

10 Fun Activities That Teach Executive Functioning to Kids and Teens

by Sarah Rudell Beach

In a typical day, do you ever have to...

- **pay attention** to something (even if it's totally boring)?
- **ignore** the things that distract you from the thing you have to pay attention to?
- hold **several pieces of information** in your head at the same time?
- **stifle impulses** to say or do things that could get you in trouble?
- **change** what you're doing in response to a change in circumstances?

If you're a typical human, you might be thinking that pretty much describes your entire day!

There's actually a fancy term that psychologists have for all of these processes: **executive functioning**. Together, these processes are the foundation for **self-regulation**.

As you can imagine, executive function is an incredibly important skill for children to develop.

Researchers tell us that while **we can improve our executive functioning at any age**, the two critical periods when it develops are **early childhood** and **early adolescence**. They also tell us that executive function is a **skill** — it's something that we cultivate through continued practice.

Executive function consists of the following skills:

- **attentional control:** the ability to focus on a specific task, even if we find it uninteresting
- **cognitive inhibition:** the ability to tune out the stimuli that are not relevant to our task
- **working memory:** the ability to temporarily hold information needed for decision-making and reasoning
- **inhibitory control:** the ability to curb impulses and select behaviors appropriate for completing a goal
- **cognitive flexibility:** the ability to adapt when rules or circumstances change

You can probably understand why those are important for, well, pretty much everything we do!

Luckily, there are a lot of fun ways we can teach children these skills — in fact, many of these are probably games you already play!

For School-Age Kids:

Guessing Games

Games like **20 Questions** or **I Spy** teach kids how to think in categories ("I spy something green..."), and they need to use their working memory to keep track of all the criteria for the object they are trying to guess.

Board Games and Card Games

Lots of card games can teach executive functioning skills, but my favorite is **Uno** — it's a game where the order of play can change rapidly, and kids have to keep track of colors and numbers (it's a more intense version of the card-sorting games above). Games like **Memory**, **Spot It!**, or [other matching games](#) are great, too. [You can find more brain-enhancing games for school-agers here.](#)

Simon Says

Simon Says is a classic game that teaches both inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility: *"I didn't say 'Simon says!'"* Kids need to curb the impulse to respond to "jump up and down" when they hear the words without the requisite "Simon says." For younger kids, you could play a game where you hold two stuffed animals, and they only do the actions that one of them tells them to do.

Minecraft

For real, [even the people at Harvard](#) say this helps build executive function, as it requires kids to keep various fantasy locations in mind, they have to follow certain rules about how different characters and materials can be used, and they need to develop strategies to meet their goals. My nine-year-old is absolutely THRILLED about this.

For Teens:

Volunteering

Volunteering is all about taking specific actions in order to solve a problem. Talk to your teen about an issue that is important to her, and have her research the different opportunities available to take action. You can [check out this list of 50 Community Service Ideas for Teen Volunteers here](#) to get started.

Journaling

With journaling, teens can practice self-reflection and planning. [This article](#) has great suggestions for helping your teen get started with journaling. Teens might also enjoy [bullet journaling](#); it's a fun way to plan, organize, and keep track of projects and activities, and can be a creative, artsy endeavor, too!

Board Games

They're not just for the little ones! Teens will enjoy games like [Taboo](#) or [Apples to Apples](#), which are hilariously fun, but also require complex thinking and inhibition control. You could also go old-school with a classic game like [Risk](#). [See this article here for more recommendations of board games for teens and tweens.](#)