

Residential Counselor 101 part 4: Executive Skills & Labeling Key Concepts

Executive Skills are abilities that part of the brain can develop that used to regulate other parts of the brain. There's two Executive Skills that describe ways that the emotional parts of the brain are regulated.

Reaction Inhibition is the ability to stop yourself from automatically reacting. More specifically, it's the ability to stop the action-focused parts of the brain, what I call the inner Warrior, from mindlessly reacting to the emotions being communicated by the parts of the brain I call the inner Artist.

Your body will have internal behaviors in reaction to every feeling you have. However, developing Reaction Inhibition means not externally acting out every feeling. It means giving yourself a split second to think before acting.

Stress Tolerance is the ability to sit with various emotions without acting them out. It's the ability to experience feelings, even potentially strong feelings, without becoming so overwhelmed that you can no longer think straight.

Kids in residential treatment have had difficult lives and their emotional states reflect that. As a counselor, you can't change their past and you can't "fix" their feelings. What you can do is help them develop their ability to tolerate their own feelings in a way where they continue to be able to make thoughtful choices about their behaviors.

There's several executive abilities that help you control, modulate, and regulate your thoughts.

Planning is being able to map out how to reach your goals or complete a task. It includes being able to make decisions about what to focus on and what's not so important. Like other skills, exercise / practice leads to development. So cue your clients to plan ahead, to think about what's next on the schedule and how to prepare for it. This isn't developed through the creation of large multi-day complex tasks. Instead, it's developed through the everyday little changes in the schedule that can be done thoughtfully instead of mindlessly.

Prioritizing is being able to weigh two or more different choices and then picking one. Again, it's exercised through all the small decisions – it's teaching kids to make thoughtful choices.

Organizing is creating and maintaining systems to keep track of information or materials. It doesn't matter what you're having kids organize – whether it's their bedroom, their backpack, an activity, or putting away toys. The act of organizing exercises their inner Chief.

Sustained Attention is being able to maintain your attention despite distractibility, fatigue, or boredom. There'll be large differences among kids in their ability to do this, and for any one kid it can be different at different times. However, it's like a muscle – when you inspire kids to pay attention a little bit longer, a little bit better than what comes naturally to them – they will get better at it.

Time Management is being able to estimate how long various tasks will take, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. This is a part of the Chief's self-monitoring ability; however,

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it's directed outward (at the passage of time) rather than inward. Having kids be aware of how much time is left in an activity, of when another part of the schedule is due to begin, or how long it takes to complete various tasks, exercises their inner Chief and will contribute to the Chief becoming better at self-regulation.

Task Initiation is being able to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient and timely fashion. In general, most kids are not great at task initiation and living in a residential program can actually make that situation even worse. Typically, there's a lot more structure and there's a whole bunch of adults to cue kids to start various tasks. It's easier to just wait for someone else to tell you what to do or how to start. However, like other skills, it's through practice that kids get better at task initiation. So, as a counselor, ask questions like "What needs to happen to start this activity?", rather than just telling kids what to do.

Flexibility is being able to revise plans and adapt to changed circumstances. Residential treatment can become so structured that it becomes inflexible. That's not helpful for developing thoughtful kids. So, encourage some amount of flexibility in the how kids think and in how they act. Typically, there's plenty of disruptions to the usual routine, so there's lots of opportunities to encourage and praise flexibility.

Self-Awareness is being able to monitor yourself in real time. This skill involves having one part of your mind that is observing other parts of your mind that are generating and experiencing feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Self-Awareness is the foundational skill for a person being able to take charge of their own brain.

Labeling is a great technique for increasing Self-Awareness and for helping clients become more thoughtful people. Labeling can be thought of as narrating what kids are doing as they're doing it – sort of play-by-play announcing. Another way to think of this technique is to imagine the a snapshot of what a kid is doing and the labeling is the descriptive caption underneath the picture.

There's variations on the labeling technique, but in its purest form it can be thought of as labeling observable behaviors. This is done without any judgmental tone, without praise or criticism. It's simply stating what you see kids doing, in-the-moment. It's probably the single tool that should be used the most by Residential Counselors.

You can combine labeling with praise, although that's going to be less targeted at increasing self-awareness, but might be better at increasing self-esteem. You can also label behaviors in a way that intended to promote social skills or character development.

You can also label feelings – however, keep in mind that most people don't like being told by someone else how they feel. So when labeling feelings, it's generally best to do it in the form of a question. The goal of that question is to increase the client's self-awareness, not to solve some problem.

Finally, one of the most powerful uses of labeling is to use it instead of directives or directly setting limits. Labeling can be a really powerful way to get kids to be thoughtfully cooperative rather than mindlessly compliant.