skills

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/>



### FAMILY ACTION (SUFFOLK)

<https://www.family-action.org.uk/>

Offer self help resources, local services and a free helpline called 'FamilyLine' which can be used to help through



### BEANS

Offers support for families journey with neurodiversity. Support for parents/carers, young people (11-25), siblings. Support includes drop ins, groups and activities.

<https://accessct.org/beans/>

## Support in Suffolk continued

### SENDIASS

Parent workshops on SEND including:

- What is a special educational need (SEN)?
- SEN support in schools
- EHC Needs Assessment
- Preparing for school transitions

Recorded previous workshops on YouTube

[Parent & carer information sessions - Suffolk SENDIASS](#)

[Suffolk Sendiass - YouTubeFS](#)

# Psychology In Schools: Free Live Workshops And Video Recordings

Upcoming LIVE Parent/Carer workshops on mental health

[www.nsft.uk/workshops](http://www.nsft.uk/workshops)



Previous recorded workshops include school avoidance, Tics and Tourette's, self-harm, supporting behaviour, social media, OCD and more!

Childhood Neurodiversity Workshops:

[Neurodiversity online parent/carers workshops - Suffolk SEND Local Offer](#)



Previous recorded workshops include supporting sensory needs, eating difficulties, sleep, anxiety, social relationships and more!

Access recorded workshops here:

[Parent workshops | Norfolk and Suffolk NHS](#)

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## FEEDBACK FORM

PINS Feedback Survey (Suffolk)



[click here](#)