

Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students: Planning



When supporting autistic students with executive function difficulties, it is important to teach new skills while also creating an environment that supports neurodiverse learning.¹ This infographic focuses on strategies to support **planning** — which is a component of executive function — to promote friendships, independence, & wellbeing.

Planning is the ability to formulate a sequential set of steps that can be used to achieve a goal.^{2,3}

Teaching planning means helping students learn the process of creating a goal, generating the steps to achieve the goal, and assessing progress towards the goal.^{4,5}

This may include helping students:

Select an achievable goal that is important to the student:

It is important to support a range of goals, not just those that are normative. Goals are the most motivating when they are meaningful.



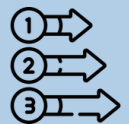
Develop a plan of the steps to achieve the goal:

Help students practice generating many different steps to achieve their goal and then a general sequence for completing these steps.



Work through the steps to achieve the goal:

It is okay for this to be a non-linear process or a process in which a student is working on multiple steps at the same time.



Evaluate and celebrate progress towards the goal:

It is important to have checkpoints that allow the student to reflect on what is working, sticking points, and to celebrate progress towards meeting goals.



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When teaching planning, it is important to ensure that students have the appropriate supports and accommodations to meet their goals.
For example, it may be important to consider the following:

The types of environmental modifications and supports needed to help a student achieve their goals

For example, if a student's goal is to be able to focus more at school, it would be important to think about the environmental modifications (e.g., dimmed lights) and access to sensory supports (e.g., fidgets) that can get them there.

A culture where neurodivergent goals and learning styles are supported

For example, if a student's goal is to be more of themselves by masking* less, it will be important for teachers to learn what this would mean for the student and to support an inclusive environment where neurodivergent interests are celebrated.

The knowledge or skills students may need to learn to help them achieve their goal

For example, if a student would like to make more friends, it may be helpful to support the student in identifying characteristics of good friendships.

For more information on executive function and its relationship to mental health, you can view these related Southeast MHTTC resources!

"Understanding executive functioning differences among autistic students with & without co-occurring ADHD": bit.ly/3MKbdUs

"Evidence-based approaches to support the executive functioning of autistic students": bit.ly/3pLl6lw

"Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students": bit.ly/43FUUNr

*"Masking is a term used by the autistic community to describe the suppression of aspects of self and identity to 'fly under the radar' or 'appear normal,' using conscious (i.e., mimicking facial expressions) or unconscious (i.e., unintentionally suppressing aspects of one's identity) means."⁶

References

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