

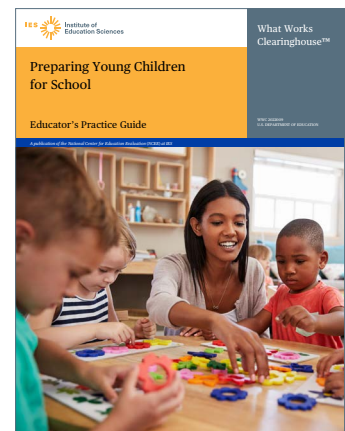
Recommendation 2: Strengthen children’s executive function skills using specific games and activities



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Executive function skills include paying attention, following directions, thinking flexibly, and exhibiting self-control and self-regulation. Developing executive function skills prepares children for challenges they will face when solving problems, remembering instructions, and learning in school. These skills can also help children manage interpersonal conflicts and other emotional situations. While executive function and social-emotional skills overlap to play a role in children’s self-control and self-regulation, they are different from one another. These skills work together to help children manage their feelings, thoughts, and behavior.

This recommendation from the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide *Preparing Young Children for School* discusses how teachers can plan games and activities to create opportunities for children to build executive function skills. The steps in this recommendation describe the types of games teachers can use and provide guidance on how to transition into these types of activities. The steps also suggest how teachers can make the games more challenging over time and incorporate other executive function activities throughout the day.



How to carry out the recommendation

1. **Use intentionally designed games to build children’s executive function skills.** Use games that are intentionally designed to encourage children to listen to, remember, and follow directions; think flexibly; and exhibit self-control. Playing a game that builds executive function can typically last 10-20 minutes. This includes time to prepare children to play the game and then to talk about the game afterward. Practice games multiple times per week.
 - Games that have multiple steps or instructions will help children listen to, remember, and follow directions.
 - Games that require children to connect their actions to a visual, oral, or musical cue from the teacher will require children to think quickly and flexibly.
 - Games where only certain children, such as children wearing something blue, respond to the teacher’s directions at one time will encourage children to calmly wait for their turn.
2. **Challenge children by increasing the complexity of games and activities over time.** Once children become comfortable with a game and have mastered the initial set of rules, make the game more challenging to help further develop their executive function skills. This can involve adding to or changing the rules or increasing the speed of the game. Increasing the challenge will also help children stay interested in and motivated to play the game.
3. **Embed executive function activities in literacy, math, art, or other parts of the day.** Provide ongoing practice in using executive function skills by creating opportunities for children to think flexibly, follow directions, problem-solve, or exercise self-control throughout the day. Executive function activities prompt children to plan and problem-solve. For example, ask children to engage in “think time” before raising their hand or to show agreement by nodding their head or a thumbs up when another child or the teacher is giving an answer. Reinforce and praise children when they exhibit executive function skills, such as waiting their turn, paying attention, remembering instructions, or exercising self-control.