



Activities to support Executive Function development in the Early Years

What are Executive Functions?

The phrase “Executive Function” refers to a set of skills that support a person’s ability to plan, organise, problem solve, store information, follow multiple step instructions and stay focused despite distractions. These skills help us to prioritise tasks, filter out distractions from the environment and control our impulses. Executive functions develop most rapidly between the ages 3-5, so this is the perfect time to introduce activities to support this development. This article offers some practical activity ideas to support the children within your setting. The Neurodiversity Team have also written a second article "Executive function and Early Years." Please feel free to download the article alongside this one for further understanding on the topic.

Role Play – Provide plenty of opportunities for children to immerse themselves in imaginative play including the dolls house, dressing up and role-play. Imaginative play supports the develop of cognitive skills, self-regulation and planning/problem solving. Adults should support the children by role-modelling this style of play.





Books – Use story-time and the book corner to encourage an early interest in books. Use this as an opportunity to share stories and allow the child to predict what might happen next, think about the characters thoughts and feelings and, if appropriate, begin to imagine their own story.



Games – Offer games that provide the opportunity to develop impulse control, for example Jenga and Snap. Hide and Seek is another great way to develop, not only impulse control, but planning and organising skills. Additionally, games that develop visual and verbal working memory, would include memory games such as 'pairs'.

Obstacle Courses – Using the outdoor space provides the perfect opportunity to support the development of executive function skills. By setting up obstacle courses that encourage climbing and balancing, children need to focus and pay attention to the activity in hand. Include activities that develop organising skills, for example throwing bean-bags into hoops.

