

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #211: Executive Function Made Easy: Yes, Game Night Totally Counts!

Lori: The mom and I were talking about how many skills they developed as a part of planning this party and it was actually really remarkable to see them working with friends. And I think a lot of times building those skills with friends is one of the most amazing ways that kids can kind of learn because they're going to get feedback immediately from friends. There's so much arguing and negotiating and fighting and whatever that goes on in those friendships, but they still manage to kind of figure it out.

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. Hey everyone. Welcome back to Shining with ADHD. Today we are diving into one of our favorite topics, executive function, but in a really practical, down-to-earth way.

Lori: Yes. And I'm really excited about this episode because I cannot add one more thing to my mental load right now. We started a renovation at my house and it feels like the amount of executive functioning I have to use to keep up with that, and all everything being off, like I can't do anymore. But, of course all of us want to help our kids with their executive functioning skills, but I know many of us do not have the time to add just another activity to the schedule.

Mallory: Totally. I hear you. And the good news is that most of us are already doing things that give our kids executive function practice at home. We might just not realize it, or maybe there's subtle changes we can make to make it even better.

Katie: Yes. So today we're going to walk you through five everyday routines. Things you're probably already doing in some form that can actually build your child's executive functioning skills with just a few simple tweaks to make those moments even more intentional. And a quick note, if you're loving this content, please make sure to leave us a five-star review and a comment. That is such a great and quick way to help us reach more ADHD parents and families.

Lori: Yes. So, before we jump into the list, let's talk a little bit about why everyday life is the best training ground for these skills. So executive functions develop over time. They're like muscles, okay. When our kids get repeated supported practice in real life situations, they get stronger. And a lot of times when we talk about this, I think parents think, oh, I need to take my child to therapy and sit down one-on-one with a professional and they're going to like teach them skills. And the truth is that our kids learn best when they're practicing these things in everyday life. They're going to generalize a lot better.

Katie: It's so true. Especially for ADHD brains. You know, it's really tough when you have ADHD to go into a room and practice a skill and then expect that you're going to come out of that room and practice the same skill. Right? It's like we really need our kids and ourselves to be practicing what we want them to do at the actual, like Russell Barkley calls it, the point of performance, or at the actual thing we want them to apply it to. And the key here, what's kind of the underlying theme to a lot of what we're talking about today, is we want to help make our child's and our own thinking visible. So, we're going to narrate our own thought process out loud. We might ask some questions to get them thinking. And most importantly, this is the hardest one for me, we have to resist the urge to just jump in and do things for them. That's so important because we want to give our kids a minute to plan and kind of think about it and then make adjustments for themselves. So, we're going to give you five examples of ways that you can build executive function and the first one is something that might actually already be on your family calendar for this weekend.

Lori: Yes. So, our first tip or idea is to let your kids plan a family night. So, I know anytime we talk about, like, family nights or movie nights or things like that on social media, so many

of you have traditions. Like, I know a lot of people have said we make breakfast for dinner or we do a movie night or we do a game night or things like that. So, and if you don't have those, maybe it's time to think about, like, having a little tradition during your week to make. I don't know, sometimes, you know, Wednesday night, my kids are dragging and they're like, I just don't want to keep going to school.

Katie: Same.

Lori: Or Friday, it's like the end of the week. I know a lot of you do really fun things or plan fun things on Friday nights. I know in our family, we try to. My daughter's in soccer right now, so we can't really do it, right now. But think about, like, do we have a movie night? Can we plan a board game night? Maybe we have a night where we build a really fun fort in the bedroom and then they, you know, camp out on the floor of a room or a bedroom floor or something like that to make it kind of fun. And if you have those fun activities, it can give your child some responsibility in planning that activity. And they're again, if they have buy in on what that is, like, if they're kind of deciding on, getting, yeah, building a fort sounds so fun! They're going to be really motivated to help plan that out so you can practice planning. Okay, if we're having movie night, what should we eat on movie night? And when should we order the pizza? Or do we need to go to the store? Can you help me plan a shopping list for the different things that we're going to buy from the store? Or problem solving. What if we don't have the things that we need to build the fort?

Katie: Or in our case, the problem solving is always like two kids with an idea of what movie we're going to watch and it's never the same. So little conflict resolution.

Lori: We literally just went through this last night. We actually, we've started doing every family member, myself and my husband included, we each go through and like have a night where we pick and we rotate because I cannot handle arguments. So that's how we've handled that. But again, that's something you can talk with your kids about. Well, we all want different movies. How do we problem solve that? Like what's an approach that we could do so that everybody gets to watch the movie that they're interested in or that they want? So doing kind of a fun family night, making a tradition of it, talking with your kids about what they want to do, if you have buy in from them and they're really excited about it, that's a great way to motivate them to start developing those executive functioning skills.

Mallory: Yeah. So there really are so many kind of executive functions wrapped up in this single task that you might not really realize. So, when you start asking those questions that Lori was saying, you're putting more of the responsibility in your kids to think ahead and use those executive functioning skills. And I think another really great executive functioning skill that this taps into is flexibility. So how to kind of make this shift in your plans and be flexible when something doesn't go to plan? Like if the popcorn burns and that was the last bag in the cabinet, what are we going to do? What should we have as the snack instead? Or you plan to play Monopoly. I know probably not a lot of you are planning to play Monopoly.

Katie: Don't plan to play Monopoly. Pro tip!

Lori: There are better games for your ADHDer. Don't do it!

Mallory: But let's say you pull out the board game and you're missing a piece. So, what do you do then? So you can again be a model for your child. Well, that didn't go as planned. What can we do instead? How can we shift our plans to not derail the whole evening and still have a great time.

Katie: I love that. And it is really hard for ADHD brains to be flexible. But I think as parents, a lot of times we're trying to prevent the meltdown or them getting upset. So we immediately solve the problem and then, in our own mind, and then we're like, okay, here's the solution. This happened to us recently we were getting family photos taken, and it's a family tradition that after we do pictures, we go out to dinner. And we had talked up this restaurant that we really wanted to go to, and it has an outdoor patio, which it's really beautiful weather right now in Phoenix. So, the kids were really excited. And thankfully I pulled it up on my phone just to figure out exactly how to get there. And it said, oh, they're overseeding the grass and the patio's closed for like the next two months or something. So, we had to pivot. And again, in my old way of doing this would be to be like whispering to my husband, like, let's come up with a really good plan B so we can sell it. And instead, we said, okay, what do you guys want to do? And then there was a little bit kerfuffle about where we were gonna go for dinner. I've been using all kinds of interesting words today, but it worked out because my kids had to take ownership and say, okay, well, here's my idea. I really wanted pizza. But again, we tend to hold on to that as parents and be like, I'm gonna solve it so they don't get mad or sad. And really when we bring them into it, then they can be a part of it. So, our second way that you can grow executive function at home is, okay, bear with me, is to have

your kids help you with packing for a trip. Okay, so I know for me, again, I like to hold onto all the things in my mind and pack everyone. But what we want to do here is start to delegate that skill. And this is not saying you're just going to hand your kid a suitcase and be like, good luck, because you're going to show up with like four stuffed animals and one pair of swim trunks on a ski trip. So that's not what we're talking about here. But packing is really great because it helps build what we call their future thinking or their future picture. When you're standing in your bedroom, you have to picture what's going to happen on the trip in order to successfully pack what you need.

Mallory: Yeah. So, here's another great opportunity to kind of ask those open-ended questions to get your kids to start thinking through what will my future look like? What will my experience be like when I'm actually at our destination? So, for example, you could say, okay, picture yourself at grandma's house. What are you going to need at bedtime? And for my kids it's going to be all those stuffies. So, then we're going to need a second suitcase.

Katie: Five stuffies. Check.

Mallory: Or I checked the weather and I saw that it might be rainy, so what should we pack in case it rains? Like what's our contingency plan for that? And you're definitely going to want to use a checklist at first with your kids when it comes to remembering everything. Otherwise, like Katie said, you're going to end up with just the stuffies and a pillow. So write it down, make it visual, make that invisible visible, make a checklist and then over time gradually transfer that responsibility to your child. So maybe eventually they're making their own checklists and you're reviewing the checklist to make sure it looks good and then they do the packing. You could even try making your own list before they make their list and they can kind of use yours as a reference. And so, think about over time how you can start transferring this responsibility to your child as they build this skill.

Lori: Yeah, my oldest kind of, we were packing to go to Ohio for a longer trip and I was basically like, you guys need to pack. And I kind of threw out some ideas and she kind of melted and it took like all day essentially. It was, it was like a very frustrating experience for us and I had to really think about like, packing is actually really hard for me. And I wish that my parents like had kind of worked on developing that skill because it isn't easy and I like forget stuff on every single trip. Not just a couple things, usually multiple things, which is frustrating. And I've had to, I have now a packing list note on my phone and every time I

forget something I like add it to the list and that has really helped me. And we were going to Universal Studios like a few weeks ago for a trip with the girls and my husband gets out a whiteboard and he's like, he basically did that and modeling out loud what we would do. Like, okay, so I'm not sure what clothes we should pack actually because I don't know what the weather is like. So, let's first look at the weather. What is the weather like in the place that we're going? And then we kind of asked them, what do you think you're going to need if the weather is like that? Like, if it's like this in the morning, this at night. And so, then we made a checklist with them. And again, we had no tears and they got it done super quickly because it was very clear exactly what they needed and they could figure those things out. So, I know for my kids they have to have like some sort of visual to go by, otherwise it's like complete overwhelm. They don't even know where to start.

Katie: Yeah. You know, and if you're listening and you're like, there's no way that my kid is taking a list and packing. Like, let's say you have, you know, a four and a half, five, six-year-old. When my kids were that age, now they're 9 and 11, but at that time what I would actually do is I would do a lot of their packing. They always were in the room with me and I would talk through it, okay, we're going to need a jacket because it's cold outside. But then when we got to our destination, they would actually unpack their suitcase into, you know, a little dresser or whatever it was based on where we're staying in an Airbnb or whatever. Let's put the shoes by the door, let's put the toothbrush in the bathroom. And so, if your child is definitely not ready to pack their own things, maybe start by having them unpack at when you arrive. Because even that is building that executive function of, okay, here's what I have on this trip and where does it go? And then again, this is a graduated skill. So, we wouldn't expect, you know, your six-year-old to take their visual, but you might have a 6-year-old who actually crushes it. So, you know, based on where your child is at, but you know, you want to meet your child where they're at in terms of what they need for support with this project because it is definitely a big skill.

Mallory: So, another way that we love to grow executive function at home without putting one more thing on your plate is inviting your child to bake or cook with you. And this is one of our favorites because it really hits so many different executive functioning skills. It requires the ability to sequence, follow directions, working memory, attention, inhibition, it hits on like all the things. And again, we're trying to make our thinking more visible. So, we're kind of processing our internal thoughts out loud to benefit our kids. So, like, first we

have to mix everything before we bake it, but we have to turn on the oven first so that it's heated it up by the time we're done mixing. You can have them repeat steps back to you. You can have them be responsible for reading the directions out loud. Some, you know, throw in some reading practice there, too. But baking and cooking together is such an amazing way to grow executive function at home.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, in our online course, Creating Calm, we do talk about this idea of helping your kid create a future picture. Like, what is it that you're working toward? And baking especially is great, because if your child is like, I want chocolate chip cookies, they picture in their mind or maybe in the cookbook, if you're using that, that shows them, okay, this is what it's supposed to look like. And it's easier when you know what the end goal is to work towards it. So that's a strategy that you can always use if you want to bake a cake or, maybe you're starting small and you're making instant pudding, whatever it is, what's that going to look like when it's done? And that helps us break down those steps. Oh, it's going to have sprinkles. All right, we need to get out those sprinkles and really thinking that through. And I think the other thing that's great about baking, and I say this as a mom of two kids who absolutely love to bake, is that a lot of times it doesn't go well, especially at the beginning. And it's a really great way to reflect. Okay, what happened there? You know, I remember when my daughter was small, and she loves almond flavoring, like the Christmas cookie kind of almond flavor. And I remember her just dumping almond into the cookies. And I'm like, what are you doing? And she said, well, I love this flavor, so I want more of it. Like, no, that's gonna burn your tongue. So, but it's a learning opportunity. And again, ADHD brains learn the best in motion. They learn when they're doing it. And so, baking is just a great way to, you know, do that problem solving and realize it's okay. Like, you're gonna get there. And, at the end of the day, you know, the whole point is the together time and all of that. The other thing I will say about this is my daughter loves baking shows and when she was probably 8 or 9, we realized that when she was baking, she was getting really agitated and she'd be like sighing and oh, I just, I feel like this is just taking forever. And I need to get these into the blast chiller, which we do not have a blast chiller in our house. But she would get really agitated when she was cooking. And we asked her about it and we realized it's because on baking shows, they're always stressed out, right. Because they're working against the clock and they're like fighting time. They have two hours to make cupcakes or whatever it is. And so, we had to talk to her about that. So again, that's emotion regulation. Hey, you know, they're making it look stressful on TV because it's so fun to watch, but when we're

actually baking cupcakes, you don't need to be, you know, wiping your face and sighing and checking the clock. And sob it's interesting again, but there's so many executive functions that can be addressed in something as simple as baking cookies.

Lori: Yes. And our fourth idea is think about planning a small purchase of something that they want to buy or doing a project. So, I think there's many different ways. Like if your child wants to save up money for a toy that they want and they need to earn the money and they need to save it and they like, there's lots of kind of steps within that maybe they want to redecorate their room. So, my kids are thinking about that right now. There's a lot of planning and do we, I know you want these things, but maybe there's not enough room. So, we gotta put, have dad put it into his architecture software. No, I'm just kidding.

Katie: You're so lucky that you have an architect, because I'm the queen of I bought this end table. I thought it would fit. No idea why not?

Lori: We're a little, the girls are a little spoiled in that way because we can actually see very clearly and exactly what it will look like in a room. But my kids actually, they have friends in the neighborhood and they are all really into Halloween. So, they like planned this Halloween party for friends. Like, they had this huge idea, it started in August and I'm like, why are you thinking about Halloween? Probably because you go to Target or whatever and like they have already decorations up and your kids are already starting to think about it. But it was so interesting because there were, we actually, this was not something I was like working on, building her executive functioning skills. But the mom and I were talking about how many skills they developed, like, as a part of planning this party. And it was actually really remarkable to see them working with friends. And I think a lot of times building those skills with friends is one of the most amazing ways that kids can kind of learn because they're going to get feedback immediately from friends. There's so much arguing and negotiating and fighting and whatever that goes on in those friendships, but they still managed to kind of figure it out. But it really was so fun. And their friends had so much fun. And because it was their creative idea, they just took complete ownership of it and had so much fun. And again, developing those skills without realizing that that's what they were doing, because it was just a lot of fun for them.

Mallory: Again, I love those sneaky ways that our kids are growing their EF while having fun. And it sounds like they were really motivated to do this. They're a little bit older, so they

didn't need your help necessarily. But if you have younger kids, again, you're asking, like, guiding questions. You're wanting to kind of lead them to, like, what's the first step? What would we need to do before we can start? Things like that so you can get them thinking about the things they need to think about.

Lori: And, we still had to do that. You know, there was a lot of, okay, if you want food, what time should I order it? And, okay, we're gonna go to the grocery store, let's make a list. And sometimes they would miss things on that list that they're not thinking about, but maybe I am. So, I like, ask questions. So, there is a lot of still coaching, you know, some of these kids are 6, 7 years old, so, there's still some coaching. And depending on, again, how young your child is, they're going to need a little bit more if they haven't, you know, been to a lot of parties and things like that.

Katie: Absolutely, yes. So, our fifth strategy is to have your kids help you get ready for company to come over. And this does not need to be some elaborate dinner party. Although Lori's kids can totally host a dinner party for us. A lot of times, you know, it's grandma's stopping by, or we're gonna, you know, have some friends come over for pizza tonight. So, this is a great way to build executive function, because you can say to your child, what does it need to look like to be ready for company? And, you know, I feel like if you asked all three of us, what does your house need to look like to be ready for company, everyone has their own idea of that.

Lori: Yeah.

Katie: So, we always have a conversation about what do we need to do to get ready for company to come over. And then you can break it down and maybe that's assigning each kid a zone in the house. That works really well for my family. You're in charge of the living room, you're in charge of making sure the backyard is picked up. Or maybe you work together in a group or you time yourself to see how long each area takes. But have your kids help you. And this is also a really great way to reduce your mental load in getting things ready.

Lori: Yes, absolutely. And I think my kids tend to be more motivated in planning and things like that when it's a play date or they're having a friend over. Although sometimes they're like, my friend doesn't care if the house is clean or the bathroom's clean. That's like, okay.

But I do think sometimes, like, if friends are coming over, there may be a little bit more motivated to help with those things. Plan, like, do we want to have donuts? Like, when do we need to get those? How many should we buy?

Mallory: Yeah. But it is, again, it's one of those great ways that we can really help our kids think about the future picture. And just really quickly to circle back to having friends over, we have a playroom and it's kind of like, well, what are you going to do when your friends come over? Oh, build a fort. Okay, what is the state of the playroom? Well, you can't even see the ground right now because it's covered in the marble track and the magic cars and Legos. And so, okay, so your friend is coming over and you want to build a fort, but look at the state of the playroom at the moment. So, what do we need to do to prepare for that? So again, these are all, all five of these are just simple ways to build executive function, growth and support into your everyday life. Making these invisible things more visible and providing some extra support that over time you can fade back as your child develops these skills. So, our, key takeaway is that you don't need fancy charts, fancy timers for every single executive function skill that you want your child to grow. Sometimes it's just slowing down, asking questions, making your own internal thoughts external to benefit your child. And remember that building executive function is a long game. It's not like one study session and you have the skill. It's a long game and it's not about perfection, it's about practice.

Katie: Yes, absolutely. And if you loved these ideas and you want to go a little bit deeper, we cover a ton of more practical executive functioning strategies in our online course, Creating Calm. And we have a new lesson called Making the Invisible Visible in the new course which we just updated. And we will link that in the show notes.

Lori: And if you love today's episode, please leave us a five-star review and a comment. Again, that helps us grow the podcast so that other families can find us. So, thank you so much for joining us today. And go make some cookies in the name of building executive functioning skills.

Katie: I love it. 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!