

## 5 Ways Executive Functioning Issues Can Impact Reading

By Kate Kelly

### At a Glance

- Learning to read requires certain executive functioning skills.

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- Kids with executive functioning issues may struggle with reading.

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- They may confuse letters that look similar and have trouble sounding out words.

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Executive function plays a big part in different aspects of learning to read. It's key to mastering the alphabet and understanding what words mean. So when kids have weak executive functioning skills it can create certain difficulties with reading. Here are five ways executive functioning issues can affect reading.

### 1. Executive Function and Letter Recognition

Kids with executive functioning issues may confuse letters when they're learning the alphabet. That's because once they've learned something, it can be hard for them to leave it behind and adopt new rules.

Take the letters P and R. If a child learns P first, she may not recognize that R is similar, but has an extra stroke. She may still reflexively see it as P. She also needs to be able to sustain attention long enough in order to realize that an extra stroke turns a P into an R.

### 2. Executive Function and Sounding Out Words

New readers need to be able to sound out unfamiliar words letter by letter. That can be tricky for kids with executive functioning issues. To decode a word, they have to keep the letter sounds from the beginning of a word in mind as they work through the rest of the word.

But trouble with working memory, a key executive function, makes it hard to hold on to that information. This can also impact your child's overall understanding of a text. She may be so focused on decoding individual words that she loses track of the meaning of what she's reading.

### 3. Executive Function and Words With Multiple Meanings

Words that have the same sound and spelling but a different meaning can trip up even advanced readers. Kids have to use flexible thinking, another executive functioning skill, to understand how a word can be used in more than one way.

For example, if a child comes across the phrase *a fork in the road*, she'll first consider the literal meaning. Then she'll decide if it makes sense based on the context. Is there really a fork in the road? Or does it mean something else in this case?

Thinking that way requires executive functioning skills. For kids with executive functioning issues, it can take a lot of effort to put aside the literal or most common meaning of words and think of an alternative. A child may have trouble using context clues, like other words and pictures in the text. Because of that, she may not understand what she's read, or may take her longer to get through the text than it takes most kids.

#### 4. Executive Function and Passive Voice

When kids first learn to read, most sentences are in the active voice. "Sophie pushed Kevin" is an example of active voice. Eventually sentences become more complicated. "Kevin was pushed by Sophie" means the same thing. But kids with executive functioning issues may misinterpret the sentence to mean that the Kevin pushed Sophie, rather than the other way around.

Understanding the correct meaning requires holding the idea of "Kevin" in their mind as they continue to read to find out who or what is doing the action. This places a greater demand on their working memory. It takes them longer to read the sentence, and there's a greater chance they won't remember what happened correctly.

#### 5. Executive Function and Focus

Learning anything new takes effort, and reading is no different. You have to sit still, pay attention and ignore distractions. Kids with executive functioning issues often struggle with focus. Trouble concentrating for a period of time can make it hard for kids to decode. It can also make it difficult to figure out the meaning of what they're reading.

#### How You Can Help

Learning to read requires many skills. Kids with executive functioning issues may need extra practice to master the basics of reading.

If your child is struggling with reading, talk to her teacher about ways to help. You can also talk about getting an evaluation for special education. An evaluation can help you better understand what's causing your child's trouble with both reading and executive function.

#### Key Takeaways

- ) Working memory and flexible thinking are key executive functions that help kids become good readers.

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- ) Kids who have trouble in this area can struggle with understanding what they've read.
- ) With extra support and resources, these kids can become fluent readers.

#### About the Author



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