A typical pre-school day might look like a lot of fun and games for the under five set: a teacher leads a small group in Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes; children tell stories and play dress up; a cooking demonstration yields a tasty snack.

Joan White, director of Oak Park's First United Preschool for 41 years, says Church Nursery School is a lot of fun, and there are a lot of games involved in the few hours children meet each week, but she points out that all of those common preschool activities are doing a lot to prepare young children for success throughout their lives by providing a key introduction to age-appropriate executive functioning skills.

“People think about kindergarten readiness in terms of counting or alphabet sets, but all sorts of studies show that social-emotional skills, executive functioning skills and gross motor skills are best for children of this age,” says White.

By LACEY SIKORA
Contributing Reporter

Executivefunctioning begins in early childhood

— John Borrero
Executive Director
Collaboration for Early Childhood

The Collaboration works with parents and teachers in the community to develop their capacity to support children in their development. We also screen children for possible development issues that could prevent children from learning the skills that they need to succeed.
No surprise, middle years toughest for executive functioning

By LACEY SIKORA
Contributing Reporter

The tween and early teen years are universally acknowledged as challenging. With changing bodies, fluid friend groups, multiple extracurricular activities and higher expectations at school, the middle years can be tough to navigate. Add in challenges with executive functioning skills, and you often find a recipe for difficulties at home and school. Kids with an extreme deficit of executive functioning skills might need outside help for treating executive functioning disorder, and other kids might just need some gentle reminders at home.

Shawna Seaton-George is a speech language pathologist in private practice who says her work naturally connects with executive functioning skills as language ties in with how kids organize their thoughts and actions. She sees a generational shift in the mastery of executive functioning skills that becomes more pronounced once kids hit the middle school years.

"Part of what we’re seeing is that when kids are younger, in the elementary school age, they don’t have the same responsibilities that they did 25 years ago. They don’t do the same chores around the house and don’t go out and play solo in the neighborhood. There’s not as much back and forth between school and home, and executive functioning skills become confusing territory for everyone: parents, teachers and kids."

When the skills aren’t built into the school day in kindergarten through fifth grade, Seaton-George notes that by the time kids get to middle school, with bigger demands, they might not have the foundational structure in executive functioning to deal with the high demand environment.

Mary Beth Hausken, parent and long-time Oak Park Education Foundation volunteer, says she sees an increased need for executive functioning skills just as students near the end of elementary school. “By fourth grade, kids are typically able readers, and expectations start escalating at that point. Homework ramps up; tests and projects begin to require planning. By sixth grade, students are expected to know the executive functioning skills already and expected to be able to stay organized. The expectations today are much higher than when we were growing up.”

During the middle years, Hausken says that many parents need to be actively involved in helping their kids acquire and sharpen executive functioning skills, which can be a process that takes time. “The secret is, you start off telling your child explicitly what to do and then move them to where they come up with their own solution. Then, move them to the last place of where they do it on their own without a prompt. Over time, your goal is to move the child from a place of dependence to independence.”

With her own three children, now grown, Hausken observed that even within the same family, the grasp of executive functioning skills varied widely, and she says that research indicates that ease of mastering executive functioning skills is not tied to intelligence.

All children will occasionally need a nudge in the right direction, and it can be difficult for parents to know when to seek help or try a new approach in helping their teen grasp executive functioning skills. Seaton-George emphasizes that struggling with executive functioning skills is not a deficit; the skills are something that continue to be developed throughout a lifetime. She does say, “If it’s having a significant impact on your ability to function, it’s probably something that you need to look at.”

While each family’s approach should be tailored to their unique issues, Hausken identifies a few key areas that are often a source of stress for families of middle school children and offers tips for families struggling with common issues.

Both Seaton-George and Hausken advocate modelling appropriate behavior for your kids. Seaton-George recommends that clients talk out loud about their own experiences. “Modelling our adult strategies and talking about them out loud can help. For example, when you open the fridge and realize you’re out of something, you can say, “We’re out of these things. Let’s make a list. I can go to the store on the way home tomorrow.”

Hausken, who jumpstarted the OPEF’s Vex Robotics Program, also says that programs like it or other extracurriculars can play a key role for kids struggling with executive functioning skills and says parents should not take away outside activities for children who might be struggling at school.

“Kids with executive functioning disorder struggle enough. A lot of these kids have talents that may not be used at school. Part of each day, kids should have something that makes them feel successful and happy. Bring balance to a child’s day so that part of the day they feel capable and full of happiness.”

STEP IT UP: Dr. Shawna Seaton-George, a speech therapist, says middle school is when a lack of executive functioning skills becomes more apparent in some students. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

PLANNING A ROBOT: Extracurriculars such as the Vex Robotics program teach students executive functioning skills. (Courtesy of Oak Park Education Foundation)

“Over time, your goal is to move the child from a place of dependence to independence.”
— Mary Beth Hausken
Oak Park Education Foundation volunteer

Good Heart Work Smart Foundation
The key to building life skills? Great expectations

By MICHAEL ROMAIN
Staff Reporter

In a sense, Hannah Gorin, a nursing major in her senior year at Marquette University in Wisconsin, is back where she was four years ago — on a life-altering deadline. Currently, the 21-year-old spends a lot of her time pouring over the details of applications; this time, however, instead of college, the time-sensitive documents are keys to a career.

“I have an application for a nursing job that opens on Friday, so I’m definitely on a timeline right now,” she said during an interview in February. “I’m mostly looking for jobs in pediatric nurse residency programs.”

Gorin, a graduate of Oak Park and River Forest High School, said that the executive functioning skills she developed at her alma mater — the ability to initiate tasks, to organize her responsibilities and her time, to plan and prioritize, and to evaluate her progress, among other critical skills — are particularly useful now as she heads into the workforce.

Matt Kirkpatrick, the interim assistant principal for student learning at Oak Park and River Forest High School, said that the executive functioning skills she developed at her alma mater matter for students “who are capable of course mastery, but need development” in critical life skills like self-management, self-awareness and responsible decision-making.

“Lessons in all these areas with specific emphasis on how they relate to academic success help students unlock their potential to succeed in their current and future content-based courses,” Kirkpatrick said.

But for students, like Gorin, who succeed academically and still need to cultivate those executive functioning skills? The incubator comes in many forms — some more basic than others.

Gorin said that while she was at OPRF, she kept the habit of writing down all of her assignments in a notebook. She added that being active in extracurricular activities helped her develop the critical skills that she’s putting to work now in her job search.

“I was a track-and-field athlete in high school and in college, so that definitely plays a role in my ability to be on top of the things I need to do,” she said. “Sports definitely helped me gain other life skills.”

Melanie Weiss, the manager of the OPRFHS Scholarship Foundation, stressed the importance of the foundation’s rigorous application process as a tool for sharpening executive functioning skills.

“It’s important for students to understand that, in life, you have deadlines and obligations,” she said. Weiss said that each year the foundation gives out an average of $100,000 in partial academic scholarships to roughly 60 students.

Gorin was a recipient of the scholarship, along with Jack Devitt, a 2015 graduate of OPRF who received the Patrick Luby Memorial Scholarship — one of roughly four dozen scholarships under the foundation’s umbrella.

“As someone who tended to take a more relaxed approach to planning for school work, being forced to be schedule-oriented in order to receive the scholarship I was pursuing was challenging,” Devitt said. “The deadlines were really strict and I knew that I had to be on top of my game if I wanted to be selected.”

Weiss said that one requirement for receiving a scholarship serves as a particularly effective tool for sharpening executive functioning skills.

“The students who receive scholarships have to write thank you notes,” she said. “It’s important that they know the value of writing thank you notes. It’s kind of a lost art, because it requires a lot of steps. You have to get the paper and envelope, mail it out. It’s not a text. People appreciate the extra effort.”

Over the years, something of a consensus has formed among OPRF officials that in order to increase all students’ executive functioning skills — despite income level, race, gender and other factors — they have to be brought into spaces where students have to rise to high expectations and rigorous processes.

The work is ongoing. In the meantime, individual students looking to responsibly navigate through high school, college and into careers might take some pointers from Gorin.

Her advice? Take advantage of the support systems that exist and make a hobby out of keeping a to-do list and holding yourself to it.

“We have a career services center at Marquette that help us with resumes and one of my instructors looked over mine and critiqued it,” she said. “I’d also say write down due dates, because then you can see them and know they’re coming up. But most importantly, make sure that whatever you’re applying yourself to is something you’re passionate about, because that will make it a lot easier for you to want to achieve your goal.”

Strategies for dealing with Executive Function Disorder:

Disorganized backpack/losing things
• They should only carry what they absolutely need
  • Clean out backpack every week (preferably before the weekend so there’s no surpris­es!)
  • Store all completed paperwork in a file drawer or file cube at home
  • Use Word or a Google doc for as much paperwork as possible (Google doc advantage: can print another copy at school if they forget it)
  • If losing math papers, take a cell phone photo of work in case they have to re-create it
  • Copy any essentials that they need (e.g., chemistry reference guide) and keep one at home
  • Will the teacher let them email the work to them in addition to bringing a hard copy? (This will ensure teacher gets it/knows they did it while they practice turning it in.)

Planning
• Kids need to keep a planner. It should include practices, lessons, doctor appointments, etc.
  • If they hate writing “track practice” over and over, print mini labels of repetitive activities
  • Break tasks down into chunks
  • Reading assignment: have them figure out how many pages they need to read each night to complete it before the deadline
  • Long project
    • Make a list of the steps required
    • Plan due date of each step by starting when it’s due and counting backwards
    • Put these due dates in the planner

Getting homework done in a timely manner
• Create a homework station
• Use a Time Timer®
• Break up homework into chunks; have them tell you what their plan is
• Allow 5-minute breaks about every 20-30 minutes, depending on age of child
• Using a sour hard candy or munching on healthy snack can help them stay focused

Forgetting what you need for school
• Carry backpack to wherever homework is done. Put homework and books back in backpack when you’re done.
• Pack backpack the night before. This should include any sports bags, instruments, etc. Put it all by the exit door.
• Use planner to confirm they have materials
• If really struggling, can create a packing checklist

I can’t find...
• Get them in the habit of everything having a place and putting it there every time.
  • Things like glasses or cell phone that move, assign a landing place in each room
  • You’re more likely to remember where you set something if you: Look at the object as you set it down and say “cell phone on piano.” (Visual-tactile-auditory memory)
  • Track suit washed and must go to school tomorrow: rule should be you walk it right now to the bag by the door, not Mom!

Messy Math
• Turn notebook paper sideways to help line up columns
• Print ¼” or ½” grid paper for math homework (found online)

“Stop nagging me” — white board in central location, like kitchen
• After first verbal reminder, parent writes reminder on white board
• When child does it, they check it off so parent knows it was done and doesn’t need to ask about it
• Encourage student to also write down things to remember as well
the area occurs in early childhood. John Borrero, executive director of the Collaboration for Early Childhood in Oak Park, says that preschool is the time to lay the foundation for learning executive functioning skills. “Toddlers are just about themselves and their immediate emotions. At three, language and nuanced emotions start to develop. So much happens between three and four. As we understand brain development more and more, we realize this is the age that these executive skills develop.”

For children entering school for the first time at age two or three, White says one of the foundations for executive functioning is predictability. “It starts with consistent routines, schedules and expectations. This provides a sense of safety to a child. Adults in the classroom model problem solving and provide management opportunities for children to exercise their choices.”

There are many activities that support executive functioning in early childhood, according to White and she points to three key areas. Focused attention means being able to filter out distractions, resist impulsive actions and follow routines. A two-year-old might be able to focus attention for two minutes, but a five-year-old might be able to focus for five to 10.

Working memory is another important skill that requires a child to keep knowledge and use it for a later activity. This might manifest in dramatic play. For instance, a child who has recently had a check-up at the doctor might bring some of that understanding to playing doctor with classmates at school later in the week.

A third important executive functioning skill is mental flexibility: being able to keep a variety of things in your mind and being able to adjust to fit different circumstances. White points to common pre-school activities like freeze dance or Simon Says as examples of activities which foster mental flexibility alongside impulse control.

Many of the typical preschool activities may look like fun and games, but White says they actually help children learn important executive functioning skills. Obstacle courses, yoga poses, finger play, games with rules, dramatic play, story time, and singing songs with directions all provide opportunities to learn executive functioning skills. White says, “It’s nothing new, but understanding why it’s important and why it’s valuable helps a teacher be intentional.”

Borrero recognizes the importance of good pre-school options and says all children are born with the capacity to learn executive functioning skills, but not all children have an environment that supports age-appropriate acquisition of executive functioning skills. “The problem we have is when other things interfere: living in an environment with toxic stress, or not having good health. … This is when we see problems start to develop.”

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With all supports in place, a three-year-old would be learning how to follow directions, how to concentrate for periods of about five minutes or how to share toys. “Compare that to a kid who regularly doesn’t eat breakfast or who experiences conflict in the morning at home or has housing insecurity or who saw violence in the neighborhood. That child may not be able to focus. It will impact his relationships with his teachers and peers,” says Borrero.

He points out the importance of preschool for all children and adds that an inability to master early childhood executive functioning skills by kindergarten and first grade can lead to a lifetime label. “If you misbehave, and get in trouble, then you hear the message ‘You’re a problem.’ This becomes a cycle that is hard to escape.”

In Oak Park and River Forest, 75 percent of children entering kindergarten have had some preschool, and Borrero advocates for more children beginning at age two. The Collaboration for Early Childhood focuses on getting children involved in the many vibrant early childhood options available locally, and Borrero says their work does not end at the school door. “We need to look at the entire environment of the child — we need to come together to support development. This is why we’re a collaboration. We need to have everyone at the table: parents, pediatricians, schools, and occupational therapists. Early childhood education is not the only thing, but it is the foundation. It’s more than one person’s work. It’s a lot of people coming together.”