



Executive Function Framework Guide

BSquared Ltd

Address: B Squared, 6 Lakeside Business Park,
Sandhurst, Berkshire, GU47 9DN, UK

Phone: 01252 870 133
Email: hello@bsquared.co.uk

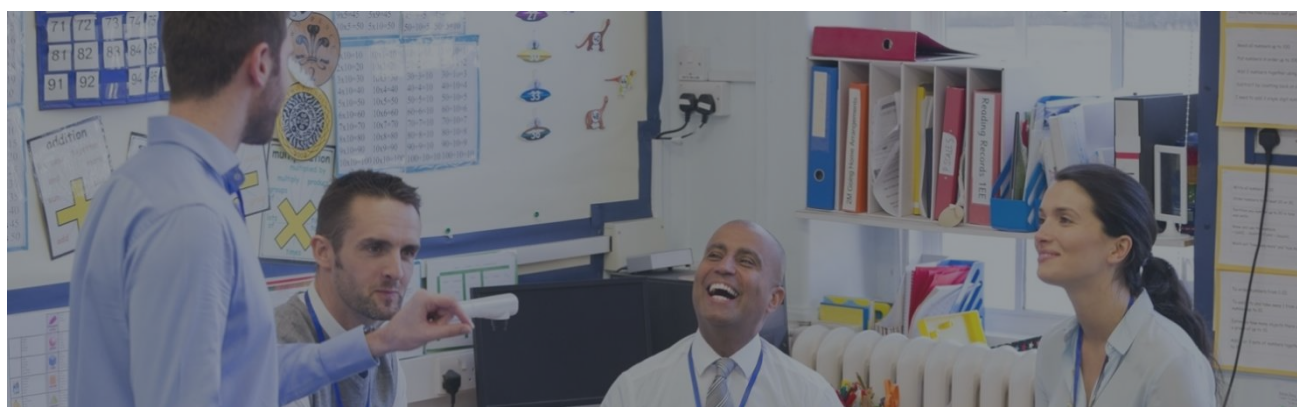


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Introduction

Every day, in schools across the country, pupils are being sanctioned for things that are not choices. Arriving late. Forgetting their PE kit. Not starting their work. Losing track of homework. Walking out of a lesson when it gets too much. For too long, these have been treated as behaviour problems — the fault of pupils who simply will not try.

They are not behaviour problems. They are **executive function** challenges — and they require understanding and support, not punishment.

Executive functions are the core brain processes that allow a person to organise their time, manage their thoughts, regulate their emotions, hold information in mind, plan ahead, get started, stay focused, and persist with a task to completion. They are the skills that turn intention into action. When they are working well, school life flows. When they are not, every day becomes a struggle, both for the pupil and for the staff around them.

The government has now recognised executive function as one of five new areas of development under the SEND Reforms. This is a significant shift. Executive function is no longer a niche concern of clinicians and specialist settings; it is a recognised area of development for all pupils with SEND, and a foundational skill set for every learner.

Our Executive Function assessment framework was originally created to help mainstream schools identify the missing executive function skills in pupils who may or may not have identified SEND. With the SEND Reforms, that purpose has broadened significantly. The framework now supports a much wider audience — mainstream schools, specialist settings, and any practitioner working with a pupil whose progress is being held back by underdeveloped executive function skills.

The framework provides a structured, developmental approach to understanding where a pupil is, what they need to develop, and how to support them, so that schools can respond with strategies rather than sanctions, and pupils can develop the skills they need to thrive.

Working with Victoria Bagnall

Our Executive Function assessment framework has been developed in collaboration with Victoria Bagnall, Co-Founder and Managing Director of Connections in Mind.

Victoria is one of the UK's leading voices on executive function. Connections in Mind, which she co-founded in 2016, pioneered executive function coaching in the UK and has since trained thousands of educators, clinicians, leaders and parents. The organisation operates as a Community Interest Company committed to serving the neurodivergent community, through Executive Function Coach Training and Neuroinclusive Classroom Practice, Victoria has shaped how schools across the UK and internationally understand and support pupils with executive function challenges.

Victoria's approach is grounded in the belief that if people understand their brains better, they can be kinder to themselves and those around them. She is dyslexic, and her own experience of executive function challenges has shaped a body of work that is both clinically informed and deeply human. Her focus is on moving away from judgement and towards understanding — recognising that pupils who appear disorganised, distracted or unmotivated are not lazy or difficult, but missing specific, identifiable, developable skills.

Working with Victoria has allowed us to build a framework that reflects the most current thinking on executive function while remaining grounded in the realities of classroom practice.

Read more about Connections in Mind on their website.



connectionsinmind.com

The Executive Function Assessment Model

The framework has been designed to give schools a clear, developmental and practical way to identify where a pupil is in their executive function development, and what to do about it.

A developmental approach

The framework covers a developmental range from age four (being school-ready) through to adulthood and being ready for work or university. It is organised into six levels, allowing schools to track meaningful progress across the whole school journey and beyond. Executive function develops over the long term, and the framework reflects this.

Five subject areas, eleven profile areas

The framework is structured around five subject areas of executive function, each containing one or more profile areas. This gives schools both a high-level overview of a pupil's executive function profile and a detailed view of the specific skills they may need to develop.

A universal language

The framework gives schools a shared language for talking about pupils whose challenges have previously been described only in behavioural terms. Instead of "disorganised", "lazy" or "defiant", staff can describe a pupil's specific profile of strengths and developmental needs across executive function. This shared language travels between teachers, between subjects, between settings, and between school and home.

From sanctions to support

Most importantly, the framework changes what schools do with the information. By identifying the specific executive function skills a pupil is missing, staff can put targeted strategies in place to develop those skills — rather than sanctioning the pupil for the consequences of not yet having them.

This is the shift the framework is designed to support: away from punishment for what a pupil cannot yet do, and towards purposeful development of the skills they need.

Framework Content

The framework is organised into five subject areas. Within each subject area sit a number of profile areas, eleven in total, each of which can be assessed and developed.

Attention and Cognitive Control

This is the foundation. These areas are about a pupil's ability to focus, hold information in mind, and inhibit immediate responses long enough to think and choose. They are the bedrock that everything else in executive function is built on. The areas are:

- Sustained Attention
- Response Inhibition
- Working Memory

Flexibility and Adaptation

This is about adjusting and engaging. These areas are about a pupil's ability to shift between tasks, change approach when something isn't working, and get going in the first place. They are central to coping with the constant transitions and unpredictability of school life. The areas are:

- Cognitive Flexibility
- Task Initiation

Planning and Organisation

This is about preparation and management. These areas are about how a pupil organises their time, their belongings, and their work. The practical skills that turn intention into delivery. They are the skills most often blamed when things go wrong in school. The areas are:

- Planning and Prioritisation
- Organisation
- Time Management

Goal-Directed Behaviour

This is about purpose and reflection. These areas are about a pupil's ability to think about their own thinking, to set goals and to keep going when things get hard. They are the skills that increasingly matter as pupils move through secondary school and into adult life. The areas are:

- Metacognition
- Goal-Directed Persistence

Emotional Regulation

This is about managing the internal world. Emotional regulation is a pupil's ability to recognise, understand and manage their emotional responses, particularly in situations of stress, frustration, disappointment or sensory overload. It sits alongside the other areas because every other executive function skill depends on it: a pupil who cannot regulate their emotional response to a difficult task cannot sustain attention on it, plan their approach to it, or persist with it through setbacks. For many pupils with SEND, emotional regulation is the area where small developmental gains unlock significant progress across the whole framework.

Using the Framework to Support the Ofsted Inspection Toolkit

Our Executive Function assessment framework is designed to complement schools' statutory duties and inspection expectations by offering a clear, consistent way to identify executive function needs, plan targeted support, and demonstrate impact over time.

The framework aligns closely with the evaluation areas within the Ofsted State-Funded School Inspection Toolkit (2025), particularly Inclusion, Behaviour and Attitudes, Personal Development, Achievement and Leadership.

Crucially, it gives schools a constructive answer to one of the most persistent challenges raised by inspectors and SEND policy alike: how schools identify and respond to the underlying causes of poor behaviour, low attendance and disengagement, rather than treating the symptoms.

Supporting Inclusion

The toolkit emphasises that effective inclusion begins with accurate identification of need and a continuous cycle of planning, action and review.

The framework directly supports this by:

- Providing structured assessment of executive function development
- Identifying the specific skills a pupil is missing, rather than describing them only in behavioural terms
- Enabling targeted interventions linked to identifiable skill gaps
- Tracking progress over time across five developmental levels
- Supporting a graduated approach (assess–plan–do–review)

Importantly, the framework captures needs that may not be visible through academic assessment alone, such as planning, organisation, working memory and emotional regulation. These are needs that often sit beneath a pupil's surface behaviour and academic data, but which have a significant impact on their experience of school.

This helps schools demonstrate that support is:

- ✓ Needs-led
- ✓ Evidence-informed
- ✓ Regularly reviewed
- ✓ Focused on developing the skills pupils need to succeed

Supporting Behaviour and Attitudes

The toolkit expects schools to understand the causes of behaviour, not just respond to it. The framework reframes a significant proportion of what schools currently treat as behaviour as something else entirely: missing executive function skills.

This enables schools to:

- Identify the underlying causes of lateness, missing equipment, missed deadlines and incomplete work
- Distinguish between pupils who will not and pupils who cannot yet
- Replace sanctions with skill development where appropriate
- Track improvements in self-management, task initiation and persistence over time
- Evaluate the impact of support strategies rather than the frequency of sanctions

This reframing has implications well beyond inspection. Schools that take an executive function approach to behaviour tend to see reductions in repeat sanctions, improvements in attendance, and better relationships between staff and pupils — because the pupil feels understood rather than punished for something they could not control.

Supporting Personal Development

Personal development sits at the heart of preparing pupils for adult life. Executive function skills are, in many ways, the most important set of personal development skills a pupil can leave school with — they underpin almost every aspect of independent adult life, from managing money and time to holding down a job and maintaining relationships.

The framework helps schools evidence personal development by:

- Tracking the development of self-management, organisation and time management skills
- Showing progress in metacognition and self-awareness
- Capturing growth in goal-directed persistence and resilience
- Demonstrating preparation for the demands of post-16 education, work and adult life

This is particularly important for pupils with SEND, where executive function is now formally recognised as one of five areas of development. Schools using the framework can demonstrate that personal development is being addressed not just in PSHE lessons, but as a structured, developmental thread running through the pupil's whole school experience.

Supporting Achievement

Ofsted places strong emphasis on progress from starting points, particularly for pupils with SEND. For many pupils, the barriers to achievement are not primarily about subject knowledge — they are about the executive function skills required to access learning at all.

A pupil who cannot initiate a task, sustain attention, hold instructions in mind, plan an answer, or persist through difficulty will struggle to demonstrate what they actually know. Improving executive function often unlocks academic progress that has previously seemed impossible.

Schools can use the framework to demonstrate that pupils are becoming:

- Better able to start and sustain academic tasks
- More organised in their approach to learning
- More effective at planning and producing extended pieces of work
- More resilient in the face of challenge
- Increasingly independent learners

This gives a fuller picture of achievement, especially for pupils with SEND whose progress on the executive function side may be significant even when academic data takes longer to follow.

Supporting Leadership and Oversight

Leaders are accountable for the quality of education, behaviour, personal development and inclusion across their school. The framework helps them demonstrate:

- A clear, evidence-informed approach to identifying executive function needs
- Consistent practice across teachers, subjects and key stages
- Targeted use of support strategies linked to identified needs
- Evidence of impact over time
- Alignment with the SEND Reforms and the recognition of executive function as an area of development

It also gives leaders a way to address one of the most common sources of inconsistency in schools: different teachers responding very differently to the same behaviours. A shared framework, with shared language and shared developmental expectations, creates consistency without rigidity.

What the Framework Tells You About a Pupil

Rather than a single label or a single score, the framework gives schools a structured executive function profile for each pupil. This includes:

- Their current level across each of the eleven areas
- The subject areas where they are strongest
- The subject areas where they need development
- How their profile has changed over time
- Which strategies are having an impact

This profile can be shared with parents, with other teachers, and with the pupil themselves. Pupils who understand their own executive function profile are far better equipped to advocate for themselves, choose strategies that work for them, and develop the metacognitive awareness that underpins long-term success.

A Common Language Across the School

Because all staff use the same areas and descriptors:

- ✓ Conversations about pupils are clearer
- ✓ Planning is more consistent
- ✓ Support is better targeted
- ✓ Expectations are aligned
- ✓ Accountability is strengthened

This shared language is particularly powerful when working with parents, who often experience the same executive function challenges at home but lack the vocabulary to describe them. The framework gives families a way of understanding their child that moves beyond "naughty" or "lazy" — which can be transformational for the pupil's self-esteem and for the home-school relationship.

Summary

This framework enables schools to move beyond treating executive function challenges as behaviour problems, and towards a structured, shared understanding of how each pupil's brain works.

By capturing development in the skills that underpin engagement, learning and independence, it supports both the pupil's growth and the school's ability to demonstrate impact.

Most importantly, it changes the conversation. Pupils who have spent years being sanctioned for things they could not control begin to be understood. Staff who have struggled to know what to do begin to have a clear pathway. And the skills that matter most for adult life — the ones executive function unlocks — begin to be taught, practised and developed in a structured way, throughout a pupil's time at school.

Connecting Steps: Simple, Powerful Assessment

All of our frameworks — including the Executive Function Framework — are delivered through **Connecting Steps**, our intuitive online assessment system. Connecting Steps is designed to be **simple to use**, even for staff who are new to assessment or not that tech savvy.

The system uses a clear, user-friendly layout with simple navigation, making it quick to record what a pupil has achieved, and see the next steps.

Teachers, support staff, SENCOs and senior leaders can all access the information they need without complex training — Connecting Steps does the hard work behind the scenes, letting you focus on supporting pupils rather than battling software.

Showing Progress in Different Ways

Connecting Steps doesn't just record a single measure of success — it shows **progress in a variety of ways**, helping you see the bigger picture for each pupil. The system tracks:

Small steps of progress

Even where full achievement hasn't yet been reached.

Depth of learning

If a pupil is working towards achieving a skill, they may have just encountered it, they may need physical support or just prompting. If they have achieved the skill, how confident are they and can they apply it in different ways?

Lateral progress

Showing where pupils are broadening and strengthening their skills within or across different areas.

Non-linear progress

Recognising that progress is spiky and uneven. Spikes in development can be celebrated, and skills that might otherwise be missed are captured.

Whether you're tracking academic milestones, executive function development, social skills or communication needs, Connecting Steps gives you the tools to show how every pupil is growing — even when that growth doesn't fit a straight line.

It ensures that **ALL progress is visible**, celebrated, and used to inform next steps in a meaningful way.

For more information about Connecting Steps or any of our frameworks, please visit the link below, to book a **FREE** online meeting at a time that works for you.

www.bsquared.co.uk/meeting