Play Based Activities to Help Students Develop Executive Functioning Skills

Activities that help students build their ability to ignore distractions:

Practice slow observations and actions
- Balloon, bean bag or boiled (plastic) egg toss, or balls of different sizes in the pool—anything that must be carefully done or there is a resulting impact (drops, pops, splash)
- Explore the details of objects/environments (slow exploration, examine the “physics” of it—e.g. how does it feel, look, sound etc.)

Copying games/activities where students must think about details/listen carefully:
- Simon says
- Red light/Green light
- Switch sides/stand up if……..
- What time is it Mr. Wolf?
- You do one thing, they do the opposite
- Do simple series of actions and have the child copy the sequence
- Games where they need to think about opposites (winter: summer, night: day, sun: moon)
- Work on projects that take a longer time to complete (over days/weeks)—e.g. mural that you add to at different times during the year, crafts with parts that need to be completed different days, growing seeds
- Another interesting game to target details/listening: ‘I will bring ….to a picnic’. The list of things grows longer and longer and children have to keep track of what items are being brought to the picnic.
- The ‘train game’—can keep kids focused till the very end. They’re required to stand in a line to form a train. You begin the game by saying out a word. The first child adds a word and says it aloud. The second child adds another word to the two words and so on.

Activities to help students learn to organize and build receptive language skills:
- Practice sorting and categorization. A great activity is cleaning up
- What goes with what games, or matching based on function, action, category etc.
- Discuss/practice their pre-existing organizing skills (how do they organize their toys, where do they put their boots/coats?).
- Ask questions about things that are already organized systematically (younger students=by color, size, shape etc.).
- Model and practice putting away one toy before bringing out the next choice for play.

Activities to help students learn to prioritize

Ask questions such as:
- What do you do first, last in routines? Talk about why we do things a certain way (e.g., snow pants must go under coats)
- If you could only take one or two stuffed animals/toys with you on a trip, how do you choose (may be helpful to have them pick among actual toys of pictures of toys to make it more concrete)
- If your two favorite TV shows are coming on at the same time, how do you choose which one you will watch?

**credit to Heather Craigdallie, R. Psychologist (based on the work of Dr. Judy Willis, M.D, M.Ed).**
Activities to help students develop good judgement

- Games with obvious cause and effect (where their decisions impact their success)
  - Blocks and towers
  - Action response toys
  - Jenga
  - Tic tac toe
- Guess the number of various things (e.g. toy cars, animals, balls… in the jar) then discuss strategies that help them make more successful estimates. Use simpler language than counting – “which one is less or more”.
- Estimate what/how many is needed for a craft/task (pieces of paper, glue, pairs of scissors etc.)

Activities to build Cognitive Flexibility

- Read stories and ask how characters might be feeling, thinking, etc. In one story do different characters feel differently?
- Read stories and then talk about them from the viewpoints of various characters (some books like the 3 little pigs have versions printed from other perspectives)
- Play an activity one day, then change how it is played another day…..Teaches that it’s “okay” to change the routine.
- Show super zoomed-in versions of pictures and have them guess what it might be talk about how our first instincts might not always be right. Use flap books that show part of something and they are asked to guess what, who, or where a character is
- Circle Props game take simple ordinary objects and see how many different things the student can pretend it is (e.g. a funnel can be a party hat, trumpet, unicorn horn).

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