

Normal Development of Executive Functioning and Self-Regulation Skills

Age	Self-calming/ Self-regulation Skills	Daily Living Skills	Play & Social Skills	Attention & Cognition Skills	Key points
0-3 months	Calms when picked up				Parent meets child's needs in a responsive manner. Child begins to engage in social interactions.
	Starts to self-calm through hands in mouth or moving self		Enjoys social play	Repeats a newly learned activity	
6 months	Raises arms to get picked up by parent		Plays with a toy for a few minutes with an adult		Child begins to indicate needs meaningfully. Child begins to engage in social play. Child begins to explore objects.
			Cooperates in social games, like peek-a-boo	Explores sounds objects make	
9 months	Separation anxiety	Begins to finger feed self	Begins relational play (stick on drum, spoon in cup)		Games with predictable social interactions allow child to remember, predict, and participate in interaction. Child begins to test parent reactions. Child begins to assert separation from parent. Expands manner of playing. Child imitates adults; adults provide a model during play and daily tasks. Child starts to have impulse control to take turns, share objects. Child increases in task persistence, planning to achieve a short-term goal.
	More fear and insecurity seen	Tests parents reactions at feeding and bed time	Throws toys and takes toys apart, just to explore		
			Increased participation in social games, enjoys anticipation during the game	Works to reach an object that is out of reach	
12 months	Explores new environments, poor safety awareness	Thrives on rituals and routines	Explores during messy play	Is easily distractible	
	Begins to resist adult control, "no" stage		Plays ball cooperatively	Overcomes an obstacle to get to an object	
	Frequent temper tantrums, recovers		Gives toy to an adult to activate	Brings objects from one place to another	
18 months	Expresses affection towards others		Sustains attention and plays alone for few minutes in purposeful play		Child continues to assert separation from parent. Child imitates more complex adult modeling in play and daily tasks. Child starts to have clear goals, preferences, and persistence in play. Child can solve simple problems. Impulse control develops through tantrums and recovery.
	Wide range of emotions emerge		Pretend play with props	Simple problem solving with tools	
	Easily frustrated, but recovers		Has preferences for certain toys	Begins scribbling and strokes on paper	
			Parallel play with peers	Finds hidden objects by actively thinking and looking	

24 months	Alternates between clingy and independent	Puts some objects away in correct place	More complex exploring and play with sensory play	Can copy a simple block structure	<p>Alternates between dependence on parent and seeking independence. Child begins to identify thoughts/feelings.</p> <p>Child can control impulses to follow simple rules.</p> <p>Child regulates behavior some of the time, but high tantrum levels.</p> <p>Begins to have a goal and plan to play. Can do simple problem solving and imitating.</p> <p>Can pay attention with minimal distractions for short periods of time.</p>
	Attempts to comfort others in distress	Removes clothing when appropriate	Begins make-believe play	“Mine” phase, understand and values property	
	Frustration and tantrums peak	Washes hands with supervision	Explores and plays by imitating adult activities		
30 months	Separates easily from adult in familiar places	Puts things in correct place	Likes to be read to and enjoys looking at books alone		<p>Begins to have a goal and plan to play. Can do simple problem solving and imitating.</p> <p>Can pay attention with minimal distractions for short periods of time.</p>
		Obeys simple rules and is aware of dangers	Can play well with an older child, ok with peers	Simple puzzles	
3 years	Takes pride in accomplishments	Dresses self with supervision	Stay with a group during an activity, following some rules		<p>Strong move towards independence. Child begins to identify thoughts and feelings and can reflect on them.</p> <p>Child can control impulses to follow simple and more complex rules.</p> <p>Child regulates behavior most of the time, being able to control emotions with adult assistance.</p> <p>Has clear goals and planning during play and daily tasks.</p> <p>Can do more complex problem solving and imitating.</p> <p>Can pay attention longer to tasks and social activities.</p>
	Variable emotions and behavior changes quickly day to day	Struggles with transitions in routines or changes from routine	More elaborate play schemes, like “house”	Makes drawings that are purposeful (letter, person)	
	Wants to try new activities		Completes simple tasks with some help	Plays well with a peer (shares, takes turns, cooperates)	
	Insists on being independent		Sits quietly to listen to story or watch TV		
4 years	Remains calm when frustrated or disappointed	Performs assigned tasks, within age ability	Uses playground equipment safely	Can solve common problems, through actions or verbally	<p>Independent from parent most of the time.</p> <p>Increased awareness and control of feelings, able to inhibit feelings when needed.</p> <p>Generally can be safe with minimal supervision.</p> <p>Increased social skills and attention to group tasks apparent.</p>
	Begins to verbalize feelings	Independently returns items to correct place	Plays in groups of 3 or more children	Sequences events	
	Behaves according to the desires of others	Gets dressed during regular routines without being reminded	Works in a small group for 5-10 minutes, with supervision	Understands categories, items that belong or don’t belong	

	Quiets down when asked to	Sequences typical daily tasks with minimal help		Attends to tasks without help, even when distractions are present (10 minutes)	Can coordinate a plan and goals with others. Will problem solve and adjust plan to achieve a goal.
	Can sit in seat or stand in line without excessive movement	Assist with simple adult tasks	Tries new activities and persists with a trial-error approach		Ability to attend and control body greatly increases. Can inhibit impulses for short periods of time.
			Can wait for turn during group activities		
5 years	Verbalizes feelings in controlled manner	Follows rules even when authority is not present	Creates own activities	Sorts by category, appearance, or function	Generally in control of body. Increasing control over emotions. Can inhibit impulses for moderate periods of time. Increasing social skills and attention to group activities. Increasing ability to use cognitive skills to problem solve and complete tasks. Child is challenged to adapt behavior to new situations without adult assistance.
	Sacrifices immediate reward for delayed reward	Recognizes an object as dangerous, can tell why	Works in a small group for 10-25 minutes, with supervision	Makes judgements on time, speed, weight, size, distance (estimation)	
	Leaves a provoking situation	Selects appropriate clothing for situations	Plays cooperatively with other children, following rules	Draws recognizable simple pictures	
6 years	Adjust behavior to fit different situations, behaves appropriately	Sequences typical daily tasks without help	Can work and play without disrupting others	Attends to and completes a task that lasts more than 15 minutes	Generally in control of daily emotions, struggles with strong emotions. Can inhibit impulses for longer periods of time. Uses growing cognitive skills to problem solve and complete tasks Child expected to adapt behavior to new situations. Rapid growth in social skills. Attention to preferred and non-preferred tasks is expected.
	Controls temper, verbalizing feelings		Follows social rules in play situations	Answers comprehension questions about a story	
	Can be silent when needed		Plays competitive games with peers		
Elementary age					
Teenagers					Higher level skills get refined: organization, multi-tasking, prioritizing, emotional awareness and management, complex social interaction, high level attention tasks, judgement, study skills, goal setting.

References:

Hawaii Early Learning Profile, ages 0-3 and 3-6 years, published through VORT Corporation.

Adaptive Behavior Assessment System. 2nd edition, published through Pearson.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence*. www.developingchild.harvard.edu