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Solving Executive Function Challenges

Simple Ways to Get Kids with
Autism Unstuck and on Target

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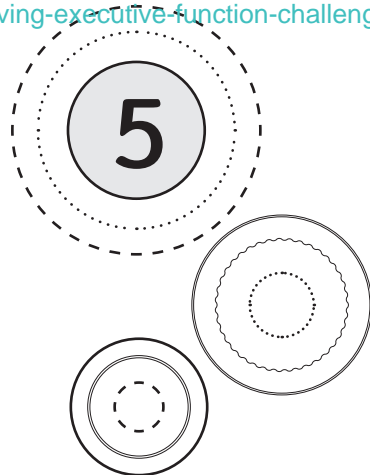
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Target Goal



In this chapter, you will learn to teach how to set priorities, identify distractors, and monitor progress. The balance between working toward a goal and giving in to whims is a difficult one, because we all like to have fun in the moment. The skills in this chapter will help those with ASD make conscious choices about when to work toward a goal and when to just have fun.

WHAT IS A TARGET GOAL, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A *target goal* is something that you want or need to do that is more important than anything else you may want to do at the same time. Children with ASD often have difficulty determining what is most important in a situation. They can easily lose sight of the big picture and become distracted by smaller details. For this reason, it is important to help children select overarching goals: target goals that may take a long time to achieve. They need explicit instruction and support in distinguishing between their target goals and smaller, more immediate goals that can interfere with the target goal. Each day, in every situation, consciously or unconsciously, we are working toward one or more target goals and are simultaneously faced with smaller goals, wants or desires, or “whims” that could steer us off target.

TIP

Distinguishing Between Target Goals and Whims

Target Goal: You set and work toward target goals on a daily basis (e.g., to be a good parent or teacher or therapist, to make it to work on time).

These goals are overarching in nature, may include multiple steps, and often take a long time to achieve (i.e., work toward some goals—such as being healthy, being a good student, getting a 3.5 grade point average, or maintaining a friendship—must be sustained over many years).

Whims: You are constantly presented with whims that may or may not be in conflict with your target goal (e.g., turning off the alarm clock and going back to sleep when your target goal is to get to work on time). When you are faced with a whim, you have to make some decisions: Is it important enough to me to disrupt progress toward my target goal? Can I modify my whim so that it does not disrupt my target goal?

Whims are defined as distractors that can interfere with reaching a target goal. We often have to choose between target goals and whims. For example, your target goal might be to lose weight. A co-worker is celebrating her birthday and offers you a piece of cake. Your whim (or immediate objective) is to enjoy a piece of cake and celebrate with your friend; this has the potential to derail your target goal of losing weight.

To illustrate this concept for children, you can ask them to visualize an arrow moving through space toward a big target. A whim is anything that diverts the arrow from the target. If *whim* isn't a word that works well with the child, please feel free to customize the language to be more meaningful to you and the child. Some examples of modifications include substituting "off target" for *whim* and introducing the idea of "on target" and "off target." When the child is on target, the dart is heading straight for the bull's-eye; when he or she is off target, tempted by a distractor or whim, the dart is heading for the edge or off the board. If sports resonate with your child, you can substitute "target goals" with "keeping your eye on the ball," and "whim" with all of the distractions that happen while you are playing (e.g., fans, noise, another player moving, an ice cream cone).

Because children with ASD have trouble seeing the big picture and integrating information, they are easily distracted by whims—leading them off target. Sometimes, they are unable to understand what the target goal is. They require explicit instruction about the concept of a target goal and initially need help identifying their target goal in a given situation. Then they need to



be taught how to set target goals, recognize that some goals are more important than others, identify when smaller goals take them off target, and determine how to modify or let go of their whim so that it is not in conflict with their target goal.

The concept of a target goal is a tool for helping children to identify the most important goal in a given situation. Once a child understands that, he or she will be much less likely to get “lost in the weeds” and derailed from important activities. The concept of a whim is a tool for helping children identify when something they want or a desire is less important than their target goal (even though the whim can feel important at the time) when it risks compromising the success of the target goal. The language related to target goals and whims can remind children that the target goal is ultimately more important than the whim and, therefore, make them more willing to modify or let go of the whim to continue to work toward their target goal. It gives you a shorthand for helping children marshal all of their self-control to meet an important goal, such as making a friend, writing an essay, or participating in recess while delaying or suppressing a whim or desire. That, in turn, makes your life easier, because the child will be better at sticking to his or her goals without your assistance.

WHAT ARE THE KEY WORDS AND SCRIPTS OR PHRASES?

In this chapter, you will continue to use and build on the language you learned in Chapter 4: Goal, Plan, Do, Check. You will learn how to help a child distinguish big, important target goals from smaller, less important whims, which sometimes distract people from target goals and get them off target. You will also learn how to help a child choose between two goals or desires in favor of the more important target goal, thereby helping a child to “keep his or her eye on the ball.” The new phrases to use are the following:

- “Are we on target?”
- “What is your goal?”
- “A goal is something you want or need to do.”
- “What is your target goal?”
- “Is that a target goal or a whim?”

- “I can see you really want to keep X as your friend. I think your target goal is to be a good friend.”
- “Are you on target right now?”
- “I know this is fun, but do you think it is getting us off target?”
- “I know this is fun; let’s plan another time to do it so it does not get in the way of our target goal.”
- “I know you really want to be a video game programmer. If this is your target goal, what are the things you need to do to accomplish this goal?”
- “Oh man, I got so off target just then!”
- “Let’s stay on target until we reach our goal; then we can take a break and do X.”
- “Is that your target goal or is that a whim?”
- “Great job choosing your target goal to X.”
- “Way to stay on target!”
- “You just figured out a way to accomplish that whim at a different time so that it did not get in the way of your target goal.”
- “You just ignored a whim that was exciting! Excellent job staying on target!”
- “You ignored something that you really wanted so that you could keep your eyes on the ball—excellent work!”
- “I can tell that you really wanted X, but you chose to stay on target, and that will help you get something even more important more quickly!”

Alternative Language for Target and Whim Scripts

Target goal

- On target
- Aim for the target.
- Big goal
- Main goal

-
- Central goal
 - Big picture
 - On track
 - Keep your eyes on the prize.
 - Keep your eye on the ball.

Whim

- Want or desire
- Little goal
- Off target
- Off track/derailment
- Distraction/distractor

TEACH BY DOING: HOW TO MODEL STAYING ON TARGET

Often, you can point out in yourself when a whim is getting in the way of a target or help a child *ignore*, *postpone*, or *modify* a whim until a target is reached (e.g., “I really want to play my new video game, but I have homework, and my target goal is to get good grades”: *ignore* = skip playing video games, *postpone* = play after I am done with my homework, *modify* = play 10 minutes now and for half an hour after my homework is done). The following are examples of modeling these scripts:

- *When you do chores before you indulge a whim:* “My target goal is to clean the house, and my whim is to watch my favorite television show. I want to make sure I accomplish my target goal, so I am going to start cleaning the house earlier so I will be finished by the time my show comes on.”
- *When the class discussion is going off on a tangent:* “Let’s stay on target and finish talking about X” or “I don’t want to get too far off target. Let’s focus on X.”
- *When you have gotten derailed by a whim while making dinner:* “Oops! My target goal was to make dinner, but here I am checking my e-mail. I guess that is a whim that I should only work on after I finish making dinner. What do you think?”