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## Lessons from Back-to-School Night

Back-to-School Night at my daughter's middle school drew a packed auditorium of parents eager to learn how to best support their children this year. The principal shared the results of a recent high school survey on what it takes to be a successful high school student. Surprisingly, academic performance (e.g., grades, mastery of subject matter) was not the biggest contributor to students' success, it was engagement in the learning process. Attitude toward work, ability to plan/organize activities, time management, how best to tackle a problem, and bouncing back after failure were far more important. Thriving in high school was not just about grades but executive functioning.

As a neuropsychologist, I often see highly intelligent students flounder when they get to university because they don't know how to study and handle the executive functioning demands of college life. I call them "boomerang students," they are "launched" after high school, but they come back to the home after a semester or two due to difficulties coping with college life. It is essential to begin developing executive functioning skills as early as possible, with expectations tailored to each developmental stage.

Executive Functions are a hot topic now. Essentially, these skills are:

- Determining what one needs or wants and conceptualizing how to go about meeting these (volition).
- Identifying and organizing steps and elements needed to accomplish goals (planning),
- Translating these plans into productive activity, and monitoring/regulating emotions and behavior while accomplishing tasks.

They are all essential for effective day-to-day functioning as adults, yet we've all seen instances where one or more of these skills are less developed in the people we encounter. Furthermore, in children and adolescents, these skills continue to develop as their brains grow and mature into

early adulthood. However, for those with neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD, autism, or learning disorders, these functions may not develop as strongly as they do in their peers. These students need more support and scaffolding in learning these functions as they matriculate.

The team at Concord Comprehensive Neuropsychological Services (CCNS) regularly assess executive function skills as part of our comprehensive evaluations, helping us understand how students are developing compared to their peers and identifying the best ways to support growth when these skills are lagging.

I am heartened that my daughter goes to a school where they put a high premium on developing executive functioning skills. The teacher hammered on the importance of:

- Having a quiet room to study, clearing desks of clutter (and laptops)
- Organizing binders, writing homework on their agenda books
- Taking breaks every 20 minutes
- Locating a place in their binders for completed work
- Stopping work when they seem “stuck”
- Getting a good night’s sleep (computers are off at 10 pm)

### **A few tips for parents:**

While it’s important to give our students room to practice these skills, we can:

- Check in on our children (especially during the first few weeks) regarding homework completion
- Spot-check their work for items that might have been missed (e.g., the instruction also said to highlight certain words)
- Allowing them to plan for the next day by ensuring computers are charged and all necessary materials are prepared
- Let them problem-solve and reach out to the teachers when issues arise (self-advocacy) with some guidance as necessary

I left the Back-to-School night empowered and inspired. This morning, my daughter was late getting up again and hadn’t packed her laptop or brushed her hair. I stood there looking at the laptop and pondered, “Should I help her?” I told myself, “Don’t do it!” She did make it to the bus on time. Phew! I must log off and clean her room...hahaha...