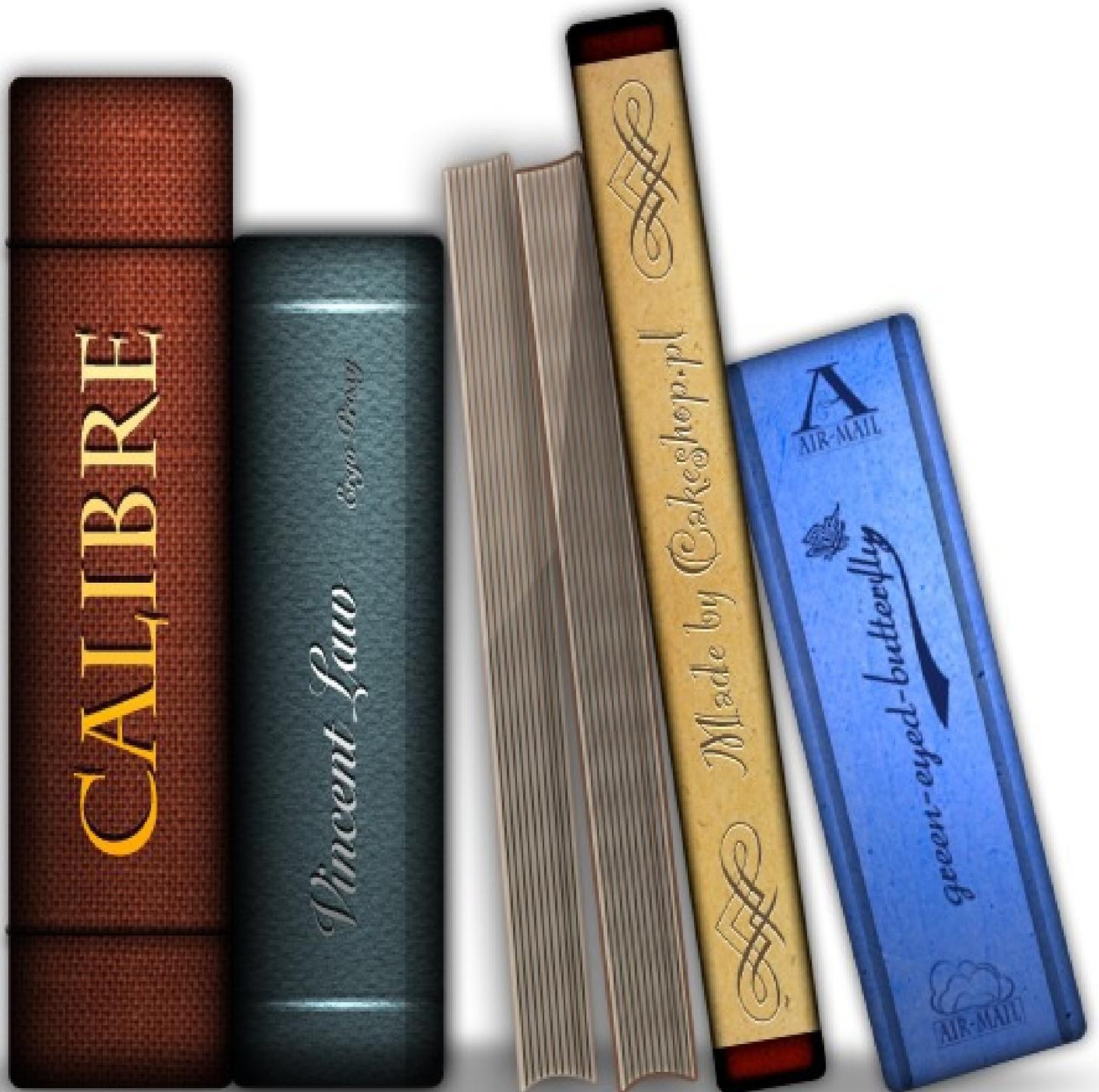


# Smart but Scattered

Dawson, Peg.; Guare, Richard.



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The Revolutionary  
"Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids  
Reach Their Potential

# SMART *but* SCATTERED

## Boost Any Child's Ability to:

- ✓ Get Organized
- ✓ Resist Impulses
- ✓ Stay Focused
- ✓ Use Time Wisely
- ✓ Plan Ahead
- ✓ Follow Through on Tasks
- ✓ Learn from Mistakes
- ✓ Stay in Control of Emotions
- ✓ Solve Problems Independently
- ✓ Be Resourceful

Peg Dawson, EdD, and Richard Guare, PhD

Smart but Scattered

SMARTbut

SCATTERED

The Revolutionary “Executive Skills”

Approach to Helping Kids

Reach Their Potential

Peg Dawson, EdD

Richard Guare, PhD

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## Introduction

There's nothing more frustrating than watching a son or daughter who has so much to offer struggle with the typical tasks and functions of everyday life. The other kids in the class can write down the third-grade homework, remember to take the math book home, and then finish the assignment before bedtime. Why can't your daughter do that? When you sit with her, it's clear she can do the math, and the teacher confirms that she understands the work. Most kindergartners can sit with the class at circle time for 10 minutes without causing major disruptions. How come your son, who's been reading since pre-K, can't stay there for more than 10 seconds? You have an 8-year-old who cleans his room with minimal fuss, but for your 12-year-old the chore sets off a weekly war. Your friends' children don't forget permission slips, lose expensive coats, or fall apart in public. Why does yours?

*You* know your son or daughter has the brains and the heart to succeed. Yet teachers, your friends, maybe your own parents, and that nagging little voice in your head all say the child isn't where he or she should be. You've tried everything—

pleading, yelling, cajoling, bribing, explaining, maybe even threatening or

punishing your child to get him to buckle down and do what's expected of him or muster up the self-control to act his age. Nothing has worked.

That's because what your child may lack is *skills*. You can't talk children into using skills they don't have any more than the right incentive could get you safely down a black diamond run when you can't even ski the bunny hill. Your child may very well *want* and have the potential to do what's required but just doesn't know *how*. Scientists who study child development and the brain have discovered that most children who are smart but scattered simply lack certain habits of mind called *executive skills*. These are the fundamental brain-based skills required to *execute* tasks: getting organized, planning, initiating work, staying on task, controlling impulses, regulating emotions, being adaptable and resilient—just about everything a child needs to negotiate the typical demands of childhood in school, at home, and 1

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## Introduction

with friends. Some kids lack certain executive skills or lag behind in developing them.

Fortunately, there's a lot you can do to help. This book will show you how you can modify the daily experiences of a child aged 4 to 14 to build the executive skills that will make it possible for the child to get on track and get things done. The groundwork for the development of executive skills in the brain is laid before birth, and you can't control this biological capacity. But neuroscientists now know that these skills develop gradually and in a clear progression through the first two decades of life. This gives you infinite opportunities throughout childhood to boost the executive skills your son or daughter seems to lack.

With the strategies you'll learn in this book, you can help your child learn to clean her room, get homework done, wait her turn, handle disappointment, adapt to unexpected changes in plans, manage new social situations, follow directions, obey rules, save her allowance, and much, much more. You can help your son or daughter meet the thousands of other large and small demands that are part of a child's life and reverse an alarming pattern of falling behind in school, losing friends, and generally falling out of step with peers.

We've seen the methods in this book work for thousands of kids in the school setting and back at home with their families. The strategies require a certain commitment of time and consistency, but none of our methods is difficult to learn or adopt. Some you may even find fun. There's no doubt that these alternatives to constant supervision, nagging, and cajoling will make your *lives* together more fun.

What Can This Book Do for You and Your Smart

but Scattered Child?

At some point, to some degree, all children struggle with getting organized, exercising self-control, and getting along with others. Battles over room cleaning erupt regularly in almost every home in the United States. And there isn't a 13-year-old on the planet who does all his homework flawlessly, with perfect promptness, every single day. But some kids seem to need constant supervision and help far beyond the point when their peers are beginning to manage certain tasks on their own. You're probably wondering when you're going to be able to retreat to the sidelines like the other parents: When will you be relieved of issuing constant reminders? When will your child learn to calm himself rather than relying on you to do it? Will a time ever come when you can stop stage-managing every event in your child's life to ensure her success?

These milestones may be a long time coming if you bank on a late-bloomer leap in development. While you're waiting, your child could suffer damage to self-esteem, and you will remain frustrated and worried. So if your child doesn't have the executive skills to meet others' reasonable expectations, it makes sense to take

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Introduction  
action now to help him catch up. Executive skills have recently been identified as the foundation that all children need to negotiate the demands of childhood, and these brain-based skills become more and more critical as children venture into the world with decreasing parental supervision and guidance. Ultimately, they are essential to successful management of adult life. Acting now to boost your child's executive skills could spare the child a lot of difficulty in years to come.

If your 5-year-old lacks or lags behind the other kids in executive skills, he

may not be able to stand to lose a game or keep his hands to himself and could end up with an ever-dwindling selection of playmates. If your 9-year-old can't plan her work and then stick to the plan, she may never finish the longer-term school projects assigned at this age. If your 13-year-old has little impulse control, what's to stop him from leaving his little sister alone to ride his bike with the guys just because you're not there to remind him he agreed to babysit? In adolescence, will your daughter pay attention while driving with a car full of friends? Will your son go to SAT review classes or spend his time instant messaging or playing video games? Will your child have the organization and time management skills to get to a summer job on time and the emotional control to avoid blowing up at an annoying customer or boss?

Once grown, will your child leave home or “fail to launch”? In short, will your son or daughter be able to lead a successful independent life?

The chances are far, far greater if you help your child build missing or weak executive skills starting now. This is one of the reasons we focus on kids of preschool to middle school age: If you begin to work on your child's executive skills now, by the time she reaches high school you'll have given her an important foundation for success during that important part of her academic and social life. You'll then find that she is armed with greater self-control, decision-making, and problem-solving skills than you might dream of right now. A lot of what we illustrate for middle schoolers may work for your high school son or daughter anyway, but because high school kids face much different executive-skill-related demands and respond to different parental coaching approaches than littler kids, we won't go into depth here on the older age group.

## About This Book

As we have worked with other children—and watched our own children grow up—

we've found that all kinds of children may struggle with executive skill weaknesses and that what you can do to help will vary depending on the age and developmental level of the child, as well as on your own strengths and weaknesses and which problems are causing you the most trouble. If you can target the right behavior and choose the right strategy, you can have a positive, significant, and long-lasting impact on your children's ability to develop executive skills. Helping you figure out where your child

needs help and the best angles of attack for strengthening those executive skills is the main goal of Part I of this book.

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Chapters 1–4 provide an overview of executive skills, how they develop, how they show themselves in common developmental tasks, and how you and the environment can contribute to the development of strong executive skills. Different scientists and clinicians have categorized and labeled executive skills in various ways, but all of us in this field agree that these are the cognitive processes required to (1) plan and direct activities, including getting started and seeing them through, and (2) regulate behavior—to inhibit impulses, make good choices, change tactics when what you’re doing now isn’t working, and manage emotions and behavior to achieve long-term goals. If you look at the brain as organizing input and organizing output, executive skills help us manage the output functions. That is, they help us take all the data the brain has collected from our sensory organs, muscles, nerve endings, and so forth and choose how to respond.

In Chapter 1 you’ll learn more not only about the specific functions of executive skills but also a little about how the brain develops, and, more specifically, how executive skills develop in children, beginning at birth. This understanding should give you an idea of how far-reaching the functions of executive skills are and why weaknesses or deficits can limit a child’s daily life in so many ways.

To be able to identify your child’s particular executive skill strengths and weaknesses, of course, you have to know when the various skills are expected to develop—just like you did for motor skills like sitting, standing, and walking when your child was a baby and a toddler. Most parents already have an intuitive sense of the developmental trajectory for executive skills. We, and our children’s teachers, naturally adjust our expectations to fit each child’s growing capacity for independence even though we probably don’t consciously label these milestones as the acquisition of various executive skills. Chapter 2 will give you a closer look at this trajectory, listing the common developmental tasks that require the use of executive skills at different childhood stages. We’ll also show you how executive skill strengths and weaknesses tend to follow certain

patterns in individuals, although it's also true that the skills overall may be better developed in some people than in others. You'll begin to form a picture of your own child's strengths and weaknesses with a set of brief tests. This picture will help you start identifying possible targets for the interventions we offer in Parts II and III.

As we've said, a child's biological capacity for developing executive skills is determined before the child is born, but whether the child reaches her potential for developing those skills depends a lot on her environment. You, as parents, are a huge part of your child's environment. This is not to say that you're to blame if your child has executive skill weaknesses, but knowing where your own executive skill weaknesses and strengths lie can enhance your efforts to build your child's executive skills and also reduce conflict that may have arisen due to certain mixes or matches between you.

Let's say your child is very disorganized and so are you. Not only will it be tough for you to teach your child organizational skills, but battles over disorganization may increase exponentially. Armed with knowledge of this similarity, however, you may

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be able to establish a camaraderie with your child over the shared need to learn these skills. Working on them together can preserve your child's pride and encourage cooperation.

Or imagine you uncover a mix rather than a match: Just being aware that you are by nature superorganized where your child is disorganized can make you feel more inclined to be patient with your child so you can help him build the skill in which you're so strong. It's not that he's just trying to aggravate you, it's a matter of executive skill differences. Chapter 3 will help you understand where your own executive skill strengths and weaknesses lie and how you can use this knowledge in your efforts to help your child.

The fit between you and your child is not the only one you should be looking at. Goodness of fit between your child and the rest of the environment is also important. As you'll learn once you get into the strategies for building your child's executive skills, the first thing you should always turn to when trying to offset an executive skill deficit is altering the environment. Of course you can't do this forever—

and a major goal of this book is to ensure you won't have to—but this is exactly what parents do to varying degrees throughout their kids' childhood and adolescence. We put safety plugs in outlets to keep creeping babies from putting curious fingers into electrical outlets; early play dates always involve parents or caregivers staying with the children; we limit our kids' Internet and iPod time so they get their homework done. In Chapter 4 we'll show you how to look at your child's environment for goodness of fit with his executive skills and what kinds of stage-managing you can do until your child no longer needs such environmental supports.

Once you know where your child's strengths and weaknesses lie and what the fit between you and your child and between your child and the environment looks like, you're ready to start working on building those skills. We believe the reason our interventions are effective is that (1) they are applied in the child's natural setting and (2) you can choose from different angles of attack. These choices allow you to custom-tailor your efforts to suit the child you know so well, and they give you a Plan B to try if Plan A isn't entirely successful.

The first chapter in Part II (Chapter 5) gives you a set of principles to follow whenever you're deciding what the best angle of attack is for a particular problem task or a particular executive skill that your child needs. Three of these form the framework for all the work you're going to do, and each of these is described in one of the chapters that follow (Chapters 6–8): (1) make adjustments in the environment to improve the goodness of fit between the child and the task; (2) teach the child how to do the tasks that require executive skills; or (3) motivate the child to use the executive skills already within his repertoire. As you'll see, we generally recommend that a combination of these three approaches be used to ensure success, and Chapter 9 shows you how to put them all together. Meanwhile, you can decide whether you'd like to adopt some of the scaffolding techniques or use some of the games we suggest in Part II to boost your child's executive skills in a seamless fashion during the course of the day.

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## Introduction

You'll also want to target certain problem situations that are causing lots of aggravation for all and/or certain executive skills that are causing your child problems across all the domains of her life. Chapter 10 offers

teaching routines aimed at the problems most commonly reported by parents of the children we see in our clinical practice. These routines give you a set of procedures, and in some cases a script, that will help your child learn to manage activities of daily living with less effort and turmoil, whether it's following a bedtime routine, handling changes in plans, or tackling a long-term school project. Many parents find it easiest to begin with these routines because they directly address a task that's a source of conflict every day and because we've supplied all the steps and tools you need. You may find this the best way to get used to executive-skill-building work and the shortest route to observable results. Parents need motivation too, and there's nothing like success to keep you going. These routines tell you how to adapt the routine for your child's age. They also identify the executive skills needed to perform that task, so if you find that the same skills are needed for the tasks causing your child the most trouble, you may decide to read and work on those skills in the corresponding chapters that follow.

Chapters 11 through 21 take up each executive skill individually. We describe the typical developmental progression of the skill and give you a brief rating scale you can use to determine whether your child is on target or lagging with respect to skill development. If you feel your child's skills are generally adequate but could use some tweaking, you can follow the general principles we list for how to do this. If you recognize that problems are more pronounced, however, you can create your own intervention, based on the models we provide for a couple of more intensive interventions, focusing on those problem areas that arise most frequently in our clinical practice. These interventions incorporate elements of all three methods described in Part II.

We're confident that, given all these different choices, you'll find a way to help your child build weak executive skills into stronger ones. But we live in an imperfect world, so Chapter 22 includes troubleshooting suggestions for those times when you run into a brick wall, including questions you should ask yourself about the interventions you have tried, as well as guidance for how and when to seek professional help.

As parents, you can help your child use strong executive skills to get homework done and form good study habits, but you can't follow him into the classroom. Most scattered children encounter problems in school as well as at home. In fact it may very well be your child's first teachers who

have made you aware of your child's executive skill weaknesses. Chapter 23 offers suggestions for how to work with teachers and the school to make sure your child gets the necessary help and support in school as well as at home. This includes suggestions for how to avoid adversarial relationships with teachers as well as how to access additional support, such as 504 Plans or special education, if needed.

The skills your child builds with your help should help her negotiate school more successfully, but what happens after middle school? For scattered youngsters, Introduction

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high school and beyond present additional challenges—ones that are often scarier to contemplate than when children are younger and you're focused much more on the upside of growing independence. The last chapter in this book offers guidance for helping your child handle the life stages ahead.

For now, we know it's sometimes scary to look down the road and imagine what will happen when your children reach adulthood. We both know that when our oldest sons were in middle school, we had sleepless nights wondering how they would ever make it through high school, let alone to whatever point lay beyond high school. We've written this book in part to assure you that children *do* grow up and learn to make it on their own. Our kids did it—yours can too. Years of clinical and parenting experience went into the writing of this book. We hope you find it helpful, no matter where you are on your child's journey from childhood to independence.

Part I

WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD SMART

BUT SCATTERED

1

How Did Such a Smart Kid

End Up So Scattered?

Katie is 8 years old. It's Saturday morning, and her mother has sent her to clean her room, with the admonition that she can't go across the street to play with her girlfriend until everything is picked up. Katie reluctantly leaves the living room where her younger brother is engrossed in Saturday morning cartoons and climbs the stairs. She stands in the doorway and surveys the scene: Her Barbie dolls are scattered in one corner, a tangle of dolls and outfits and accessories that look from a distance like a colorful gypsy ragbag. Books are piled every which way in her bookcase, with some spilling out on the floor. Her closet door is open, and she sees that clothes have fallen off hangers and drifted to the floor of her closet, covering several pairs of shoes and some board games and puzzles she hasn't played with recently. Some dirty clothes have been kicked under her bed but are visible in the space between the bedspread and the floor. And there's a pile of clean clothes strewn around the floor by her bureau, left there after a mad search for a favorite sweater she wanted to wear to school yesterday. Katie sighs and goes to the doll corner. She places a couple of dolls on her toy shelf, then picks up a third doll and holds it at arm's length to inspect the outfit she's wearing. She remembers she was getting the doll ready for the prom and decides she doesn't like the dress she chose. She scrabbles around in the pile of miniature clothing to find a dress she likes better. She's just snapping the last fastener on the dress when her mother pops her head in the door. "Katie!" she says, a note of impatience in her voice. "It's been half an hour and you haven't done a thing!" Her mother comes over to the doll corner and together she and Katie pick up dolls and clothes, placing the dolls on toy shelves and the clothes in the plastic bin that serves as a 11

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## WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD SMART BUT SCATTERED

clothes chest. The work goes quickly. Mom stands up to leave. "Now, see what you can do with those books," she says. Katie walks to the bookshelf and begins organizing her books. In the midst of the pile on the floor, she finds the latest in the Boxcar Children series, the one she's in the middle of reading. She opens the book to the bookmarked page and begins reading.

"I'll just finish this chapter," she tells herself. When she's finished, she closes the book and looks around the room. "Mom!" she cries out plaintively. "This is way too much work! Can I go play and finish this later?"

Please?!”

Downstairs, Katie’s mother sighs heavily. This happens every time she asks her daughter to get something done: she gets distracted, discouraged, and off track, and the job doesn’t get done unless Mom sticks around and walks her through each and every little step—or caves in and does it all herself. How can her daughter be so unfocused and irresponsible? Why can’t she put off just a little of what she’d prefer to do until she finishes what she *has* to do? Shouldn’t a third grader be expected to take care of *some* things on her own?

Katie has been in the 90th percentile on the Iowa achievement tests since she began taking them. Her teachers report that she’s imaginative, a whiz at math, and has a good vocabulary. She’s a nice girl, too. That’s why they hate to keep reporting to Katie’s parents that their daughter can be disruptive in class because she can’t stay on task during a group activity or that the teacher has to keep reminding her during quiet reading time to get back to the book and stop rummaging around in her desk, fiddling with her shoelaces, or whispering to her neighbors. Katie’s teachers have suggested more than once that it might help if her parents tried to impress upon her the importance of following directions and sticking to assigned activities. At this point her parents can only reply sheepishly that they’ve tried every way they know to get through to their daughter and that Katie sincerely promises to try but then can’t seem to hold on to her vow any more than she can follow through on cleaning her room or setting the table.

Katie’s parents are at their wits’ end, and their daughter is at risk of falling behind at school. How can someone so smart be so scattered?

As we mentioned in the Introduction, kids who are smart often end up scattered because they lack the brain-based skills we all need to plan and direct activities and to regulate behavior. It’s not that they have any problem receiving and organizing the input they get from their senses—what we might ordinarily consider

“intelligence.” When it comes to smarts, they’ve got plenty. This is why they may have little trouble comprehending division or fractions or learning how to spell.

The trouble shows up when they need to organize output—deciding what to do when and then controlling their own behavior to get there. Because

they have what it takes to absorb information and learn math and language and other school subjects, you may assume that much simpler tasks like making a bed or taking turns How Did Such a Smart Kid End Up So Scattered?

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should be a no-brainer. But that's not the case because your child may have intelligence but lack the executive skills to put it to best use.

### What Are Executive Skills?

Let's correct one possible misunderstanding right off the bat. When people hear the term *executive skills*, they assume it refers to the set of skills required of good business executives—skills like financial management, communication, strategic planning, and decision making. There is some overlap—executive skills definitely include decision making, planning, and management of all kinds of data, and like the skills used by a business executive, executive skills help kids get done what needs to get done—but in fact the term *executive skills* comes from the neurosciences literature and refers to the brain-based skills that are required for humans to *execute*, or perform, tasks.

Your child (like you) needs executive skills to formulate even the most fundamental plan to initiate a task. For something as simple as getting a glass of milk from the kitchen, he needs to decide to get up and go into the kitchen when he's thirsty, get a glass from the cabinet, put it down on the counter, open the refrigerator and retrieve the milk, close the refrigerator, pour the milk, return the milk to the refrigerator, and then drink it either on the spot or back in the family room where he started out. To carry out this simple task he has to resist the impulse to grab and eat the chips he spots in the cabinet first—they'll only make him thirstier—and to choose a sugar-loaded soda instead of milk. If he finds none of the usual glasses in the cabinet, he has to think to check the dishwasher instead of opting for one of his parents' best crystal goblets. When he finds the milk is almost gone, he has to soothe his own frustration and resist starting a fight with his little sister when he's sure she drank most of the milk. And he has to be sure not to leave a milk ring on the coffee table if he doesn't want to be banned from having his snacks in the family room in the future.

A child with executive skill weaknesses may be able to get a glass of milk

without trouble—or he may get distracted, make poor choices, and demonstrate little emotional or behavioral control, leaving the fridge wide open, leaving a trail of milk droplets across the counter and the floor, leaving the milk out on the counter to spoil, and leaving his little sister in tears. But even if he can get himself a glass of milk without incident, you can bet that he will have trouble with the tasks in his life that are more complicated and more demanding of his ability to plan, sustain attention, organize, and regulate his feelings and how he acts on them.

Executive skills are, in fact, what your child needs to make any of your hopes and dreams for his future—or his own hopes and dreams—come true. By late adolescence, our children must meet one fundamental condition: They must function with a reasonable degree of independence. That does not mean that they don't ask 14

## WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD SMART BUT SCATTERED

for help or seek advice at times. But it does mean that they no longer rely on us to plan or organize their day for them, tell them when to start tasks, bring them items when they forget them, or remind them to pay attention at school. When our children reach this point, our parenting role is coming to an end. We speak of our children as being “on their own,” accept this at some level of comfort, and hope for the best for them. Social institutions do the same, defining them as “adult” for most legal purposes.

To reach this stage of independence, the child must develop executive skills.

You've probably seen an infant watch his mother leave the room, wait for a short time, and then begin to cry for his mother's return. Or maybe you've listened to your 3-year-old tell herself, in a voice that sounds suspiciously like your own, not to do something. Or how about watching the 9-year-old who actually stops and looks before he races into the street after a ball? In all these cases you're witnessing the development of executive skills.

### Our Model

Our initial work in executive skills dates to the 1980s. In evaluating and treating children with traumatic brain injuries, we saw that the source of many cognitive and behavioral difficulties was deficits in executive skills.

Although less severe, we noted similar types of problems in children with significant attention disorders.

From these origins, we began investigating the development of executive skills for a broad range of children. While there are other systems of executive skills (the Resource section includes references for these systems), our model has been designed to achieve a specific goal: to help us come up with ways that parents and teachers can promote the development of executive skills in kids who have demonstrated weaknesses.

We've based our model on two premises:

1. *Most individuals have an array of executive skill strengths as well as executive skill weaknesses.* In fact, we've found that there seem to be common profiles of strengths and weaknesses. Kids (and adults) who are strong in some specific skills are often weak in other particular skills, and the patterns are predictable. We wanted a model that would enable people to identify those patterns so that kids could be encouraged to draw on their strengths and work to enhance or bypass their weaknesses to improve overall functioning. We also found that it made sense to help parents identify their own strengths and weaknesses so they could be of the greatest help to their kids.

2. *The primary purpose of identifying areas of weakness is to be able to design and implement interventions to address those weaknesses.* We wanted to be able to help chil-How Did Such a Smart Kid End Up So Scattered?

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dren build the skills they need or manipulate the environment to minimize or prevent the problems associated with the skill weaknesses. The more discrete the skills are, the easier it is to develop operational definitions of them. When the skills can be operationalized, it's easier to create interventions to improve those operations.

For example, let's take the term *scattered*. It's great for a book title because as a parent you read the word and know immediately that it describes your child. But *scattered* could mean forgetful or disorganized, lacking persistence, or distracted. Each one of those problems suggests a

different solution. The more specific we can be in our problem definition, the more likely we are to come up with a strategy that actually solves the problem.

The scheme we arrived at consists of 11 skills:

- Response inhibition
- Working memory
- Emotional control
- Sustained attention
- Task initiation
- Planning/prioritization
- Organization
- Time management
- Goal-directed persistence
- Flexibility
- Metacognition

These skills can be organized in two different ways, developmentally (the order in which they develop in kids) and functionally (what they help the child do).

Knowing the order in which the skills emerge during infancy, toddlerhood, and beyond, as mentioned earlier, helps you and your child's teachers understand what to expect from a child at a particular age. In a workshop we conducted several years ago with teachers in kindergarten through grade 8, we asked teachers to identify those two or three executive skills in their students that were of greatest concern to them. Teachers in the lower elementary grades focused on task initiation and sustained attention, while middle school teachers stressed time management, organization, and planning/prioritization. Interestingly enough, teachers at all levels selected response inhibition as a skill that they saw lacking in many of their

students! The main point, though, is that if you know the order in which skills are expected to develop, you won't end up wasting your time trying to bolster a skill in your 7-year-old that is typically not mastered before age 11. You have enough battles already, you don't need to add beating your head against a brick wall.

The table on pages 16–17 lists the skills in order of emergence, defines each skill, and provides examples of what the skill looks like in younger and older children.

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## WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD SMART BUT SCATTERED

### Developmental Progression of Executive Skills

#### **Executive skill**

#### **Definition**

#### **Examples**

Response

The capacity to think before you

A young child can wait for a

inhibition

act—this ability to resist the

short period without being

urge to say or do something

disruptive. An adolescent can

allows your child the time to

accept a referee's call without