

[Close Window](#) [Print Window](#)

## Surviving the Executive Functioning Demands of High School



**Author:** [Paula Jacobsen](#)

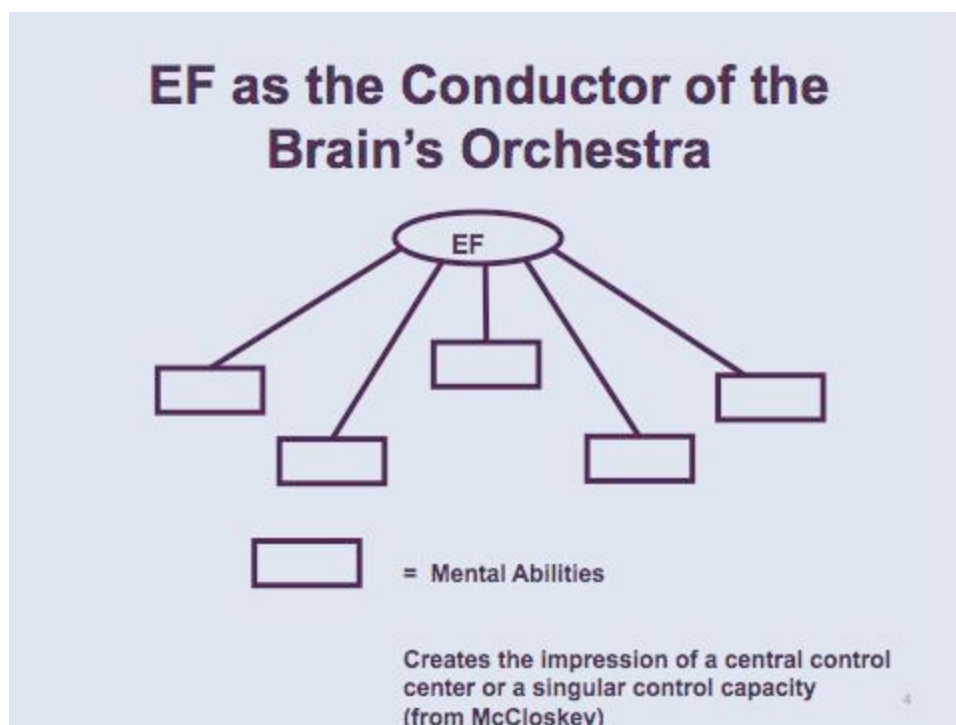
**Source:** [Autism Society](#)

By high school, academic performance is highly influenced by executive function skills. These skills are needed to learn or complete assignments, making some schoolwork very challenging for students with Asperger Syndrome (AS). Helping students with the executive functioning aspect of assignments is the kind of support that helps students complete their assignments successfully.

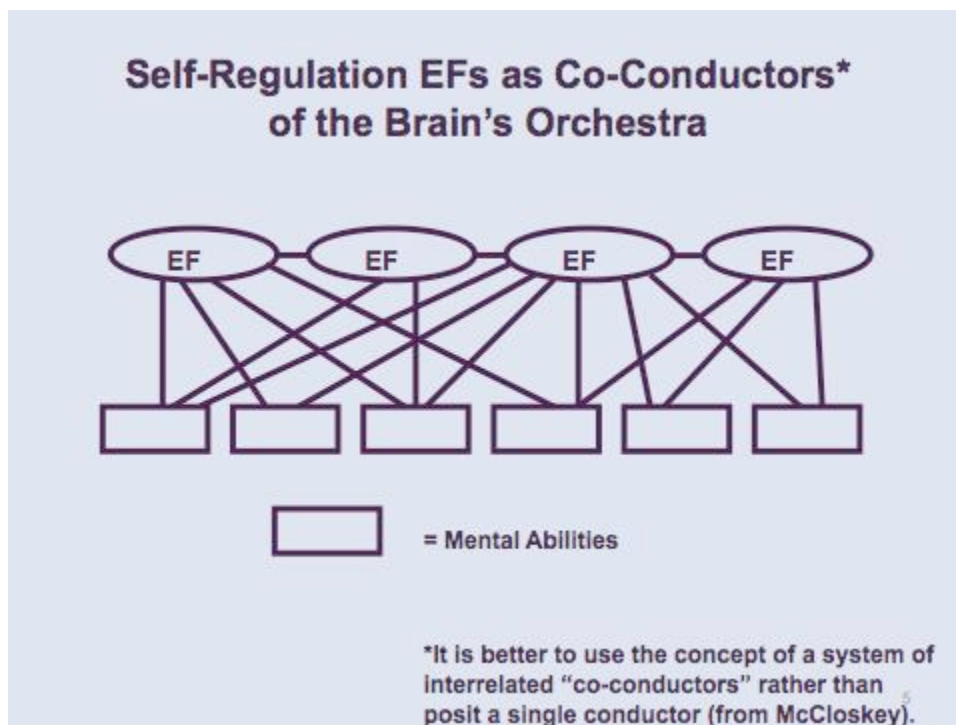
### What is Executive Functioning?

Executive functioning is the capacity to control attention, to recognize the relevant and not be distracted by less relevant or irrelevant details. Attention, organization and generalization are possible because of executive functioning (Jacobsen, 2005). Executive functions are multiple, complex, directive capacities of the mind that cue the use of other abilities, and direct and control perceptions, thoughts, actions and to some degree emotions (McCloskey et.al., 2009). The illustrations below provide a visual representation—a kind of organizational chart of executive functioning of the brain. The first, a simplistic model, can easily lead us to think that simple interventions and strategies might be effective to address executive functioning challenges. The complexity of executive functioning is somewhat approximated in the second model, but is even more powerfully captured in the third.

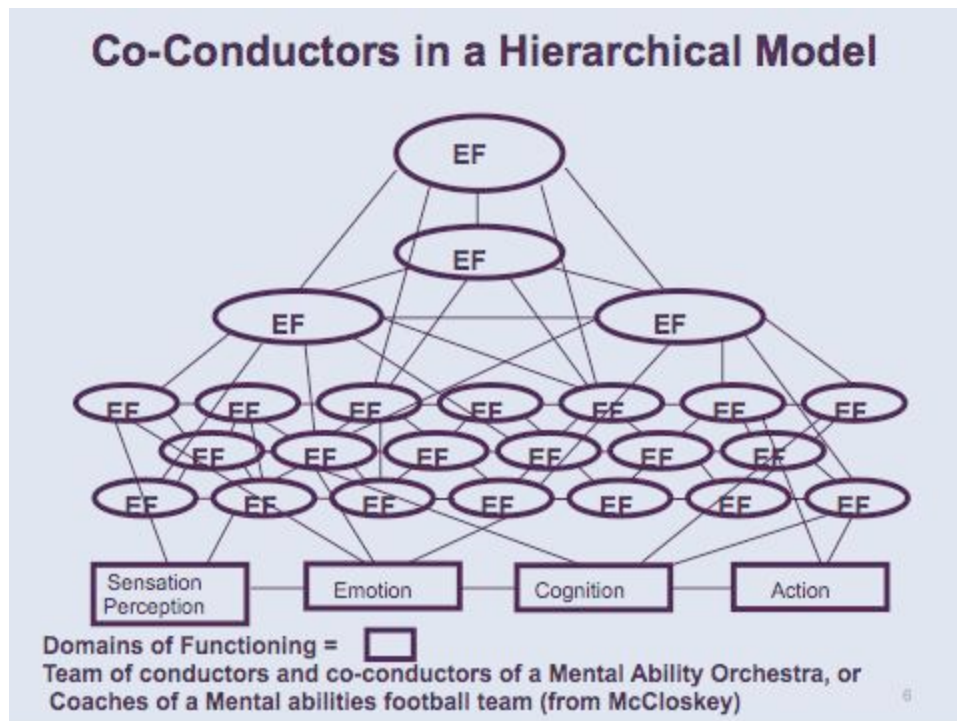
### Figure 1: EF as the Conductor of the Brain's Orchestra



**Figure 2: Self-Regulating EFs as the Co-Conductors of the Brain's Orchestra**



**Figure 3: Co-Conductors in a Hierarchical Model**



## How Do Problems with Executive Functioning Impact Learning?

Because of executive functioning challenges, traditional school standards and curricula are often not a good match for some students with AS. For example, to function adequately in most schools requires a student's awareness and acceptance that "doing school" may not be the same as learning. Generally, "doing school" means finding out what is expected and doing it, even if the student already knows it and thinks it is "stupid" or "a waste of time." Students with AS who cannot adjust to these expectations often struggle in school. These students may require a program that includes a high degree of acceptance and flexibility that supports the student's interests and abilities.

Many students with AS want to do well in school, if they think that is possible. Some are so determined to excel that only perfection is acceptable, resulting in stress for themselves, their parents and their teachers.

## Which Subjects are Challenging for Those with Executive Functioning Deficits?

Often a teen with AS will report that she cannot do an assignment or understand a lesson. This often indicates that the executive functioning component is beyond her capacity. For example, writing, particularly when facts, sequence and logic are not apparent, can overwhelm someone with poor executive functioning. Even factually based writing can be challenging, when the expectation is something the student is assumed to understand, but is not spelled out clearly enough for that student to understand. Unfortunately, executive dysfunction is often mistaken for willful resistance, as shown by the following story.

Suzy, a student with AS, wanted to do her assignments, but often did not understand what was expected, especially in essays. As a result she became anxious, depressed and school-avoidant. When

assessed for special education eligibility, she performed adequately on many of the individually administered tests. However, when the testing required that Suzy write an essay, she said that she was unable to complete this part of the assessment. This appeared contrary to the responsiveness, motivation and cooperation she had exhibited during testing. Suzy could not write, because she did not know what to write. She was unable to voice her concerns adequately and, as a result, her assessment report stated that Suzy's written language could not be assessed because Suzy "refused to write." The role of her executive functioning challenges was not recognized. She was described as oppositional.

## **Which Supports are Helpful?**

Helping a student complete a writing assignment means providing support and assistance to bridge what the student knows (or can find out) with the intent of the assignment. A teacher, parent, tutor, peer or other helper often does this by "talking through" each step and sometimes scribing for the student. For students who write or type themselves, a helper can edit, so that what the student has written is organized and relevant to the assignment. Software with a "track changes" option allows the student to see the original and suggested changes. Many high school students with AS benefit from these types of supports as illustrated in the following example.

Ryan's mother edited all of his assignments after he typed them and before they were turned into his high school teachers. One day he told his mother that he no longer needed her help because she was not making substantive changes in his work. His perception was that he gave her his papers and his mother returned them without any changes. In actuality, she made significant edits in his papers, but was not using the computer's "track changes" option to indicate them. She thought that if Ryan saw the number of edits, he might become overwhelmed and discouraged. To help Ryan understand her role as editor, his mother began to show him the changes she made in his written work. These included removing paragraphs (and sometimes pages) of tangential information or making sure that the concluding paragraph was the last paragraph and not somewhere in the body of the paper. When Ryan saw these changes, he began to understand what he needed help with.

Another area of difficulty for many students with AS is literature, language arts or English. While they may enjoy fiction in which relevant information seems clearly and directly explained, much of the literature presented at the high-school level requires that a reader understand what is implied and recognize the author's or a character's perspective and intent. Even concrete information may be presented in ways that are confusing to these students. Pre-learning can help. This means knowing in advance what happens and analyzing implied meaning and intent, as indicated in the following story.

Required English class reading baffled and frustrated Brad. His resource teacher encouraged him to learn about the book before reading it, using Sparknotes ([www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com)). Sparknotes allowed him to understand the overall plot and prepared him to read the text. Because he was primed for what was to happen in his reading, he was better able to make sense of the text. He continues to wonder why anyone would want to write (or read) something so unclear and indirect, but he is less overwhelmed or averse to doing his literature assignment.

Pre-learning or priming can help students with AS understand relevant and implied information since much of high-school subject matter and instruction requires "getting" what is taught without being

told. For some, a computer program, computer research or reading instructional comic books is helpful. Others require individual instruction.

Some worry that helping students in these ways is not preparing them for independence. Resource teachers and parents may be told that they are “enabling” students by providing these kinds of supports. They may very well be enabling their students—to function and succeed in school. If independence includes knowing what you need help with and getting that help when you need it, executive functioning supports, such as those outlined above, can prepare students for a successful school experience.

## References

Jacobsen, P. (2003). *Asperger Syndrome and Psychotherapy: Understanding Asperger Perspectives*. London & New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Jacobsen, P. (2005). *Understanding How Asperger Children and Adolescents Think and Learn: Creating Manageable Environments for AS Students*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McCloskey, G. “Executive Functioning.” [PowerPoint presentation]. Available at: [www.ospaonline.org/pdf/presentations/mccloskey\\_EF.ppt](http://www.ospaonline.org/pdf/presentations/mccloskey_EF.ppt).

McCloskey, G., Perkins, L.A., & VanDivner, B. (2009). *Assessment and Intervention for Executive Function Difficulties*. New York: Routledge Press.

© Copyright 2006-2009 Education.com All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/executive-function-high-school-asperger/?page=2>