COGNITIVE ACADEMY · FREE PARENT GUIDE · ASHLEE FEDYK, REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGIST

The After-School Launch Plan

Turn after-school chaos into a calmer, predictable routine, starting tonight.

A printable executive functioning checklist and routine builder for parents of kids and teens · from Ashlee Fedyk, Registered Psychologist · www.cognitiveacademy.com

1 · EF check-in | 2 · Routine template | 3 · First Step Only cards | 4 · Make time visible | 5 · Calm-down scripts | 6 · What's next

1 The 60-Second EF Check-In

Executive functioning (EF) is the brain's "management system": the skills that help us plan, get started, stay organized, remember steps, manage time, and handle big feelings. Every child has a mix of strengths and still-growing skills. Check anything that sounds like your child **most weeks**. There are no wrong answers; this is just a starting point.

Getting started *task initiation*

- ☐ Stalls or avoids, even on tasks they can do
- ☐ Needs several reminders to begin
- ☐ Says "I'll do it later" and later never comes

Planning *figuring out the steps*

- ☐ Isn't sure where to begin on bigger tasks
- ☐ Leaves projects until the last minute
- ☐ Does steps out of order or skips some

Organization *keeping track of stuff*

- ☐ Backpack, desk, or room is often chaotic
- ☐ Loses or misplaces homework and belongings
- ☐ Has trouble sorting what matters most

Time management *sensing time*

- ☐ Underestimates how long things take
- ☐ Is surprised when time is up
- ☐ "Five more minutes" turns into thirty

Working memory *the brain's sticky note*

- ☐ Forgets multi-step directions partway through
- ☐ Says "I forgot!" about things they meant to do
- ☐ Loses their place when interrupted

Emotional regulation *managing big feelings*

- ☐ Gets frustrated quickly when work feels hard
- ☐ Small changes in plans lead to big reactions
- ☐ Takes a long time to settle after being upset

The 1–2 skills that feel hardest right now: _____

Strengths I see in my child: _____

_____

> **How to use this:** pick just one skill to focus on first. The next pages give you a simple tool for each, so you can start small and build from there.

Educational content, not a substitute for an individual assessment.

2 The After-School Launch Routine

After school is when executive functioning demands are highest and energy is lowest. A predictable routine takes the guesswork (and many of the arguments) out of the afternoon. Fill in what each stage looks like at your house, ideally **together with your child**.

Refuel → **Reset** → **Plan** → **Start** → **Check out**

Stage	What this looks like at our house	Time
1. Refuel Snack, water, movement, and some downtime. A rested brain starts more easily.	*e.g., snack at the counter and 20 minutes outside*	
2. Reset Unpack the backpack, empty folders, put things in their "home."	*e.g., lunchbox to the sink, papers in the tray*	
3. Plan What needs doing tonight? What's first? How long might each take?	*e.g., a 2-minute check of the planner together*	
4. Start Do just the first step of the first task. Momentum comes after starting.	*e.g., use a First Step Only card (page 3)*	
5. Check out Pack the bag for tomorrow, notice what went well, and celebrate effort.	*e.g., backpack by the door, one "win" at dinner*	

This week we're practicing

☐ Refuel ☐ Reset ☐ Plan ☐ Start ☐ Check out

Days we tried it: ☐ Mon ☐ Tue ☐ Wed ☐ Thu ☐ Fri

Start with one stage. Most families begin with "Start." Practice it for about a week before adding another. A routine that is "good enough" and repeated works better than a perfect one that is hard to keep up. Post this page where your child can see it.

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3 “First Step Only” Task Cards

“Start your homework” is actually a huge request. Getting started (called **task initiation**) is much easier when the ask is tiny. Help your child shrink a big task down to **one small, physical first step**, then cut out the cards and keep a stack nearby.

FIRST STEP ONLY — Example

The big task:
Math worksheet

My first step only:
Open my folder and put the worksheet on the table

Then I can:
Do problem #1

Start time: *4:15* ☐ I started!

FIRST STEP ONLY — Cut along the dotted line

The big task:

My first step only:

Then I can:

Start time: _____ ☐ I started!

FIRST STEP ONLY

The big task:

My first step only:

Then I can:

Start time: _____ ☐ I started!

FIRST STEP ONLY

The big task:

My first step only:

Then I can:

Start time: _____ ☐ I started!

FIRST STEP ONLY

The big task:

My first step only:

Then I can:

Start time: _____ ☐ I started!

FIRST STEP ONLY

The big task:

My first step only:

Then I can:

Start time: _____ ☐ I started!

Good first steps are small and physical: “open the laptop,” “find the reading book,” “write my name on the page.” If your child still stalls, the step is probably still too big. Shrink it again, kindly.

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4 Make Time Visible

For many kids, time is invisible: “five more minutes” and “an hour” can feel the same. These tools help your child **see** time instead of guessing at it. Treat the results as helpful information, never as a test.

Guess & Check

Before a task, your child guesses how long it will take. Time it together, then compare. Over time, guesses usually get closer, and that is real skill-building.

Task	My guess	Actual time	What I noticed
Example: Spelling practice	*5 min*	*15 min*	*Took longer than I thought!*

Plan Backward

Start with the finish time and work back to see when each step needs to begin.

We need to be done by: _____

Step	Starts at
5. _____	_____
4. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
1. _____	_____

Easy ways to show time

- **Visual timers or analog clocks** that show time shrinking.
- **Count down the steps:** “Two more things: shoes, then backpack.”
- **Use landmarks:** “When this song ends, it’s time to start.”
- **Work in short blocks** with a planned break, and add a small buffer for transitions.
- **Say time out loud:** “It’s 4:10. We start at 4:15.”

The one we’ll try this week:

_____

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5 Calm Down Before Catch Up

Managing frustration (**emotional regulation**) is an executive functioning skill too. When a child is flooded with big feelings, the thinking part of the brain goes offline, so reasoning and consequences won't land yet. **Calm first, then catch up.**

1. Pause
Lower your voice and slow down. Your calm helps theirs.

2. Name it
Put words to the feeling, without judging it.

3. Return small
Once settled, go back to one tiny first step.

"I can't do this!"
When work feels too hard

Instead of: ~~"Yes you can, just try."~~
Try: "This feels really hard right now. Let's take a breath and look at just the first problem together."

Tears or yelling
When frustration boils over

Instead of: ~~"Calm down!"~~
Try: "You're really frustrated. That makes sense. I'm right here. Let's get some water and come back in a few minutes."

"I don't want to!"
When they refuse to start

Instead of: ~~"Just do it."~~
Try: "Starting is the hardest part. What's one tiny thing you could do first? I'll stay close while you do it."

"But you said...!"
When plans change

Instead of: ~~"It's not a big deal."~~
Try: "It's disappointing when plans change. You were looking forward to that. Let's figure out what happens next."

"I'm so stupid."
When they're hard on themselves

Instead of: ~~"Don't say that."~~
Try: "You're not stupid. Your brain is still learning this skill, and learning feels messy. What helped last time?"

My child's calm-down helpers
e.g., water, a hug, moving their body, quiet space, a favorite song

Our words for "I need a break"
A signal or phrase your child can use instead of melting down

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6 What's Next

Thank you for spending this time on your child. If you've tried even one idea from this guide, you've already done something meaningful. Executive functioning skills grow with practice, patience, and the right support, and none of this means your child (or you) is doing anything wrong.

In my work as a Registered Psychologist, I meet so many caring parents who are trying everything and still feel stuck. Not because they aren't trying, but because no one has explained how executive functioning works or given them a clear plan. That's why I'm creating something more.

Warmly, Ashlee Fedyk, Registered Psychologist · Cognitive Academy · www.cognitiveacademy.com

COMING SOON FROM COGNITIVE ACADEMY

The Executive Functioning Parent Training

A self-paced training for busy parents. Learn at your own pace and:

- Understand your child's unique EF strengths and challenges
- Build homework, morning, and chore routines that actually stick
- Respond to stalls and meltdowns with less conflict
- Gradually build your child's independence

Learn more: www.cognitiveacademy.com

My notes: what worked this week?

If you're worried about your child, an individual assessment can clarify what's going on and what kind of support would help. At school, it may also be worth asking about supports such as an IPP/IEP or your local equivalent.

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