Task Initiation

Definition: the ability to begin a task without undue procrastination, in a timely fashion

Implications within the classroom

A student with task initiation difficulties often does not begin their work right away and/or is unable to start pre-planned tasks on time. The student often “just sits there” when the other students have started working. Often the student can complete the task successfully, once they get going.

A student with difficulties with task initiation will often:

- Need reminders to get started on classwork, homework, or chores
- Be slow to start a second task after the first is completed
- Wait for someone else to begin in group activities
- Need cues to begin over-learned routines

Looking for more information?

Much of the information in this handout was adapted from Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents, Second Edition; by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare and Executive Function in the Classroom by Christopher Kaufman
Step-by-Step Teaching

Some students require explicit instruction in how to start a task promptly. Try these steps for teaching task initiation.

Try these specific cues to help a student to begin a task promptly:

1. Teach the student to use self-talk – “The teacher told us what to do and now it’s time to start.”
2. Teach the student to perform, right away, the first step in the assignment or task – open the textbook, get out the pencil, write their name, etc.

Try these steps to teach a student to begin a pre-planned task promptly at a pre-determined time in the future:

1. Have the student make a written plan for doing the task.
2. Have the student determine what will be the cue for reminding him or her to start (a person, a timer, or after an event).
3. At the point the student is to begin the task, ensure he or she does so promptly.
4. Gradually fade supervision.

Keys to success:

- Be diligent about consistency during the habit-forming first few weeks.
- Fade the cueing system gradually.
- If the child is not quickly successful, add an incentive.

Environmental Modifications

These modifications are designed to help a student get right to work when tasks are assigned or being a task at a pre-determined time.

- Verbally cue the student to get started.
- Arrange for a visual cue to prompt the student to begin (perhaps a picture taped to the student’s desk).
- Walking the student through the first part of the assignment to get him or her started.
- Noting the start and stop times when tasks are assigned and/or completed.

- For chores or homework, have the student specify when he or she will begin the task and then cueing the student when the scheduled time arrives.
Deficits in “primary” initiation are rare. Most children within your classroom will have initiation as a secondary deficit. Some of the following tips will be useful for supporting initiation as a secondary deficit as well as possibly supporting underlying or primary deficits.

- Increase the structure in the environment and/or in the activity
- Use routines for as many tasks as possible
- External prompting may be necessary – stop by the students desk to provide gentle cues
- Work in pairs or on cooperative projects
- Set a timer for task completion
- Reframe the student’s difficulties as “initiation” rather than “unmotivated”
- Break tasks into smaller chunks to avoid overwhelming the student
- Monitor the students overall arousal/energy level – physical activity, group interaction, short breaks may increase arousal levels
- Guide the student through the first problem or step
- Provide examples or work samples for the student to follow
- Provide appropriate and supportive signals to remind a student to begin
- Chose tasks that are inherently self-motivating
- Be careful to not teach “learned helplessness” – be aware of the natural tendency to do things for the student, rather than support his or her participation

### Other Executive Functions That May Influence Initiation

Task initiation can be a very complicated executive function. For some students, being explicitly taught how to start a task (initiate), while provided with external rewards and followed by gradual fading provides the supports they need to learn this vital skill.

Other students seem to have an even harder time. For these students, they may have other executive functioning difficulties complicating their struggles. Some common struggles associated with task initiation difficulties:

**Organization** – these students may have difficulties organizing their materials to begin, or with organizing their thoughts to begin. External structure to support organization may be useful.

**Working memory** – these student may have difficulties holding their thoughts and the directions in mind while trying to actually begin the task. These students may benefit from external supports for holding their thoughts (mind maps or graphic organizers), and written/visual instructions or samples.

**Shift** – these students may have difficulties in shifting their attention from one task, activity, or mind set to another (also called cognitive shift or set shift). These students often seem to need extra time to transition. These students may benefit from learning calming strategies and self-talk that can help them to shift.