Executive Function Coaching Guide

What It Is What It Is Not and When It May Help

A practical guide for teens, young adults, families and the professionals who support them.

P.A.V.E. Plan • Anchor • Value • Excel

THE SHORT ANSWER

Executive function is how we turn intentions into action

Executive function skills are the mental processes we use to hold information in mind, direct attention, pause before acting, shift when circumstances change, organize materials and time, and carry a plan through to completion. Executive function skills help a person answer practical questions such as: What matters first? How long will this take? What do I need? How do I begin? What should I do when the plan changes?

These skills support school, work and daily life. They are still developing through adolescence and early adulthood, and they can look uneven. A student may be insightful, creative and capable in conversation while still struggling to start an assignment, remember a deadline or use a planner consistently. That gap is not a character flaw; it reflects skills that may need explicit teaching, practice and support.

What executive function can look like in real life

- Planning and prioritizing — deciding what comes first and breaking a large goal into manageable steps.
- Working memory — holding instructions, ideas or next steps in mind long enough to use them.
- Task initiation — moving from knowing what to do to actually beginning.
- Time awareness — estimating duration, noticing time passing and planning backward from a deadline.
- Organization — creating reliable places and systems for materials, assignments and information.
- Flexible thinking — adjusting when the original plan no longer works.
- Self-monitoring and emotional regulation — noticing what is happening, recovering from frustration and choosing a useful next step.

A strengths-first view. P.A.V.E. does not begin by asking how to “fix” a student. We begin by noticing what already works, then build practical scaffolding.

Why Sue does this work

I have spent more than 20 years helping students with diverse learning needs. My background in special education and literacy taught me that a well-designed plan or system can provide meaningful support for students with ADHD. I have also experienced the search for ADHD support as a parent. Our family could find evaluation and medical care, but we still needed practical help between pediatrician appointments: someone other than a parent to help turn recommendations, assignments and good intentions into repeatable systems. P.A.V.E. grew from that gap.

What executive function coaching does

The student and coach identify a current challenge, make the work visible, choose a realistic next step and practice a system that can be used again. Coaching is not simply advice. The goal is for the student to participate in designing the system and gradually rely less on adult prompting.

At P.A.V.E., coaching is built around what is actually happening this week: the project that feels too large, the calendar that is not being checked, the morning routine that keeps falling apart or the transition that needs support. The coach helps the student slow the situation down, see the decision points and test a structure that fits.

What the coach and student may work on

- Planning backward from deadlines and choosing priorities.
- Creating a calendar, task list or assignment-tracking routine the student will actually use.
- Starting work when motivation is low or the task feels unclear.
- Designing study and homework workflows.
- Preparing for conversations with teachers, parents or other professionals.
- Recognizing patterns, resetting after a hard week and deciding what to change next.
- Building self-advocacy and increasing ownership over time.

The aim. Useful support now, with increasing independence over time. A system is successful because the student can use it—not because it looks impressive to an adult.

CLEAR ROLES PROTECT STUDENTS

Coaching is one part of a larger support system

Coaching can complement therapy, tutoring, medical care, evaluation and school-based services. It does not replace them. The right support depends on the student's needs, and more than one professional may be involved at the same time.

Support	Primary focus	Important boundary
Executive function coaching	Current goals, practical systems, accountability, reflection and repeated practice.	Non-clinical. It does not diagnose, evaluate, prescribe or provide mental health treatment.
Therapy	Mental health, emotional distress, relationships, behavior patterns and treatment goals within a licensed clinician's scope.	A coach should refer to a qualified clinician when a need is outside coaching scope.
Tutoring or literacy instruction	Direct teaching and practice in an academic skill or subject area.	Coaching may support the routine around learning, but it is not automatically subject-matter instruction.
Medical care	Diagnosis, health assessment, medication and medical treatment by qualified providers.	Coaches do not give medical advice or change a treatment plan.
School-based services	Instruction, accommodations, evaluations and services governed by the school's responsibilities and the student's plan, when applicable.	Private coaching does not determine eligibility or replace the school team's role.

When a different response is needed

P.A.V.E. is not an emergency or crisis service. A person experiencing an emergency, immediate safety concern or acute mental health crisis needs appropriate emergency or clinical support. Coaching should pause or coordinate with qualified professionals when the student's needs exceed a coach's training or scope.

P.A.V.E. may collaborate with parents, educators, pediatricians, therapists or other professionals when that participation is appropriate and permission has been obtained. Collaboration does not turn coaching into medical or mental health treatment.

When coaching may be worth exploring

A discovery call may be useful when a capable teen or young adult understands what is expected but has difficulty translating that understanding into consistent action. A diagnosis is not the only reason to ask about coaching, and a diagnosis alone does not establish that coaching is the right fit.

- Assignments, appointments or responsibilities are frequently missed despite repeated reminders.
- Starting is consistently harder than doing once momentum exists.
- Long-term projects stay vague until the deadline becomes urgent.
- School systems—portals, planners, folders or calendars—are not being used consistently.
- A student knows several strategies but has trouble selecting and applying one in the moment.
- Parents have become the student's reminder system, creating conflict or exhaustion.
- A transition, such as entering high school or college, requires more independent planning.
- Recommendations from an evaluation, clinician or school team need practical implementation between meetings.

Readiness matters

Coaching works best when the student can participate in setting goals, talk honestly about what is and is not working, and try small experiments between sessions. A parent may initiate the conversation, but the student's voice and willingness matter. If the main need is diagnosis, crisis care, treatment of significant emotional distress or direct academic remediation, another service may need to come first or work alongside coaching.

What happens during sessions

P.A.V.E. begins with a free 30-minute discovery call, usually with a parent and often the student, to hear the story, answer questions and discuss fit. After basic information, goals and the coaching agreement are addressed, the first session focuses on connection, current systems and one small win.

Ongoing one-on-one sessions are virtual and typically 30 minutes. A session generally includes:

- Reviewing what happened since the last meeting without grading or shaming the student.
- Looking at the real week ahead—deadlines, commitments, obstacles and priorities.
- Choosing one problem to make more manageable.
- Building or adjusting a practical system.
- Naming what the student will try and how they will remember the next step.
- Recognizing progress, including useful information learned from something that did not work.

Warm and structured. Every session should end with a clear next step. The goal is steady, supportive momentum—not perfection.

What progress can realistically look like

Executive function skills develop through awareness, practice, feedback and repeated use. Progress is usually measured over weeks and months, not days. It is rarely a straight line, and no coach can promise a particular academic, behavioral or health outcome.

Early indicators

- The student can describe where a process breaks down instead of only saying, “I forgot.”
- The first step of a task becomes clearer and easier to begin.
- A calendar, list or routine is checked more consistently.
- The student recovers from a missed goal more quickly and makes an adjustment.
- Parents give fewer repeated prompts because the system carries more of the reminder burden.

Longer-term progress

- The student chooses among strategies rather than waiting for an adult to supply one.
- Planning and follow-through become more consistent across settings.
- The student communicates needs and asks for help earlier.
- Systems survive ordinary disruptions and can be rebuilt after a difficult period.
- Confidence grows because the student has evidence that a personalized process can work.

Grades or completed assignments may be relevant, but they are not the only measures. Useful review questions include: Is the student more aware of their patterns? Are routines becoming more reliable? Is family conflict around reminders changing? Is the student taking more ownership? What still requires support?

How parents may participate

For a teen, parents usually remain important partners. At P.A.V.E., the plan for parent involvement is discussed rather than assumed. Short recap notes and optional parent check-ins can keep a family informed while preserving space for the student to build ownership. The aim is to move parents away from constant monitoring and toward agreed-upon support.

How professionals may participate

With appropriate permission, coaching can align practical strategies with recommendations from educators, clinicians and other professionals. A coach may help the student implement an agreed system, notice barriers or prepare questions for the relevant professional. The coach does not reinterpret a diagnosis, change a treatment plan or provide records to others without an appropriate basis and permission.

Cost and insurance considerations

P.A.V.E. is a private-pay service. If you plan to submit a receipt to an insurer or FSA/HSA administrator, confirm eligibility with your plan before relying on reimbursement. P.A.V.E. does not determine tax eligibility or guarantee reimbursement.

P.A.V.E. publishes current rates and session details so families can review them before moving forward. Rates may change, so the website—not a copied number in an older guide—should remain the source of truth. The current structure is a free discovery call, the coaching agreement and setup, then a first paid 30-minute coaching session followed by weekly or biweekly coaching. Cancellation and billing terms are reviewed in the service agreement.

Review current rates: pavesupport.com/services/pricing

Questions to ask when choosing a coach

- What training and experience do you have with this age group and the kinds of challenges we are describing?
- How do you decide whether coaching is an appropriate fit?
- How do you distinguish coaching from therapy, tutoring, medical care and school-based services?
- What does a typical session look like, and what is expected between sessions?
- How are goals set, reviewed and changed?
- How do you involve parents while protecting the student's growing independence?
- How do you coordinate with other professionals, and what permission is required?
- How do you protect personal information, especially for a minor?
- What are your fees, cancellation terms and communication boundaries?
- What happens if the student's needs are outside your scope or coaching is not helping?

About Sue Hobbs

Sue Hobbs, M.Ed., is the founder and CEO of P.A.V.E. She is a special education teacher, certified reading specialist and certified executive functioning coach with more than 20 years of experience supporting students with diverse learning needs. Her work brings together individualized instruction, practical planning systems, collaboration with families and school teams, and a strengths-first approach.

Sue earned a Master of Education in Special Education from Towson University and a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and Sociology from Adelphi University. Her Maryland certifications include reading specialist, special education and elementary education. She completed executive function coach certification in May 2024.

A LOW-PRESSURE NEXT STEP

How to begin a conversation

If the challenges described here feel familiar, the next step does not have to be a commitment to coaching. P.A.V.E. offers a free 30-minute discovery call to hear what is happening, answer questions and discuss whether coaching may be a useful fit. A parent and student may attend together. If another type of support appears more appropriate, that boundary should be clear.

Start here: Schedule a free discovery call or send a Getting Started request. Please do not submit diagnoses, medications, medical history, evaluations, school records or other sensitive records through the website form.

Scope reminder. P.A.V.E. provides non-clinical executive function coaching for students ages 13 and older. It does not provide diagnosis, evaluation, therapy, medical care or emergency services. Coaching outcomes vary, and no particular result is guaranteed.

Sources and Further Reading

These independent resources provide additional background on executive function, coaching and benefit eligibility. Coverage and eligibility depend on individual circumstances and plan terms.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: Executive function and self-regulation
CHADD: Coaching overview
Internal Revenue Service: Publication 502 Medical and Dental Expenses

Learn more at pavesupport.com