

Case Study #1: Eric

It's Thursday evening and students are preparing for their Friday tests. Eric has two upcoming exams: history and math. Even though he has known about them since last Monday, he didn't start studying until tonight. Eric feels he needs to be "in the mood" to study. That means he's always under the gun because he waited until the last night to start studying. Some of us do our best work under pressure, but Eric hasn't learned that he must control his schedule instead of letting the schedule control him. Now, in addition to being tested on his inadequate ability to solve one-variable equations as well as his meager understanding of the causes of the American Revolution, Eric has to complete his regular Thursday night assignments from his other classes. He's not just under the gun; he's facing a firing squad.

Adults always tell Eric how smart he is. He has plenty of evidence to justify those compliments. He's learned to read well and he can answer teachers' questions. He's good at multiplication and division and he can fill up a sheet of paper with meaningful content when asked to write a story.

Unfortunately, Eric has misunderstands the notion of what it means to be "smart." He thinks the intellectual abilities that got him through elementary school without studying will just as easily get him through middle and high school.

Long ago he came to the conclusion that studying is something that less-than-smart people do. He doesn't understand that it is studying that leads to the acquisition and

application of knowledge which makes people see others as smart. He thinks, “If I’m older and more mature [equating physical maturity with intellectual and emotional maturity], I shouldn’t have to study even though the subjects are harder. I should be able to manage them. Having to study is a major humiliation.”

Such magical thinking is not uncommon, especially among boys. The educational and psychological literature refers to it as a failure of “executive functioning.” This is the decision-making process that we use to effectively organize our lives. The successes of these decisions appear to be related to the development of the frontal lobes of the brain. The frontal lobes connect the right and left hemispheres making possible the transference of data and the enhancement of concepts and ideas. Thus, Eric’s dad says, “Every day I’ll hit the gym at 5:45 am (so I can keep my weight down and stay fit). Then I’ll go work until 4:00 pm (so I can earn part of the living that supports our family). I’ll make myself available to take Eric to his weekly karate class and Cub Scout meetings. Once a month we’ll go family camping (because I want to demonstrate to Eric the kinds of things I think should be important in his life. I want him to know that it’s a parent’s responsibility to be there when needed).” This represents a mature adult’s executive plan.

For Eric developing executive functioning skills will mean learning to distinguish between making *unreasonable demands* and being one’s own *self-advocate*. He needs to learn how to *negotiate*. This means he will have to *recognize what someone else wants*. That can only be accomplished if Eric takes the time to *listen* and learns to *paraphrase*

what the other person is saying by becoming an *active listener*. Learning the benefits of a pleasant voice and direct eye contact will help Eric understand the old adage that you can attract more flies with honey than you can with vinegar.

Children can't help but infer a sense of being judged when parents make even the mildest suggestions regarding changes in behavior. Anxious to be perceived as perfect by the people they love, they latch onto futile positions and procedures out of pride and youthful arrogance. They are certain that if they only try a little harder they can prove their competency and demonstrate that they acquired it without any help. Eric's not only off on the wrong track, but he has no idea that there are viable alternatives.

Changing Eric's approach to school begins with an educational therapist establishing a trust relationship that doesn't focus on judgment and teaching the strategies of self-advocacy. Eric understands how to express his needs and desires, but he doesn't understand how to convince others of their legitimacy. The second step is to rebuild the missing academic content (the algebra and American History) and demonstrate ways how smart students study using flash cards, graphic organizers and calendars. We will also work at rebuilding his notebook and nurturing the idea that this is one of his most important tools.

Clarity for Eric won't come immediately. He'll have to fail more than one set of tests because his belief that smart people don't have to study is so firmly engrained in his

mind. The hardest job for Eric's parents in this process will be to restrain their need to be judgmental and to let the therapist engage Eric over the need for change.

The therapist will ask, "You're smart, so why are you failing?" Eric will offer all sorts of reasons, but the therapist's job is to lead him to the realization that "Smart people study and you're not studying!" This will become the therapist's mantra.