

# What are Executive Functions?



*Executive Functions* are a group of abilities, including impulse control, organization, flexibility, planning, and working memory (or on-line processing), which play a major role in the functional impacts that can be associated with autism. Because of their executive dysfunction, autistic children have difficulty:

- Organizing, or integrating their world into a meaningful whole (think of a person who stands too close to a mosaic and sees only individual pieces of the design, not the big picture). They have good attention to detail, but miss the forest for the trees, unless people work with their detail analysis strengths to help them build a big picture, piece by piece.
- Flexibly shifting gears from one thing to another. This means that they can get stuck on irrelevant details and have problems generating new ideas. Often inflexible thinking patterns drive “stubborn” behaviors. Repetitive behaviors and over focused interests are also related to inflexibility.
- Keeping track of multiple step tasks.
- Keeping track of, and using directions and information spoken to them by others.

These executive problems interfere with social interaction skills, daily living skills, and academic skills (especially written expression, reading for meaning, making inferences, long-term projects, note-taking, and studying for tests). These executive problems pose greatest risk in situations that are

- New or unfamiliar (e.g. the first day of school)
- Unexpected or unpredictable (substitute teacher)
- Unstructured or chaotic (lunch room, bus, field trip)
- Group activities that involve more than a few people
- Demanding of listening skills (new procedure is explained orally)
- Social.

## **Where to find out more:**

Free videos and tip sheets on research-tested strategies for supporting executive functioning at home:

[Support Videos | Unstuck and On Target](#)