

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #190: Supporting Executive Function: What to Expect at Every Stage

Lori: So even if your child is in that seven- or eight-year-old range that we talked about, they might still be mastering skills that are more typical of a preschool or a 5-year-old and that is totally okay and that is also very typical for kids with ADHD.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: We want to start today with, a small request. If you are loving the Shining with ADHD podcast, would you please just take a second to leave us a review wherever you listen?

Reviews are the best way for us to grow the podcast and keep releasing new episodes. And again, thank you to everyone who has left reviews.

Mallory: Yeah, we have a group text where we're always sharing your reviews and it keeps us so excited and motivated to hear how the podcast is helping you and it keeps us motivated to keep making more episodes.

Katie: So true. So now that we have that small request out of the way, we are really excited to dive into today's topic. We consistently hear this question from parents. How do I know what executive function skills are appropriate for my child at their age? And we love this question

because when you're not really sure, you can kind of fall into one of two traps. You might be expecting way too much of them or you might be over helping them accidentally.

Lori: Yeah. So, if you have followed along or listened to our podcast for a long time, we will talk a lot about for kids with ADHD, there's this kind of 30% rule that we talk about that kids with ADHD often show a 30% delay in their executive functioning skills in comparison to same age peers. So, for example, if you had a child who was 10 years old, their executive functioning skills, behaviors, emotions might be more like that of a seven-year-old. The problem that we have found is that when we talk about this, a lot of parents are still saying, well, I don't know, I don't even know what to expect of a 10-year-old. Like, what do I expect of executive functioning skills at certain ages? Like what is appropriate and typical development of these skills.

Mallory: Right. And so, all kids develop skills differently, but we want to give you some ideas of typical executive function milestones that you will see in your kids throughout the years. And this will help you just develop more appropriate expectations for your ADHDer and gain ideas of how to grow those skills. And I think it's important to note that when we're talking about this 30% delay, it's not that we're just removing expectations for our kids or deciding that they're never going to do something or we just have to do it for them. That's not the case at all. We're not getting rid of expectations. We still have expectations for our kids, we still have high expectations for our kids, but we can adjust those accordingly and meet our child where they at, because that is what's going to help us approach them with empathy, but also know exactly what skills they need to learn to help them develop and grow into their best selves.

Katie: I love that. So, a very common thing that you might be wondering is what are the executive functions? So, we've talked about how there is this oftentimes this 30% delay, executive functions and ADHD just go hand in hand. Okay so, if your child has a diagnosis or you ADHD, a lot of what you're seeing is related to those executive functions and it can be hard to define what they are because when they're working well, it's not necessarily that noticeable. It's more times that things aren't working well and that's when you're going to notice very specific things. So broadly speaking, the executive functions are a set of brain-based skills. And these brain-based skills help us to make decisions, make a plan, stay on-task while we complete that plan, check in with ourselves and the people around us to see are we,

you know, are we on task? Are we getting distracted? How long should this take me? And am I kind of on schedule here. It's so important to understand that the executive functions are defined in a lot of different ways. Some people, you know, say there's three major areas, we typically talk about nine executive functions. Things like inhibition, emotional control, task monitoring, but without getting too deep into the weeds, but I can tend to do sometimes, we're just going to refer you to an episode. It was actually our first episode that we ever recorded. It's not the best sound quality, but I will say if you want to hear us just starting out and being so terrified to podcast, episode 101 is an introduction to those executive functions and it actually has a ton of really great information. So, if this is new to you, that would be a great place to start is just jumping back to that episode. But again, the executive functions as we, as we think that them through, they work all together. So, it's not, it's very rare that we might say, I'm going to work on just one executive functioning skill like working memory, for example. They're working together. They help us do all kinds of things. They help us stop ourselves from saying or doing things that we probably really don't want to do. They help us pay attention during the boring tasks, change plans when needed, and just really, it's a lot of those kind of silent skills that help us to accomplish things throughout our day.

Lori: Yep. And another important thing to kind of mention is that our executive functioning skills take years to fully develop. So, all kids, neurotypical kids are going to develop their executive functioning skills throughout their childhood, throughout adolescence, even into early adulthood, we usually say around 25. So again, it might take longer and we would expect it to maybe take longer for, you know, kids with ADHD or adults with ADHD and some of those things might persist. We would expect them to persist a little bit. But the executive functions again, develop at different rates, from early infancy all the way through adulthood. So, all kids are developing these skills. Again, toddlers are going to have tantrums because they haven't really developed like emotional control at that point and that's very typical. In elementary school kids are going to get in trouble because they're still learning inhibition, they're still learning how to follow rules and remember rules. So, all of these executive function related struggles are age appropriate and not necessarily a sign of ADHD. What we typically see for kids with ADHD is it's more, you know, that delay is more noticeable and it's more significant. And the emotional control and those tantrums, you know, might be normal, but they persist for kids with ADHD, and they continue those or they're really excessive and long lasting. So again, it's more the severity of, of those differences.

Katie: And something I want to mention here too is that one of the hallmarks for kids with ADHD is that you do tend to see inconsistent skills over time of day, over parts of their week, even just individual situations. And so, what we often hear from parents is this frustration of, you know, he can do it when he wants to or he's successful at this when he's motivated. And that's true. Executive functions, especially for kids with ADHD, are impacted by a ton of different variables, right. How much sleep they got, how motivated they are, how interesting that is to them. But we don't want to write that off as a behavioral difficulty because we know that the way their brain is developing, this is really difficult. And so just recognizing that even if your child is able to do something at one point and then later they can't, that is really real and that is part of the way that their brain works.

Mallory: That's a really great point. So, let's kind of talk through what we can expect from kids, when it comes to executive functioning skills from birth, all the way through high school. And let's start in those really early years thinking about, you know, birth to 2 years old. This developmental phase is all about emerging self-regulation., they're learning how to sleep, they're learning about feeding, they're learning about self-soothing which they can't do on their own at first, it's a skill that's developing. Once we get around to those preschool years, 3 to 5 years old, these kids are in those early emerging problem solving skills. They're learning how to follow simple directions, they're starting to learn how to control those emotions a little bit. But remember, these skills are, I say emerging at this age, they're not going to be perfect. They're just learning how to navigate these things. So, tantrums, meltdowns, big feelings, these are all very normal in those three to five preschool years. During the preschool years the executive functions that are related to social interactions are also developing very quickly. They're learning how to negotiate and compromise with their peers. They're learning how to stand up for themselves, they're learning how to persuade others. So, what can you expect of preschoolers when it comes to executive function skills? You can expect that they're going to start participating in their own self-care routines. Things like brushing their teeth, things like bathing, they're becoming more independent with those things. Helping around the house, like putting laundry in the hamper after they change their clothes, putting their personal possessions away, putting shoes away, toys away after they've used them, helping in the kitchen a little bit, maybe they're setting the table with kid friendly dishes or clearing off the table. They're noticing and then responding in kind to the emotions of others. They're helping you with cooking, pouring, measuring things. So, I think it's important to note that at this age, in these preschool years you might be seeing some of those

signs of ADHD, like having a hard time following multiple step directions, having a hard time manage emotions, you're going to see these in kids at this age whether or not they go on to get an ADHD diagnosis just because of where they are developmentally. And this is part of the reason that at this age we're usually not making an ADHD diagnosis because so many of those signs of ADHD are just developmentally appropriate. Again, a lot of these skills are emerging. Maybe they're doing them sometimes but not other times and that is very developmentally expected at this age. But these differences are going to become more clear over time as their neurotypical peers are starting to kind of master some of these executive functioning skills, but maybe they continue to lag behind or they're not kind of developing those skills at the same rate.

Katie: Yeah, this is when parents start to say there's just a gap. They just, they seem immature. There's a gap between them and the other kids in their preschool class or at the birthday party. And maybe in the 3-year-olds classroom all the kids cry when you leave the birthday party, right. But if your child is turning five and they're still crying but the other kids aren't, that's when you start to notice. And it can be kind of isolating for parents to start to recognize that and think okay, wait, is something going on? Like what's going on here?

Mallory: Absolutely. So, some things that you can do as a parent if you have a preschooler to help develop your child's executive function skills, set them up for success, one of the most important things is just to provide very consistent routines and structure. Kids, all kids whether ADHD or not, really thrive on these consistent and predictable routines. You can use play. Play is the best way to teach kids, but you can use play to teach turn taking, patience, playing simple board games. We have some board games that we love that are cooperative board games. So, everyone's working towards the same end, it's great for that age range especially as they're just learning how to kind of handle disappointment and loss. A great thing for parents to do is to model and narrate their own self-regulation, managing their own emotions. So kind of, as we mentioned at this age it's all about learning how to handle those emotions and a lot of times kids are not going to be handling it maybe in the most regulated way, that's totally age appropriate. But as parents we can model our own feelings and handling those things well and that's one of the best teachers for these kids. If you have a child in this age range where your child, you have some concerns about their development but they're still, you know, a little too young for an official ADHD diagnosis. We have a podcast episode, it's really a great one. I encourage you to listen to it. It's episode 128. It's all

about how you can support your child when you have concerns but your child is still too young for a diagnosis.

Katie: Yeah, I love that episode. And it does go into home and school and just ways to support, it's just a very actionable episode. So, let's jump into those early elementary years. So, in the United States, I'm thinking of, you know, that kindergarten to second grade age range, and at this point kids are often transitioning into more structured school environment, right. Even if they were in preschool, it's usually very play based. And kindergarten is really the beginning of a lot of those expectations. You have to sit, you have to regulate. And again, every school is a little bit different. Hopefully, you know, we're seeing kids get enough movement throughout the day and breaking things into really, you know, shorter age-appropriate timelines in the school. But this is a big, huge shift for our kids as they start elementary school and some of the things that we start to see developmentally is they start to learn how to understand multiple step directions and just multiple step processes. So, at home they're going to be able to help more with multiple step tasks, things like cleaning their bedroom or sorting laundry. Again, they're probably not at 5 gonna go in and just clean their room completely independently, so don't freak out if you're not seeing that at home. But they're able to conceptualize a bigger portion of that, and as they go through those elementary years, they're going to get more and more independent in that. Again with things like self-care, so showering and bathing and getting dressed, being able to hold different parts of their routine in their head. I think at this age was when my kids really started to want a little more independence too. Like, I'm going to go in the shower and you know, you don't need to check on me. And that's a cool thing to see because I mean I do check and I kind of, you know, through the door like, hey, how we doing? It's been a long time. But it's, it is that idea of this increased independence and we want that for our kids, we love to see them starting to do that. And we also see socially that our kids are starting to learn more about self-monitoring and recognizing that other people have thoughts about them, they have thoughts about other kids and just recognizing kind of how they fit into the classroom. So, this is where we see the teacher give jobs like, okay, today you're the door holder or the line leader. And they really love that because it's their sense of how they kind of fit into this little society of the kindergarten and first grade classroom, which is really precious. At this age you're also seeing them develop basic time management and planning skills. So before elementary school starts, a lot of things are going to be just very much in the moment. Or maybe at best during those preschool years you might have your child starting to recognize, like after lunch

we go to recess, or after nap we go in the car and we go to swimming. But at this point they're starting to actually understand time and the flow of time and a lot of that is related to their day at school being much more structured. So, when we're trying to think about how as parents we can support our kids in this age, a big piece of this is, you know, encouraging that independence and you might need to help them by breaking tasks down into smaller steps. But definitely rewarding or reinforcing them if they do try something and saying, hey, I'm so proud of you, I love the way you did that. This is a great age, if you haven't already to introduce the visual schedules and timers to help with those daily routines. Because again, when you're getting your child ready and you are the one saying, okay, now we need our toothbrush, now we need the toothpaste, let's put it on the toothbrush. You're not really, they don't have the opportunity to think that through on their own. But if you notice that you just walk away and leave the child to their own sort of devices, they may not be able to do all those steps alone. So visual schedules are a great in between for those kids that need to see it and be reminded, but then they can feel that sense of accomplishment on their own. And we do offer a lot of visual routines and printables on our website if you're interested to kind of just check those out. They are fully customizable so that if your family rides the bus or takes a car to school or whatever, you can really make those personalized. And we definitely recommend getting your child involved in that process so that they feel like they have some buy in into that.

Lori: Yeah. And just to remind families, if you're listening to this and your child is 8 years old, for instance, and again we're talking about typical expectations of how kids are developing. Just know that it's okay that they aren't able to do multi step directions, you might still be working on those skills that our preschoolers are often working on one step directions and that's okay. So, let's talk about later elementary, so this is going to be more kids in that like third grade to fifth grade age range. I have one of them right now, so I can speak, very personally about what, what is going on at this age range. But again, as far as schoolwork goes, they're starting to develop their ability to kind of plan and organize assignments. They should be developing a little bit more independence in starting and completing some of those homework assignments or projects. But again they're still going to need some assistance from parents with gathering materials or breaking those tasks, those bigger project tasks down a little bit. There's more awareness about emotions. But again they're still, you know, even at this age range in third to fifth grade, they're still struggling to manage emotions. Even in typical kids like the neurotypical kids, they're having a hard time

with that, you know, going with the flow when, when plans change. They're starting to develop a little bit better emotional control at this stage, but it's still a little bit hard.

Katie: I feel like it's still hard for me to go with flow when plans change.

Lori: I know, exactly.

Katie: It can also go on the 40-year-old list if you really need it to.

Lori: Again, some of those things persist and that's okay. We all have strengths and we all have challenges, right?

Katie: Yes, we do.

Lori: You know, my daughter plays soccer so again it's like when we have soccer practice, what are all the things, you know, that we need to bring to practice to make sure that we are there and prepared? So they should be starting to be able to recognize and start to pack up some of those things independently so that they're prepared for those activities they're participating in. And again, starting to show a little bit more in pulse control in the classroom and they're raising their hand to speak and following those, those classroom rules better. As far as things that you can do as a parent to kind of help continue supporting skills at this age, again this is where if they aren't using planners or checklists or things like that for school, they can start to develop the skill where they're writing things, assignments down in a planner or breaking those things down in a planner or on a calendar of what are steps that I need to take for these projects or homework assignments. You can start even with social stuff or emotional stuff, role playing situations with your kids where you're practicing, how do I respond in a situation that comes up or how do I manage my emotions or when a friend is, you know, saying I don't want to play with you at recess and it's your best friend and they're excluding you, like what do you say to them and how do you manage that situation and let's practice at home for when those things come up. And then with transitions, they can still be hard, so using, continuing to use those schedules, those visual aids, and continuing to have really clear expectations around behaviors and communicating that to your kids is really important.

Katie: And something I just wanted to say too is if you're listening and you're like, okay, I'm doing the visual schedules and the clear expectations and I'm using the timers, you know, don't lose hope. With a lot of these ADHD tools and a lot of these skills, this is ongoing thing. Helping your child understand emotions as an example is ongoing. It's lifelong. It starts when they're really young and you just feel like you're constantly investing into it, but then there starts to be moments of payoff. And if you're not there yet, keep going because it does feel like almost a little bit repetitive. And again, you're just, especially for those ADHD brains, they need a lot of repetition, they need to learn from experience and sometimes that can be painful, but we're here to support them. But again, just knowing that you, you can keep going and keep using these things and over time they are going to grow these skills.

Mallory: Yep, it's an important point. So, let's talk about middle school. I don't know why you guys put me on middle school because I hated middle school.

Katie: That might be why. I think it was serendipitous.

Mallory: Is this like, for me to process through the awkwardness?

Katie: We're healing your inner middle school child.

Mallory: So, when we're talking about middle school, we're talking about like those tween years, right. And gosh, like so much is going on in those tween years. I'm not looking forward to those years for my own kids, but some great cognitive development, some great executive function development going on in those tween years. And so one thing that we see is kids these age are really expanding their abstract thinking. They're moving from more concrete to more abstract thought. Being able to think through potential scenarios, things that didn't actually happen but could happen. So just more abstract thought but still not necessarily consistent follow through, you know, just yet. These kids are begging for more independence, but they still really need a lot of parental guidance with a lot of like daily tasks. We can start to expect them to have a better idea of their schedule, what events happen. So, for example, knowing that I have karate every Monday, towards the end of middle school, they should have a lot more independence when it comes to their schedule. Knowing what days of the week things happen, timing that things happen when they need to be home for things. Another really notable development during these tween years is that their peers start having a much greater influence over them than their parents. So, in those elementary years, parents

are kind of the go to the knowledgeable ones, but there's this shift that happens in middle school and these kids are starting to look through their peers to learn about the world and to gather information about how they should act in particular situations or how they should feel about certain things. So peers are starting to have a huge influence on their life, for better or for worse.

Katie: Yeah, I don't love that for me.

Mallory: I know. Love that for you if your kids have great friends.

Lori: Yeah, exactly.

Mallory: So that is a challenging phase in that sense, as parents we're having less and less control over our kids and they're begging for that independence, but they still really need a lot of our support. So ways that you can support your child during this phase, collaborate with them, work with them, talk about what are their goals, how can you help them reach their goals, whether it's at school or extracurricular activities, or take this opportunity to really learn more about them as they're kind of developing into their own little self. But they're still going to need your help when it comes to, once you understand what their goals are, they're still going to need your help with breaking those things down into really actionable steps. How do they accomplish that goal? They still need your help with that, continuing with that teaching and modeling of coping with big feelings, especially stress. They have a lot more on their plate once they reach these teen years. You can maybe do a little bit more teaching of, strategies that you might use, like things like mindfulness. Recognize that your child is going to learn a lot from natural consequences in their environment. They still need boundaries, like, obviously you still need to keep them safe, but they are very valuable lessons to be learned when it comes to the natural consequences, they're going to be encountering in their tween years. Like again, because they're having a lot more independence, there's going to be a lot more opportunities for them to fail. There's a lot more independence with schoolwork. There's a lot of opportunity there for them to not turn things in and keep, you know, lose track of a timeline and things like that. So, monitor, keep them safe, but recognize that kind of natural consequences at this age can be a really effective teacher too.

Katie: Yeah, and I always say this but you don't have to save your child from every natural consequence. Obviously there, yes, there are certain things that you absolutely want to help

your child avoid. But in the, example of like not turning things in, it's okay for them to get a poor grade and then realize, okay, that's actually the result of this. Yeah. Okay, I think Mal, you crushed it. Middle school, I feel confident now. I don't know, hopefully you're feeling good too. Now we have to talk about high school and full disclosure, none of us have kids in high school, but we've worked with a ton of kids in high school. And so, when we're looking at this stage, you know, this is as kids are moving toward that adulthood, that very coveted independence. But at the beginning of high school, which here in the US that's four years, so they're probably starting high school around the age 14 somewhere in there, they tend to be very egocentric at the younger end. The world revolves around them and we talked a little bit about this in middle school too, but they tend to feel like pretty invincible, untouchable, right, that could never happen to me. But over time, as you get towards the end of high school, we do see them start to, I mean, ideally, okay, each child is going to be unique, don't, you don't have to send us an email us that we were wrong, but generally speaking, we are going to see that as they get closer to the end of high school, they actually might start to engage in less risky behaviors. Because why? Because their brain is developing. They're starting to be able to see the bigger picture and the future picture, right. This is a huge issue for all kids, is learning to see the future picture and how does what I'm doing right now affect me in the future? And when you're really young, you can only see two seconds into the future, right, and we expect that as they grow it gets longer and longer. But for kids with ADHD, this is even more difficult and so it can be really hard for them to do these long-term planning. Whether that's like a project, that's a semester long project in school or you know, that it really started to catch up to me in college because you only had a midterm and a final to show what you know. And day to day there's not a lot going on other than just studying and those kinds of things. So, through high school the journey is getting them more and more ready if they're going to go into higher education, so you don't have daily work necessarily that's getting turned in. And so, you also have multiple teachers and kids are having, at this age to balance multiple responsibilities, multiple classes, group projects, things like that and they do require a lot more steps in order to complete the task. But the big picture here is that our kids, as they go into high school, are learning to set and set goals and then move toward achieving that goal. And they're really learning, it might feel slow, but they are learning to think critically and start to think about, okay, what do I believe? What's my worldview? You know, what do I think? And it might be separate from yours, it should be separate from yours. And again, this can be really challenging for parents, but recognizing that this is a really crucial stage of development. And so, what does that look like from a parenting perspective? So, one

of the big things is that we really want to be helping our kids to self-advocate. And I know at my child's school, once they hit middle school, we, the parents aren't supposed to email the teachers unless our child has already spoken with the teacher about the topic. And I'm curious to see how this goes next year, because over time, we need to build up that skill and so, we want them to be communicating for themselves. As they go later into high school, they might have a job and they need to communicate with their employer. You should not be emailing or reaching out to the place where your child works to tell them, you know, what hours they can work and things like that. We want our kids to be independent, and it might be scary for them, but it's also going to feel really good as they learn to do that. And this is just a gradual transfer. You're sort of shedding that responsibility for managing schedules and deadlines, and it might not go smoothly all the time, so the biggest piece here is collaboration and working together with them. Okay, that didn't work, what can we do next time? How can we change it? How can we shift? And again, I think celebrating those successes and it might look a little bit different as our kids get older, right, mom, you're so embarrassing. but we do still want to tell them, hey, I'm really proud of you, the way you handled that was great. And it becomes a lot more of a partnership, rather than, like Mallory said, like, when they're really young, you know, we're sort of the geniuses. And I'm just coming out of that phase with my daughter where I no longer know everything and it becomes much more of we're going to work together and we're going to both provide ideas and collaborate together to sort of go through these times when there might be setbacks or things don't go right. You are working with your team as a teammate and as an equal player and that can be again, just a huge transition from us feeling like we are in charge.

Lori: Yeah. And again, it's really important to remember the human brain takes at least 25 years to fully develop. So even when your child turns 18 and they're done with high school, their brains are still developing and what we would consider adulthood. So, they're still working on developing a lot of these skills that we're talking about.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. So hopefully these milestones in executive functioning are helpful so you can just gain a better sense of what is typical for most kids, but also sort of the general progression of what you might see even if the ages don't quite match. This is just generally the order that we see these skills being acquired. And it's so important, like I said, to focus on progress and celebrate their unique journey because it is not always going to be easy. If you are looking for more actionable tools to support your child's executive functioning and

behavior at home, we do have a free ADHD parenting guide and we're going to link that in the show notes. But that's a great place to start and we do talk about executive function, emotion regulation, those types of things in that guide.

Mallory: Another thing that we'll link in the show notes for you as well is we have a blog post that is on the same topic that has even more examples of different executive functioning skills by age if you just want to dive in even deeper.

Lori: Our key takeaway today is that your child will likely be 30% delayed in their executive functioning development when they have ADHD. So even if your child is in that 7- or 8-year-old range that we talked about, they might still be mastering skills that are more typical of a preschool or a 5-year-old. And that is totally okay and that is also very typical for kids with ADHD. And if you have any questions, just remember we are here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!