



A PUBLICATION  
OF THE MINNEAPOLIS  
JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

keshet  
CONNECTION

קשר

May 8, 2004 | 17 Iyar, 5764

## But My Child Is Too Bright To...

Gay Rosenthal, Consulting School Psychologist

lose track of whether or not assignments have been turned in, be unable to keep track of time, not know how to organize possessions, be unable to clean up the toys or bedroom when we ask, not learn from experience, not understand flexibility and compromise no matter how many times we work on it.

***In fact, even very bright children can experience challenges with such tasks. One of the reasons may be problems with executive functions. Executive functions are those abilities that allow us to utilize our intellectual ability in an efficient manner. Executive functions may be unrecognized and underappreciated.***

The executive functions are to the human brain what the CEO is to the corporation. The CEO plans, organizes, determines utilization of resources, delegates, prioritizes, and monitors all the company functions so that productivity is strong, however it may be measured. Executive functions are those abilities that enable us to determine environmental demands; to regulate our attention and responses in an adaptive manner; to demonstrate flexibility in shifting from one task to another or from one competing demand to another; to demonstrate working memory (the ability to simultaneously hold and mentally manipulate information); to modulate our emotions; to initiate tasks and inhibit inappropriate responses; to plan and organize work; and to generalize learning from one situation to another. When there are deficits in executive function, satisfactory functioning can be difficult, regardless of intellectual level. Challenges with executive functions may be especially apparent when children are experiencing novel situations.

Children or adults who have executive function problems may show inattention or distractibility, have difficulty with sequencing multi-step tasks or directions, fail to come up with a plan to solve even a simple problem, have difficulty determining when a problem-solving strategy is not working and changing it, and using feedback from others to modify their behavior or approach. They may show inefficient memory, have problems organizing information for rapid and efficient retrieval, show slow and arduous re-

sponses to problem-solving or other demands, and perform in a highly inconsistent manner from one time or place to another.

Emotional and behavioral challenges may also be apparent. Children may act impulsively, seem to lack initiative or enthusiasm, show repetitive behaviors or repeat the same thing over and over as if they are “getting stuck,” and digress from a discussion topic. They may speak too much, never allowing others a chance, or be reluctant to speak at all. They may have social difficulties due to problems “reading” nonverbal and other environmental cues, and they may do or say inappropriate things, particularly when they are anxious or overstimulated. They may suffer emotional outbursts and later manifest sincere and intense remorse. They may show frequent and rapid shifts in mood, or may appear disinterested, inhibited, or “shut down.” They often lack self-awareness with respect to their own challenges and the impact of their behavior, demeanor, or apparent attitude on others.

Not all children with executive function problems demonstrate all of the above behaviors. Similarly, not all children who have some of the above problems actually have disruptions in executive function. When there are deficits, very specific modifications at school and at home can help. Modeling, teaching tasks in small-step-by-small-step fashion, providing additional structure, using agreed-upon signals or passwords as a cue, and additional help with organizational plans can be helpful. Specific work on “being flexible” and learning to compromise, when paired with strong positive reinforcers, can also produce positive results. Slight modifications in teaching or parenting style can also be very helpful. Working with an admired partner may increase motivation and learning.

So, when we-as staff members responsible for the well-being, overall development, and academic progress of MJDS students-have questions about any of these behaviors, we ask them aloud. We invite you to join us so that we may learn from one another, shifting our responses according to the needs of our children.