STEP 1

Assess the Young Adult's Skills for Independence

The Executive in the Brain

Terry has an appointment for a job interview and, as is typical for her, she gets a late start. On the drive she tries to make up lost time and is stopped for speeding. Terry resists the urge to argue with the police officer and instead apologizes for her mistake and briefly explains why it happened. She gets off with a warning.

Jackson, who is struggling with completing his degree, has a short paper due for an online course he is taking. He starts to research topics on his computer but takes a break to check how his fantasy football team is doing, and 2 hours later he still doesn't have a topic.

Tirone started a new job a week ago. He's supposed to punch in by 7:00 A.M. He's ready on time but as usual can't find his wallet or car keys. He arrives late and gets a written warning from his boss.

All of these young adults are stalled, in one fashion or another, as a result of significant weaknesses in one or more executive skills. Terry evidences both weak and strong executive skills. It looks like she doesn't have a good sense of time, but she is good at controlling her feelings. Jackson seems to have issues with getting started and maintaining his focus. And Tirone apparently struggles with making plans and keeping belongings in order.

Introducing Executive Skills

So what exactly do we mean by "executive skills," and why do they have so much power over us? The executive skills in the brain help us reach our goals, whether they're as simple and short term as getting to an appointment on time or as complex and long term as getting a college degree. In fact, we need these executive skills to choose our goals to begin with. Then we need them to regulate or guide our behavior in a way that makes it likely that we will reach those goals. On the flip side, they are the skills that help us avoid the behaviors that will derail our progress.

When some people hear the term "executive skills," they think it refers to skills needed by a successful business executive. There is some overlap: planning, task initiation, and focus are used by both the business executive and the young adult (and the rest of us) to accomplish goals. But the term in fact comes from the neuroscience literature and refers to a set of brain-based skills that are required for humans to *execute*, or successfully perform, tasks. When a young adult is stuck, in spite of having academic and work skills as well as preferences that suggest reasonable fit with a goal, it is likely that weaknesses in executive skills play a significant role because these skills are essential for successful goal accomplishment *and* independent living.

Executive skills are the brain-based skills needed to perform tasks.

If your son or daughter has a passion for (or even a sustained interest in) a particular subject, craft, vocation, or career path, you might wonder why the young adult is stalled. How can a person who's been a valued pet sitter and tireless volunteer at the local pet shelter, and really seems to be a dog or cat whisperer, never seem to get even close to the avowed dream of becoming a veterinarian? Why would the kid who's been talking about being a master game developer since the age of 9 not work hard to learn how to code? Sometimes knowing what you like to do and want to pursue isn't enough. It's also not always enough to have the talent or aptitude a goal requires. If interest and aptitude were sufficient for goal attainment, many more young adults would be in their dream jobs or would have finished college. Colin, for example (National Honor Society, SAT scores from the 96th to the 99th percentile), would have finished college and likely been involved in writing about language, literature, or politics. Clearly, he, as do many young adults, had the interests and aptitude to reach those goals.

But goal attainment requires additional skills. In pursuit of a goal we need to be able to develop a plan, the road map, for how to travel toward the goal.

And we need to be able to sustain the attention necessary to maintain focus on the road. We need to have the flexibility and emotional control to manage any roadblocks that get in the way, as well as the time management skills to balance the other day-to-day responsibilities that come along. Collectively these are what we call the brain's "executive skills."

Executive Skills Weaknesses in Action

Many stuck young adults exhibit problems like Terry's, Jackson's, or Tirone's over and over, so that they never seem to get where they want to go. But as a parent who wants to see your child succeed, it can be hard to attribute the failure to launch to brain-based problems rather than concluding that your child isn't trying hard enough, doesn't care enough, or is just naturally lazy. This chapter will give you and your young adult a chance to see where your son or daughter's executive skills stand so you have an inkling of how any weaknesses are keeping the young adult stuck.

You may have been dealing with your child's executive skills deficits for as long as you can remember. Terry had more "tardies" on her report cards than any of her elementary school classmates, and she typically had to pull an all-nighter to hastily slap together papers due in high school. Jackson is his family's "airhead," always needing to have instructions repeated, constantly wandering away from half-finished chores and projects—even the ones he was supposedly interested in. And Tirone was often compared to the Charles Schultz Pig-Pen character, with a cloud of dust, flotsam, and jetsam trailing him everywhere he went. He never put anything back where it belonged, so his environment was a chronic mess. But for the most part these three got by. Terry did get to school and get her papers in, with a little help from her parents. Jackson's pediatrician said he might have a mild case of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and suggested some tools like electronic reminders to keep him moving forward on assignments and other tasks. His parents often served as his frontal lobes, and with help from them and his teachers, he graduated from high school with a 3.0 grade point average (GPA). Tirone has cost his family a lot of money for cell phones, new sets of keys, and sports equipment to replace what he's lost. They've started keeping a tally of these expenses, and he's supposed to be reimbursing them a little at a time out of his paycheck. They had hoped that feeling obligated to them would make him more conscientious about this latest in a string of jobs, but now they wonder if he just doesn't care about his family.

Colin "got by" too:

In the early years (from elementary school through sophomore year of high school) my natural abilities had the side effect of hiding my executive skills deficiencies; I could effectively close the gap of poor life management by just being smart. This had the twofold effect of not only leading others to believe I possessed these skills when I didn't, but also allowing me to make it successfully through school without ever having to work on them. Yes, the chair pushing in and talking out were examples of issues identified by my teachers and parents, but it's difficult for adults to assess whether these are temporary, isolated issues ("kids being kids," or "boy brains" as my mother calls it) or whether they foreshadow more serious issues down the road. Some present-day school systems, both public and private, have begun to implement curricula that help develop these skills by teaching them and monitoring student performance. In my case, some solutions worked better than others, some problems were more persistent than others. Some I've simply grown out of (biting my nails); others are works-in-progress (to-do lists and other reminders). Sometimes issues arose completely out of the blue, but in many cases my executive skills problems correlated to universal teenage milestones. Even if I had a time machine, I doubt I could have been punctual for anything between 2003 and 2005, for example.

Junior year of high school was when I began to struggle significantly. Similar to college, junior year at my high school marks an informal end to a general, student-body-wide course load and begins asking students to commit to more specific, rigorously taught subjects. It required a realignment of my learning style; no longer is a good handle on general topics adequate for good grades; now time and energy must be devoted to lengthy studies of very particular disciplines.

Spoiler alert: I didn't realign. Between junior and senior year I took four advanced placement (AP) classes: U.S. history, U.S. government, physics 1, and English. I love(d) history, government, and English, and it showed; my AP test scores on those were 4, 4, and 5, respectively (where 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest score). What's more interesting, though, is that my grades in those classes didn't reflect this result at all. I didn't fail, but in comparison to my classmates I was middle-of-the-road at best. The results were a catch-22 of my own design, because it somewhat validated my views at the time that

if the purpose of the course was to do well on the test, then why do my missed homework assignments matter? I got A's and B's on the tests, so give me A's and B's for the class because I clearly did what was asked of me.

The real warning sign that I would struggle in college was my physics class. The first month or so was a breeze, designed to refresh us and lay down fundamental concepts that would be important later. I took this month as an indicator of the class as a whole, and proceeded to ignore most of the material, learning only enough to complete daily and weekly assignments. I had no real interest in physics, I was a casually proficient math student at best, the course was there, so I took it to boost my college résumé. By Christmas break I had floundered completely. The course accelerated quickly, and for the first time I was confronted by something that I didn't like, didn't understand, and couldn't master or even comprehend without diligent study.

My response? In short, I simply bailed out. I ignored the class as much as I could. I had done some of this in the past, but this was senior year AP physics; my teacher was wonderful, but he wasn't there to babysit me or liaison with my parents. By the time things came to a head and my guidance counselor notified them that I was in serious trouble, it was too late in my mind. I suppose I could have gritted my teeth and tried to make up all the work, but it seemed insurmountable.

Later it became obvious how shortsighted it was for me to dismiss the impact of homework on my performance, and clearly I completely missed the boat on the secondary lessons and skills that homework is trying to reinforce: consistent, independent completion of work on time. At the time it was annoying, but the end result was positive, so I ignored it; in retrospect it was a perfect dichotomy for understanding how and why I would struggle down the road.

My wife and I* were certainly aware of Colin's issues with executive skills, and from elementary school through high school we put various monitoring systems in place that provided us with timely information about academics and behavior in school and we set up a variety of systems to help him manage school. These included limits on access to distractions (TV, Internet, phone,

*Whenever we use the authorial "I," outside the vignettes about Colin and others, Richard Guare is speaking.

etc.) and making access to things he wanted (TV, Internet, free time, use of the car) contingent on acceptable school performance and behavior. From middle school through the end of high school he and I had more than our share of confrontations and conflicts about what he saw as unnecessary intrusions into his life. But he got through high school relatively unscathed, so from my perspective the system worked. At least until he went off to college, as Colin recalls:

> In high school, my parents made access to gratification somewhat dependent on the effort I put into my studies. No effort = no results = no privileges (roughly). But when I got to college, the timely monitoring and red-flag systems that my parents and teachers had had in place were now absent. Hence, I could tell myself (and I did) that I could catch up or recover anytime with a little effort. The second element, time distortion, contributed to this illusion so that I underestimated the amount of time that I needed to put into coursework. My courses seemed easy at first, making it easier for me to skip just that one class or teacher assistant (TA) session. And I overestimated the amount of time that I had available since the whole semester was in front of me.
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> *Tempus edax rerum*—time, in fact, gradually devoured my opportunities. Once I fell behind, the amount of effort that I perceived necessary to catch up was daunting. So I defaulted to immediate gratification to escape the uncomfortable thoughts and comfort myself with the continuing belief that I still had time. The system works until the piper calls. After that point I saw a mountain of coursework that I'd never come back from, and ignored it because of the perceived effort, stress, and shame that it gave me.
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> In reality, at that point, I could have acted—met with my professors and counselors, mitigated the damage. And it probably would have worked; most college educators do have a sympathetic ear for students who temporarily forget what their job is, and are willing to cut them some slack. But I was the person who ran up his credit card to the limit of instant gratification, and instead of proactively contacting a debt consultant, I sat in my room biting my fingernails until the collection agency came knocking. The immediate context provided a ready-made distraction and escape. Things we don't want to do are always perceived as more difficult than they actually are. As I put off catching up on my classwork and seeing professors during office hours to patch up my attendance record, the perceived effort I

thought it would take increased exponentially. Thus, the point at which I simply conceded that the semester was a total loss was a lot earlier than it was in reality. And by the time I made this known to my parents, the semester really was in dire straits.

Ultimately, I probably put more effort into a failed attempt at resurrecting the semester than it would have taken to fix it when I first acknowledged it as a problem. This is a pattern of behavior that has been with me for much of my life, but again, it didn't necessarily reveal itself until the game changed and the stakes were much higher than before.

Are Executive Skills Deficits Stalling Your Young Adult?

For all of our sons and daughters, the reality is that looming adulthood changes the landscape. Obviously, leaving the nest for an independent life means being largely self-sufficient: No more parents coming to the rescue with trips to the lost-and-found. No more endless financial backup—they start to peter out. No more authorities cutting your son or daughter slack for repeated recklessness and carelessness because he or she is "just a kid." These supports are rarely withdrawn abruptly or all at once, but the young adult's goal is to gradually move toward doing without them. To ensure that progress can be made in that direction, you have to know where the young adult's executive skills strengths and weaknesses lie. Weaknesses can hold your child back. Strengths can help him or her move forward.

Your adult child could be stuck for a variety of reasons, and maybe executive skills weaknesses aren't significant. This book will help you look at the complex matrix of factors typically involved, including lack of motivation and readiness for independence, ambivalence from parents, feeling too comfortable where they are, not knowing what they like or are good at, and wanting something that seems hopelessly out of reach. But we strongly suggest that the young adult and his or her parents complete the Executive Skills Questionnaire on pages 31–33 anyway. Whether you've never heard of executive skills or you both believe you know which executive skills are a problem for your child, you'll find that the questionnaires help you set aside a lot of assumptions that may have been stifling your ability to look at the situation clearly and fairly and give you some ideas for moving forward.

For parents and young adults who are not familiar with executive skills, the following information will provide you with an understanding of what executive skills are, how they develop, and the key role they play in the young adult's

journey to independence. (If you've read one of our books about executive skills, *Smart but Scattered, Smart but Scattered Teens,* or *The Smart but Scattered Guide to Success,* the information below may serve as a refresher, or if you're knowledgeable in this area, you may want to skip ahead to the questionnaires, where you can begin to apply this information to your young adult.)

How We Acquire Executive Skills

How do executive skills develop? There are two main contributors to the development of executive skills: neurobiology and experience. The neurobiological contribution begins with genetics. The genes you inherited from your parents affected your own executive skills development, and the genes you passed on to your young adult likewise have impacted his or her skills. And as with other skills, such as language development, the brain is hardwired at birth for executive skills to develop. At birth, these skills exist only as *potential.* Newborns don't speak, and they don't display executive skills. But as long as no pre- or early postnatal disease or trauma has occurred to damage this neurological equipment, these skills will develop.

Beyond that, the environment and the experiences in that environment play a major role in executive skills development. A biologically or physically toxic environment can alter the neurobiological substrate underlying executive skills. Environmental toxins include anything from lead exposure to poverty to child abuse. And there is growing evidence that significant psychosocial stress (conflict in the family, sustained negative interactions with the child) can also adversely impact the brain and hence executive skills development. But if we assume reasonably normal neurobiological equipment and the absence of negative genetic or environmental factors, then executive skills development proceeds more or less as it is supposed to, starting at a very early age.

The experiences we have in our environment while growing up have a strong influence on how our executive skills develop.

The infant enters the world with a brain primed for interaction with people and the environment. And she learns from those interactions and adjusts her behavior as a result. When, at 8 months, the infant sees a cat disappear into another room and crawls after it, she is demonstrating rudimentary executive skills: visual working memory, initiation, attention, even goal-directed persistence. At this age, though, she doesn't have all the executive skills she needs to be safe. If she comes to an ungated set of stairs, she may start

down them without any thought about the consequences. She lacks inhibition, so you as a parent intervene and lend yours to the situation. This is a very early example of a process that will go on between you and your child for a long time—25 or more years in fact, which is how long this process of full executive skills development in the brain takes.

In the course of development, our brain and nervous system, in conjunction with our body, provide us with an ever-increasing capacity to move about in our environment, interact with it, and receive feedback about that interaction. It is in the context of these interactions with the world that executive skills develop. When we practice crossing the street with our 6-year-old, holding her hand and telling her, "Stop, look both ways," that experience becomes encoded in the neurobiological substrate of our child's brain. Over time, we can fade the hand holding, and eventually even the words, as we see evidence that our child is learning the skill and demonstrating safety by using memory, inhibition, and attention.

Over the course of 25 years, your child's accumulation of these types of skills through practice strengthens the capacity for the self-regulation that depends on executive skills. The child's interaction with *people* (parents, teachers, community members, and peers) and with *things* (phones, cars, ATMs, washers and dryers) becomes part of the learning process. And if the process goes as planned, the end result is that your child is more able to make his own decisions and manage for himself and needs to rely less and less on you. If, on the other hand, your young adult is stuck, chances are that a weakness in executive skills has interrupted the process.

Executive Skills Development in Young Adults

Young adults, at least in the United States, are "legal" at age 21, that is, able to buy alcohol and in some states marijuana. But we often think of adulthood beginning at age 18, because that's when many privileges and responsibilities are acquired, and many leave home for college at that age too. Whether your adult child is stalled at age 18, 21, or beyond, however, you're probably providing ongoing advice along with emotional and material support, because you recognize that the parenting role is not defined completely by your child's age. In fact, parenting a young adult is one of the most important phases of your role. Your help and support during the young adult years serve as the launch point and final step of the process you've been preparing your child for since birth—independence from you.

Two facts about young adults justify your ongoing support and need to be taken into account when you carefully consider how to manage this later stage of your parenting role.

1. At least through the mid-20s, executive skills are still developing. That means young adults, particularly those who haven't launched, may need continued support with some of these skills. Identifying a young adult's executive skills strengths as well as those that lag behind becomes a key issue for goal selection and goal achievement. If a young adult chooses a goal based on interest but attaining that goal requires a set of executive skills that are weak, the goal may be a questionable fit. Jackson wants to complete school, but he struggles with task initiation and sustained attention. While this doesn't preclude school completion, he will need some effective strategies to address these weaknesses if he is to succeed.

Colin recalls the error in metacognition—one of the last executive skills to develop and the one through which we see the big picture of a situation accurately and learn from experience —that led him on a fruitless course in AP physics:

> There was also a mental math that was the little voice in my head; it was always there and still is. "Your grades in other courses were okay. More important, you had 2½ years of A's and B's padding your GPA; taking this hit wouldn't do much to it. It will be seen as a fluke, as a case of senioritis. At this point, in terms of stress and time commitment, you're better off chalking it up as an acceptable loss and moving on." So that's what I did. I hung on to a D in the class and scored a 1 on the AP test . And in a way I was right; it barely nudged my GPA, and it was perceived as a case of someone who wasn't a "math" person getting in over his head. Now, partly that was true, but it also revealed my lack of foresight, as so many college courses are built on the format of an initial, familiarizing survey, followed by a rapid incline. And it was the first instance of a pattern of behavior that I would repeat many times in the future.

2. Many young adults have not had a lot of practice with the skills of independent living. At a basic level, these skills include grocery shopping, use of washers and dryers, résumés and job searches, and getting to work on time. At a more advanced level, they include locating apartments and handling leases, and managing money, independent living expenses and budgets, credit, health and car insurance, car repairs, and medical appointments.

Our role as parents is not to manage these areas for our young adults. Nor is it to direct them, in a step-by-step teaching or lecturing fashion, in what they should do. Rather, it is to model these skills for them by inviting them to see, ask questions about, and participate in the ways that we manage these activities for ourselves. We share our tools with them (e.g., budgeting software programs or tricks we've learned for managing our time so we're not late to work). We also may put them in touch with people in the community who can provide these services for them—doctors, dentists, bankers, insurance brokers, or online services that we currently use and they will need—so that they can develop some facility in managing their own affairs.

In so doing, we are, in a sense, killing two birds with one stone. As we've noted, brain development in the regions tied to executive skills continues into young adulthood. So this is the ideal time for young adults to work on these skills. The complex activities of daily living we're talking about are the foundation of our ability to live independently, and mastery of these activities requires executive skills. As our young adults are learning the skills they need to be independent, the practice involved in learning these skills helps them "beef up" the executive skills needed for other life goals. Furthermore, how young adults manage these activities gives us direct evidence about their executive skills strengths and weaknesses and what supports they may need to strengthen their skill set. In fact, you may discover executive skills weaknesses that weren't as evident at home or school once the young adult is expected to handle daily adult tasks for the first time. We offer practical advice for helping young adults develop these skills of independent living in the Appendix.

The Essential Dozen: Definitions of the Executive Skills Needed for Independence and Success

Let's drill down a bit and identify the specific executive skills we believe are at the core of independent adulthood. Neuroscientists organize and label executive skills in different ways, and in fact some even call them executive *functions*. We prefer to use the word *skills* because we know that these are behaviors that can be learned and practiced. And by so doing, we can become more proficient at them, in the same way a tennis player practicing serves or volleys day in and day out gets better at playing tennis. To us, the word *function* sounds more permanent and less malleable—like brakes on a car. They're there and they function to stop the car to avoid hitting something. We're much more interested in the *skill* involved in learning how to use the braking function proficiently.

We began our work on executive skills by identifying the skills we thought were critical to school success. We very quickly realized that the same skills predicted adult success as well. And through the years we've found that our terminology helps people visualize and operationalize the skills. You may find more technical descriptions of executive skills out there, but we place a premium on clarity.

The definitions and brief behavioral examples in the checklist on pages 27–29 are designed to introduce executive skills and a sample of the behaviors that exemplify these skills. You and your young adult can read through this list, and if you find the examples of each skill helpful in describing how you each see yourself, you can enter your initials on that line. (The checklist is also available online; see the end of the Contents for information.) A more complete assessment questionnaire for the young adult follows on pages 31–33. Parents can assess their own executive skills more fully in Step 4.

What can you take from these definitions? Getting an idea of where your young adult's executive skills and weaknesses may lie? What about your own?

Assessing the Young Adult's Executive Skills

As we already mentioned, Jackson really does want to further his education. The courses he's taking online will get him some credits toward a degree in environmental science. And he's really interested in environmental engineering. But he's not going to get into that highly competitive field unless he actually gets the degree. Terry doesn't like living at home with her parents. She got pretty used to coming and going as she pleased when she was living and working at a resort over the summer and then into the fall, but the off-season didn't pay enough for her to live on her own once her roommate went back to college. Unfortunately, her job search from home has gone through fits and starts, and 3 months later she's still unemployed. Tirone's having lost several jobs due to being disorganized is eroding his self-confidence, which he tries to hide from his parents with gruff silence—which they're interpreting as his lack of concern about paying them back when he actually feels really guilty about that but doesn't know how to resolve his problems.

All three of these young adults have a broad goal—get a job, get a degree, make enough money to repay parents—but no idea about how to reach it. A good start is to take a close look at what's holding them back. Is the broad goal too broad? Is it realistic? Will it be met, considering the individual's executive skills profile?

Executive Skills Definitions and Behaviors Checklist

Check off or initial behaviors/statements that you identify with.

Response Inhibition: The capacity to think before you act—this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Thinks before speaking	_____ Says first thing thought of
_____ "It's worth waiting for"	_____ "I want it now"
_____ Reflects on decisions	_____ Makes impulsive decisions

Working Memory: The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Keeps track of belongings	_____ Misplaces things
_____ Remembers what to do	_____ "What was I going to do?"
_____ Learns from past experience	_____ Repeats same mistakes

Emotional Control: The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Maintains cool	_____ Has a short fuse
_____ Handles criticism/correction	_____ Is easily hurt/aggravated
_____ Controls temper if frustrated	_____ Tends to "lose it" if frustrated

Task Initiation: The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Gets started right away	_____ Dawdles
_____ "Just do it"	_____ "Plenty of time"
_____ "I took care of it"	_____ "I promise I'll take care of it"

(continued)

Sustained Attention: The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Finishes the task	_____ Jumps around
_____ Persists at job	_____ "This is boring"
_____ Focused	_____ Easily distracted

Planning/Prioritization: The ability to create a road map to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Sees path to the goal	_____ Not sure how to get there
_____ "This is the first thing to do"	_____ "Start here, no, maybe there?"
_____ "I can ignore this"	_____ "Is this important?"

Organization: The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Neat, tidy	_____ Stuff everywhere
_____ A place for everything	_____ Wherever it fits
_____ "It's right here"	_____ "I don't know where it is"

Time Management: The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ "This will take 10 minutes"	_____ "This will take forever"
_____ "I need to leave now"	_____ "Just one more thing before I go"
_____ "It's due today"	_____ "An extra day is no big deal"

(continued)

Executive Skills Definitions and Behaviors Checklist *(page 3 of 3)*

Goal-Directed Persistence: The capacity to have a goal, to follow through to the completion of the goal, and to not be put off by or distracted by competing interests.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ "Come hell or high water"	_____ "This is too much work"
_____ "It's worth the wait"	_____ "I want it now"
_____ "I can get past this"	_____ "I'll never get past this"

Flexibility: The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Go with the flow	_____ Stick to the schedule
_____ "Maybe there's another way"	_____ "There's only one way"
_____ Spontaneous	_____ Set in ways

Metacognition: The ability to stand back and take a bird's-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem-solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself "How am I doing?" or "How did I do?").

Strong	**Weak**
_____ "I'm okay at this"	_____ "Am I any good at this?"
_____ "I'd give myself a B"	_____ "How did I do?"
_____ "This relates to this"	_____ "I don't see any connection"

Stress Tolerance: The ability to thrive in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.

Strong	**Weak**
_____ Take it in stride	_____ Overwhelmed
_____ "I can manage this"	_____ "I can't do it"
_____ "Let's see what happens"	_____ "I need to know exactly what is happening"

Young adults should fill out the questionnaire on pages 31–33 (also available online; see the end of the Contents for information) so they can start to see whether there is a good fit between where they want to go and what executive skills they have to get there.

Any surprises here? Does this information explain what has been holding the young adult back? Where have you seen the executive skills weaknesses cause problems with momentum? Where have strengths been helpful? Many parents and young adults find the results of the questionnaire a relief. Finally, they have an idea of why it's been hard to get going or to keep going. A young adult who doesn't tolerate stress well might not do well in an intensive 4-year degree program right away but thrive at a community college where success can be built one or two courses at a time. An adult child who is relatively low in response inhibition and task initiation won't be likely to succeed in a job that calls for disciplined self-starters. Someone who doesn't have time management or planning skills may flounder when simply expected to "go out and get a job." He won't know where—or when or how—to start and will need more support from you.

> As a favor to Peg and my dad, I did fill out the Executive Skills Questionnaire toward the end of high school. I don't remember exactly my profile, but I'd guess strengths would have been flexibility and stress tolerance. Weaknesses are clearer—task initiation, sustained attention, and goal-directed persistence [GDP]. In the spring of this year, 2017, it's a bit different. I see my strengths now as flexibility, metacognition, and emotional control. Task initiation and sustained attention persist as weaknesses, and time management has moved into third place (from fourth in the past). Having a career objective that has emerged clearly only in the past 3 years has helped displace GDP as a weakness.

Colin's profiles, then and now, are not a surprise to me or my wife. What is or was surprising is that with my own son I didn't attend to and act on what I knew. For any other teen with this executive skills profile and his or her parents I would have predicted the likely outcome and the steps they could take to avoid it. Colin even gave us his vision of what was to come. On an evening a few weeks before we took him to college, my wife and I were talking with him about last-minute details. In the midst of the conversation, very uncharacteristic for him, he broke down, saying he didn't think he could succeed. I chalked

Executive Skills Questionnaire

Read each item below and then rate that item based on the extent to which you agree or disagree with how well it describes you. Use the rating scale below to choose the appropriate score. Then add the three scores in each section. Use the Key at the end of the questionnaire to determine your executive skills strengths (two or three highest scores) and weaknesses (two or three lowest scores). Everyone who completes this questionnaire will have some strengths and some weaknesses. No pattern of strengths or weaknesses is "better" or "worse" than any other, and there is no pattern that is "typical" or "atypical."

Strongly disagree	1	Tend to agree	4
Disagree	2	Agree	5
Tend to disagree	3	Strongly agree	6

Item	Your score
1. I don't jump to conclusions.	_____
2. I think before I speak.	_____
3. I make sure I have all the facts before I take action.	_____
TOTAL	_____
4. I have a good memory for facts, dates, and details.	_____
5. I am very good at remembering the things I have committed to do.	_____
6. I seldom need reminders to complete tasks.	_____
TOTAL	_____
7. My emotions seldom get in the way when performing on the job.	_____
8. Little things do not affect me emotionally or distract me from the task at hand.	_____
9. When frustrated or angry, I keep my cool.	_____
TOTAL	_____
10. No matter what the task, I believe in getting started as soon as possible.	_____
11. Procrastination is usually not a problem for me.	_____
12. I seldom leave tasks to the last minute.	_____
TOTAL	_____

(continued)

Executive Skills Questionnaire *(page 2 of 3)*

Item	Your score
13. I find it easy to stay focused on my work.	_____
14. Once I start an assignment, I work diligently until it's completed.	_____
15. Even when interrupted, I find it easy to get back and complete the job at hand.	_____
TOTAL	_____
16. When I start my day, I have a clear plan in mind for what I hope to accomplish.	_____
17. When I have a lot to do, I can easily focus on the most important things.	_____
18. I typically break big tasks down into subtasks and timelines.	_____
TOTAL	_____
19. I am an organized person.	_____
20. It is natural for me to keep my work area neat and organized.	_____
21. I am good at maintaining systems for organizing my work.	_____
TOTAL	_____
22. At the end of the day, I've usually finished what I set out to do.	_____
23. I am good at estimating how long it takes to do something.	_____
24. I am usually on time for appointments and activities.	_____
TOTAL	_____
25. I take unexpected events in stride.	_____
26. I easily adjust to changes in plans and priorities.	_____
27. I consider myself to be flexible and adaptive to change.	_____
TOTAL	_____
28. I routinely evaluate my performance and devise methods for personal improvement.	_____
29. I am able to step back from a situation in order to make objective decisions.	_____
30. I am a "big picture" thinker and enjoy the problem solving that goes with that.	_____
TOTAL	_____

(continued)

Executive Skills Questionnaire *(page 3 of 3)*

Item	Your score
31. I think of myself as being driven to meet my goals.	_____
32. I easily give up immediate pleasures to work on long-term goals.	_____
33. I believe in setting and achieving high levels of performance.	_____
TOTAL	_____
34. I enjoy working in a highly demanding, fast-paced environment.	_____
35. A certain amount of pressure helps me to perform at my best.	_____
36. Jobs that include a fair degree of unpredictability appeal to me.	_____
TOTAL	_____

KEY

Items	Executive skill	Items	Executive skill
1–3	Response inhibition	4–6	Working memory
7–9	Emotional control	10–12	Task initiation
13–15	Sustained attention	16–18	Planning/prioritization
19–21	Organization	22–24	Time management
25–27	Flexibility	28–30	Metacognition
31–33	Goal-directed persistence	34–36	Stress tolerance

Strongest Skills (highest scores)

_____

_____

_____

Weakest Skills (lowest scores)

_____

_____

_____

What Did You Learn?

What did the questionnaire tell you are the young adult's two or three strongest executive skills and two or three weakest skills? Enter them below for easy reference if you like.

Executive Skills Strengths

_____

_____

Executive Skills Weaknesses

_____

_____

it up to last-minute stress and reassured him and my wife that he'd be fine. It was a wake-up call and a lesson that I haven't forgotten. I came to know that he is the best judge of what's best for him. (He was probably already becoming strong in metacognition!) Over time I've become a better listener, and he, in turn, openly discusses problems and doubts and we discuss options. He chooses which, if any, makes sense for him and when he wants help. He's open to suggestions and knows for himself what fits best. And I've learned to listen and to appreciate collaborative problem solving. I've given a specific example below.

So what do you do with your list of executive skills weaknesses and strengths? We're going to show you how to consider the implications in setting good goals toward achieving independence in the next few steps. But later in the book—in Steps 7 and 8—we'll also show you how you can adapt the tasks and environments of adult life to an individual's executive skills profile and also how young adults can get creative, as Colin and many others have, to compensate for specific executive skills deficits.

The Collaboration Begins

Now is a good time to start collaborating, so we encourage parents and young adults to sit down and talk about the questionnaire results and any insights they produce. For Colin and me, our collaboration began in earnest when he decided in 2014, 9 years after graduating from high school, that he needed a college degree to pursue his interest in behavior analysis and autism. Now he had a goal, but he recognized that the executive skills weaknesses were likely to be an impediment, especially since he would have to take courses that were not relevant to his interests. These had always been his Achilles' heel. Ability was never the issue. Rather, it was on-time completion of tedious work. We discussed how I might help, and he proposed that I prompt him and follow his progress with on-time completion of coursework. And so we embarked on a process that, with fits and starts, stretched out over 2 years. And it continues, in a much-reduced form today, in late 2017. Colin is pursuing a master's degree in behavioral psychology. If he feels stuck and has questions, say for a research paper, he calls or texts and we talk through his thoughts. Since we share an interest in behavior analysis, our collaboration typically involves confirmation that his approach makes sense and that is enough for him to move on.

To compound the problem of executive skills challenges, many young adults who have been experiencing disappointments in pursuing higher education, getting a job, or doing much of anything independently can find

themselves increasingly demoralized or even depressed. Their motivation and self-confidence often take a serious hit. If you've been thinking your son or daughter "just isn't motivated," you might be right, but not due to an underlying character flaw. Here's Colin's memory of his experience.

> I think when I got to the later parts of high school and the beginning of college, I wasn't used to there having to be a real embodiment of hard work or focus in order to achieve. I understood what people meant when they said work hard, give 110%, and study, but for most of the time I didn't have to internalize that message, even though the results indicated I did. And when the time came for me to understand that I was no longer smart enough to get A's and B's on autopilot, I didn't want or really know how to do things differently.
>
> I was like a young kid who was really good at basketball because I liked shooting around in my free time. And when people saw me play they thought, wow, he's going to be really good someday. But I wasn't really good then because I desperately wanted to play in college or the NBA. I was just good as a kid because I liked playing and was a little bit taller than everyone else. Then one day I'm in high school and people are telling me to watch game film, and two-a-day practices, and suicides [increasingly longer, timed sprints, with a change in direction for each sprint] till you puke. And I thought playing in college must be a good idea because all my teammates were busting their butts to get recruited. But I was angry and resentful that my old moves didn't really work anymore, and when I got to college the coach told me what it would take to be a starter, and I said, eh, things will work out. And then I got outplayed and got frustrated and didn't know how to adjust my game or whether it was really "my sport" in the first place. Similar experiences in arenas of my life were just as frustrating, and they ate away at my self-confidence and my motivation to get involved in new endeavors.

Launching into adult life is a complicated process for some postadolescents. Some problems involved reside in the young adult individually, such as executive skills deficits or a lack of awareness of what the young adult wants to do and has the talent or aptitude to take on. Some reside in the parent individually—unrealistic expectations, the parent's own executive skills, or the parent's attitudes about independence and providing support toward it. Some have to do with the dynamics between parent and adult child. If there's nothing you love

more than making lists and plans and checking off met objectives, but the preceding questionnaire shows that your child lacks planning skills, you two may have been clashing for years. If you tell your son you want him to find his dream future but then you subtly take the helm over and over to steer him toward *your* dream, you could be giving mixed messages that paralyze him. If you say your daughter really needs to take responsibility for her own upkeep but then you keep doing her laundry and waking her up for work, you're not really giving her the opportunity to take care of herself.

Knowing the young adult's executive skills profile can help you defuse blame and guilt by pointing to concrete reasons it may have been tough for the young adult to move toward independence. It may explain why progress has not been made toward any goal the young adult has set—or why no goal has been set at all. For a goal to be achievable, it has to meet the criteria for goodness of fit: Is the goal a good fit with the young adult's executive skills? Is the goal a good fit for what the adult child wants and has the talent or aptitude to do? To identify a desirable and realistic goal, both you and the young adult also need to be motivated to collaborate on it. Are you both ready? The next chapter, Step 2, will help you see where you two stand on readiness for change and motivation. Then you can get to know yourselves better individually in Steps 3 and 4—young adults getting to know in detail what they want and what skills, talents, and knowledge they can apply to it; and parents digging in to discover how they really feel about their children leaving the nest and what they're willing to contribute over the long haul to support the child's pursuit of independence.

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