

Strategies for the school year—how to help kids work-smart from home

Peg Dawson, EdD, and Richard Guare, PhD, are executive skills experts and the authors of the [*Smart but Scattered*](#) series, as well as [*The Work-Smart Academic Planner: Write It Down, Get It Done*](#).

Here they share some strategies for fostering executive skills development in kids, as well as some tips on how to set up your child's at-home work space for distance learning success.

You are both experts on executive functions—the brain-based skills students (and everyone!) use every day to learn, work, and complete tasks and assignments. Can you give some specific examples of executive skills? In this time of distance learning, what are ways parents can encourage their kids to stay on track with school work *on their own*—without excessive nagging or hovering?

Executive skills are brain-based skills that develop between birth and age 25 and improve with practice. They are critical to school success. They can be divided up and defined in various ways, and there are many different skills. The ones we include in *The Work-Smart Academic Planner* are the ones that seem to matter most to success, both in school and beyond.

The *Planner* is particularly useful for distance learning because it is an all-in-one resource that helps kids keep track of assignments, while at the same time teaching them strategies for academic and personal self-management and self-efficacy.

Here is a list of six executive skills, along with a few tips for fostering development.

Organization

- Create a comfortable work space with the materials needed for assignments
- Use laptop or tablet for managing information/assignments/class notes

Task Initiation

- Pick the task (make it small)
- Pick the start time
- Pick the minimum work time
- Pick the cue to start (use an alarm, or begin right after breakfast or lunch)

Time Management

- Estimate how long a task will take—and check to see if you were right
- Break homework down into short time segments (we like the Pomodoro technique, in which a timer is used to break down work into 25-minute segments, with a 5-minute break in between)

Sustained Attention

- Set realistic work goals and stick to them
- Take planned breaks and get back to work on schedule
- Gather all necessary materials before beginning a task
- Build in rewards for completing tasks

Working Memory

- Set reminders with time and sound cue on smartphone
- Make checklists

Planning, Goal-Directed Persistence

- Make daily study plans to build a sense of accomplishment

Can you share some tips, based on the strategies in *The Work-Smart Academic Planner*, for setting up your child’s work-from-home space for success?

1. Students are more likely to use a workspace that they have had a choice in designing. Choices can include location, type of work surface, seating and light source, as long as these include some basic elements. These include:

- a flat, reasonably sturdy work surface that has a drawer for materials or a storage container in the workspace
- a location that has a good source of light for day and evening
- a chair that is at the correct height for the desk or table, has a back and is sturdy
- a location that is as free as possible from distractions such as TV, video games, family traffic
- access to a reliable internet connection or wifi if available and an electrical outlet

2. Student can decide what materials they will routinely need. If you have a workspace, let them see that you have that they might like. These might include:

- Pencils, pens, markers, etc. and a container or desk space to store them
- Notebook, loose-leaf binder with tabs, loose-leaf paper, post-it notes
- Folders and a file box
- Paperclips, colored binder clips
- A timer or some visible time keeping device so they can decide on the length of work and break times
- A wastebasket

3. If students are using computer or tablet and their work is being done online, ask them if they know how to save, store, retrieve and submit it. This is more likely a need for younger students who have less experience with remote learning or use of technology.

4. Let them personalize their workspace with pictures, decorations, sports logos, etc. as long as it doesn’t clutter the workspace.

5. Encourage them to clean and reorganize their workspace for a few minutes daily at a designated time. Offer to help them with this initially by suggesting options for where things can be stored, what can be thrown out, etc. If need be you can help with a little of the clean-up but gradually hand this off to them. Have them set a reminder on a phone or time about when to start. Keep the process brief (2-5 minutes). Model this clean-up with your own work space around the same time.

Thank you so much! This is such a challenging time for students, as they navigate schools and classrooms that look very different this year. Organization, time management, study strategies, and daily/weekly calendars are key. For more information, check out The User's Guide to the Work-Smart Academic Planner. <https://www.guilford.com/add/dawson-guare-revised-guide.pdf>