



Q&A: Tips for Staying Ahead of the Curve

Michael Smith, MA, Educational Specialist/Executive Functions Tutor at RNBC

Recently, I caught up with **Michael Smith, Education Specialist and Executive Functions Tutor at RNBC**. Mike offered great tips on how parents can help their students stay organized and stay active to stay academically ahead of the curve.

Camaree Turman: We are now transitioning from the back-to-school time to the progress report time in school. How can parents help students stay ahead of the curve?

Michael Smith: The main focus of RNBC's executive functions curriculum is a materials management system, basically setting up a way to **keep students organized**. We think it's important that all of the folders are color-coded and have labels, that all the subjects are stored in a separate folder, binder, or a separate compartment in an accordion file, and we also think that it's important that homework for each subject has its own spot too that it is separate from other materials.

In tandem with organization is **using a planner** to record homework, tests and quizzes, long-term projects, and after school activities so that students start to understand the importance of writing all of their tasks down in one place. I think a lot of students don't write their assignments down because most teachers record assignments online, but that's going to about three or four or five different websites for the homework and there's no central location for all that information a way the planner can provide, so we really do think that it's important to write it down in the planner.

Once students master organizing and using their planners, they can begin **prioritizing**. "I have four different things to do for homework tonight, which one should I do first? We recommend that, if possible, start with the hardest task, which is a hard sell for most kids. The one thing that you don't want to do is get your student in the habit of leaving all the hard things last. We work really hard in trying to avoid that because it leads to kids running out of energy and not wanting to finish all their assignments. A compromise would be to alternate back and forth between easier and harder tasks. Getting into a routine of **estimating the time length of assignments** is also another skill that students need to learn to stay ahead of the term.

CT: Are there specific tips that you recommend for parents of students with neurobehavioral challenges to help stay ahead of the curve?

MS: Some of my students have symptoms of ADD and ADHD regardless of whether they've been officially diagnosed: distractions, lack of focus, having a hard time initiating work. I've found that the **estimating time technique** helps them get started with their homework because they realize "oh, this really won't take as much time as I thought it would," it really motivates them.

I think **exercise** helps as well. If I see my student start to get tired or start to lack focus we'll put our lesson aside and start doing some physical activity. Sometimes I'll do some jumping jacks with them to get the blood flowing a little bit. It energizes them. I tell students who have a hard time focusing or sitting still for long periods of time that they can study standing up. They can walk around with a set of flashcards and pace back and forth, put chart paper on the wall where they're engaged in charts or organizing information in a way that is a little more engaging than sitting down at a desk and memorize something

While we don't encourage listening to music, watching TV, or surfing the internet while doing homework and studying because it can be very distracting, **organizing and cleaning out folders and backpacks while listening to music or a TV show** is the one exception so that it seems like less of a chore. Organizing and cleaning school materials on a regular basis is one essential way to stay ahead of the curve in school.

For more information about RNBC Executive Function Tutoring Services, please contact Cate Gonley at cgonley@rush.edu

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