

Executive Function

Training Workshop

Every Teacher- a SEND Teacher

The Trainer

Geoff Hannan

Geoff Hannan

Geoff Hannan has spent over forty-five years running a highly successful educational training and consultancy business. An internationally recognised expert in sex and gender differences in learning, he is best known for his award-winning work developing and testing practical strategies to narrow attainment gaps.

Geoff's innovative approaches to teaching and learning are supported by strong evidence bases, with many now embedded in everyday classroom practice across the UK and internationally.

In Britain alone, Geoff has worked with more than 1,500 schools and delivered programmes for over fifty local authorities and national educational organisations, including the NUT, the Headmasters' Conference, the National College for Teaching and Leadership, and the Department for Education.

As an adviser to government and a widely respected author, Geoff has written twelve books, including the best-selling *Improving Boys' Performance* and, most recently, *Teaching the Autistic Child in the Inclusive Classroom*. His work with UK education departments has been seminal in shaping national curricula and inspection frameworks.

Geoff is also well known for his television and media contributions. His television appearances include *Panorama*, *The Future is Female*, *The Hard Lesson*, *No More Jobs for the Boys*, *The Education Programme*, and *Child of Our Times* with Professor Robert Winston. Other media work includes the Channel 4 series *Why Men Don't Iron*, ITV's *Boys Will Be Boys*, and numerous feature articles and radio contributions.

Geoff's motivational training programmes are interactive, challenging, and highly engaging. They consistently receive outstanding feedback for their clarity, relevance, and practical impact.

"Unanimous acclaim from his audiences." — *TES*

"To see him work with the children, then the teachers and then the parents is to understand what makes him Britain's most sought-after educational trainer." — *The Guardian*

"A British education guru with important things to say to our children, teachers and parents: charismatic and entertaining — but above all, down-to-earth." — *The New York Time*



Welcome

Teaching the Autistic Child in the Inclusive Classroom: Executive Function Workshop for Teachers and Teaching Assistants

The objectives of the workshop are to illustrate, explore and target tactics for building executive function (EF) skills into your everyday classroom support activities.

My workshops are experiential and interactive. They are based around a series of 'challenges' designed to explore and analyse each of seven key executive functions and then relate them directly to your work in the classroom.

Each of the functional challenges are aimed at adults! They are then each debriefed and followed by introducing 15 multi-adaptable ideas for the classroom and a simple practical probe to use with your children.

All the materials and resources used in the training and many more can be found on my website: www.hannans.org.uk -/ teaching autistic children-/ closing gaps (password: cpd101) /Working with Oscar. You may reproduce the resources freely for use in your own school or for use in your own training of others ONLY. Full copyright remains © various dates Geoff Hannan

But, firstly an introduction to my wonderful grandson and mentor Oscar...

Oscar loves anything to do with farms.

VIDEO

Have a child of yours in mind during the workshop.

Zones of Regulation



1. Blue Zone - Low Energy*

You might feel:

- Tired
- Sad
- Quiet
- Not very interested in things

It's like a tractor that has almost run out of fuel and needs a little rest before it can get going again.



2. Green Zone - Body Relaxed *Calm & Ready

You might feel:

- Happy
- Calm
- Ready to learn
- Comfortable

This is like your favourite farm vehicle moving smoothly across the field—steady, peaceful, and working just right.



3. Yellow Zone- Shakey * Jittery

You might feel:

- *Anxious
- *Nervous
- *Unsettled
- *Irritable
- *Annoyed

It's like when a sheepdog starts running a bit too fast and might need to slow down to stay controlled.



4. Red Zone - Big Feelings- *Body stiff and tense

You might feel:

- Angry
- Scared
- Overwhelmed
- Out of control

This is like when a tractor gets stuck in the mud and its wheels spin too fast. It needs help and time to calm down.

What zone are you in at the start of today's training?



Modus Operandi

In my training I use three core strategies I have developed for helping children, students and adults order and retrieve information better:

'Go for Three'- short term recall

'Go for Five'- medium term recall with application

'Go for Seven'- deep understanding

And the system; Individual Work- Pair Work-into Group Work- back to individual work

Challenge One: WM

Warm-up- All the group together after discussion between you.

Brian has some boxes of paper clips.

Some boxes hold 10 clips and some boxes hold 100.

He has some paper clips left over.

He has three more boxes with 100 paper clips than he has boxes with 10 paper clips.

He has two fewer paper clips left over than he has boxes with 100 paper clips.

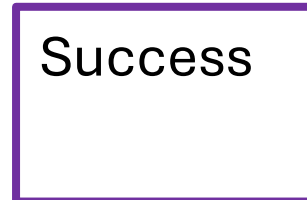
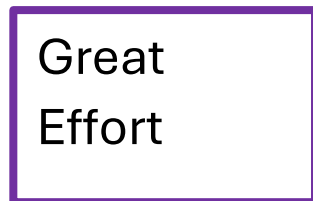
What number of paper clips could he have?

Hint

Use your knowledge of place value **systemically**- then it's easy (ier!)

			6 Geoff Hannan Training

In the booklet are some stickers- use them after each challenge to reward yourself...



THE HUGE IMPORTANCE OF IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION TO OSCAR'S AUTISTIC BRAIN.

1. Oscar's brain needs fast feedback

Many autistic children find it hard to connect:

“What I do now” → “A reward later”

Executive function differences mean:

- Working memory is limited
- Future rewards feel abstract
- Motivation drops quickly if reinforcement is delayed

Why immediate reward helps

- The reward arrives while the effort is still active
- The brain links *action* → *success* straight away
- This strengthens learning far more effectively than delayed praise

👉 For Oscar, *“Do task → get sticker now”* is much clearer than *“Do task all week → get something later”*.

2. Stickers make success visible and concrete

Abstract ideas like “good effort” or “well done” can be hard to internalise.

Stickers:

- Turn success into something he can see
- Provide a physical marker of achievement
- Reduce anxiety by making progress predictable

For Oscar, stickers say:

“I did it. It counted. I can see it.”

This is especially supportive when language processing or emotional interpretation is harder.

3. Stickers support Executive Function, not bribery

This isn't about “rewarding behaviour” — it's about scaffolding EF skills that are still developing.

Sticker systems help Oscar practise:

- Task initiation (“I can start because I know what happens next”)
- Task completion (“I finish to get the sticker”)
- Self-monitoring (“I know when I'm done”)
- Emotional regulation (“I can cope—there's a clear outcome”)

Once these skills grow, reliance on stickers naturally reduces.

4. Collection builds motivation without pressure

A sticker chart:

- Allows many small successes
- Avoids all-or-nothing failure
- Encourages return after setbacks

Oscar doesn't have to be perfect — he just has to try and complete.

This is crucial for autistic children, who may shut down if success feels unreachable.

5. Stickers provide emotional safety

Oscar is working harder than it looks:

- Processing instructions
- Regulating his body and emotions
- Managing uncertainty

Immediate reward:

- Validates that effort
- Lowers stress hormones
- Increases willingness to try again

Without this, effort can feel invisible — leading to avoidance or distress.

6. Predictability reduces anxiety

Sticker systems work best when:

- Rules are clear
- Rewards are consistent
- Expectations don't change mid-task

This predictability supports Oscar's need for structure and helps him feel safe enough to engage.

7. Stickers are a bridge to intrinsic motivation

A key misunderstanding is:

“He’ll only work for stickers.”

In reality:

- Stickers build the skills needed for intrinsic motivation
- Motivation comes *after* success, not before

As Oscar:

- Feels more competent
- Experiences repeated success
- Learns self-regulation

...external rewards can be gradually faded.

EF Typically Includes:

- **Working memory** – holding information in mind while using it
- **Attention control** – focusing and sustaining attention
- **Inhibitory control** – resisting impulses and distractions
- **Planning & organisation** – breaking tasks into steps, managing time
- **Cognitive flexibility** – adapting to change, switching tasks
- **Emotional regulation** – managing frustration, anxiety, or overwhelm
- **Self-monitoring** – recognising mistakes and adjusting behaviour

QUICK PROBES

1. Working Memory Probe

Skill: Holding and manipulating information

Task

Give Oscar a **3-step instruction** supported by pictures:

“Get the tractor, put it in the barn, then feed the sheep.”

Observe

- Does he remember **all steps**?
- Does he need **repetition or prompts**?
- Does he complete steps **in the right order**?

Red Flags

- Forgets steps quickly
- Completes only first step
- Appears confused midway

Suggests

Working memory load is too high → needs **chunking, visuals, shorter instructions**

CLASSROOM IDEAS

All these may be readily adapted to fit into curriculum contexts....

1. Working Memory (holding information in mind)

1. Follow **2–3 step farm chores** (e.g. pick cow → park tractor → feed sheep)
2. **Tray memory game** with farm objects (look, cover, recall)
3. Repeat and act out **short movement sequences**
4. Build from a **picture model**, then hide the model
5. **Matching pairs** card game
6. “**What’s missing?**” game with toys
7. Remember **verbal instructions**, then complete task
8. Copy a **block pattern** after viewing briefly
9. Simon Says (slow, visual cues first)
10. Repeat **number or word sequences** with actions
11. Follow a **visual recipe** with several steps

12. Remember **where items are placed**
13. Draw something after **briefly seeing the picture**
14. Simple **board games** with turns and rules
15. Retell a **short story** using picture prompts

My Ideas/Notes

Challenge Two AC

Individual work (WITH DISTRACTIONS!)

My Answers

1

2

3

Great
Effort

Success

1. Oscar doesn't lack attention — he has interest-guided attention

Autistic attention is often **interest-driven rather than externally driven**.

When Oscar is interested (for example, farm vehicles or animals):

- His attention is **sustained for long periods**
- Distractions drop away
- He can process detail, remember information, and persist with effort
- His executive functions temporarily **strengthen**, not weaken

This is sometimes called **monotropism** — the brain naturally locks deeply onto a small number of meaningful interests rather than spreading attention thinly.

So Oscar's deep focus isn't unusual or accidental:

It is his brain working **at its most efficient and regulated state**.

2. Deep attention emerges when anxiety and processing load drop

Attention and regulation are tightly linked.

When Oscar works within an interest:

- The task feels **predictable and safe**
- Cognitive load is reduced
- Emotional regulation stabilises
- His working memory frees up for learning

When tasks feel abstract, irrelevant, or language-heavy (as English and Maths often are):

- Anxiety increases
- Executive function load spikes
- Attention drops **as a protective response**, not disengagement

This means:

Loss of attention is often a sign of **overload**, not lack of ability or effort.

3. His deep focus shows what he is *capable of*

Oscar's ability to focus intensely on preferred topics proves something crucial:

- He **can** sustain attention
- He **can** think deeply
- He **can** persist through challenge
- He **does not** have a global attention deficit

This matters educationally because it reframes the question from:

"Why can't Oscar concentrate on English and Maths?"

to

"How can English and Maths be delivered in a way that allows Oscar's concentration system to switch on?"

4. Why adapting English is essential

English places heavy demands on:

- Abstract language
- Inference
- Working memory
- Emotional interpretation

When English is **decoupled from Oscar's interests**, he must first:

1. Suppress anxiety
2. Decode unfamiliar content
3. Manage language processing
4. Regulate attention
before learning can even begin

When English is **interest-based**:

- Reading comprehension improves because meaning is motivating
- Writing improves because ideas are available and organised
- Vocabulary grows naturally
- Attention becomes self-sustaining

For Oscar:

Writing about tractors is not avoidance — it is **the most efficient access route to literacy**.

5. Why adapting Maths is equally important

Maths often fails autistic learners not because of logic, but because:

- Word problems lack relevance
- Contexts are socially abstract
- Motivation drops before problem-solving begins

Embedding Maths in Oscar's interests:

- Anchors numbers to meaning
- Reduces language load
- Sustains attention through relevance
- Encourages problem-solving persistence

For example:

- Counting animals
- Measuring fields
- Comparing tractor speeds
- Adding feed quantities

This is **not dumbing down** Maths — it is **removing barriers so real mathematical thinking can occur**.

6. Interest-based learning is an access strategy, not a reward

It's important to be explicit:

- Interests are **not bribes**
- They are **regulation tools**
- They allow Oscar's brain to reach a learning-ready state

Without interest-based adaptation:

- Attention drops
- Behaviour may escalate
- Learning stalls

With it:

- Attention deepens
- Regulation improves
- Independence increases
- Academic skills develop faster

This aligns with inclusive practice and SEND guidance: **learning must meet the child where their brain can engage.**

7. What Oscar's attention tells us

Oscar's deep attention when interested shows:

- His brain is capable of sustained, high-quality engagement
- His difficulties are contextual, not inherent
- Adaptation is not optional — it is essential

In short:

Oscar's extraordinary depth of attention is not something to fight — it is the key to his learning.

English and Maths must pass through his interests if they are to reach him at all.

2. Attention Control Probe

Skill: Sustaining focus

Task

Ask Oscar to complete a **5-minute focused activity** (puzzle or drawing) with a clear end.

Observe

- How long he stays engaged
- How easily he's distracted
- Whether he returns to task after distraction

Red Flags

- Leaves task within 1–2 minutes
- Frequently scans room
- Needs adult to re-anchor attention

Suggests

Attention stamina is limited → needs **short bursts, timers, breaks**

3. Inhibitory Control Probe

Skill: Stopping impulses

Task

Play **“Red Light / Green Light”** or a stop-and-go toy game using a toy car.

Observe

- Can he stop immediately?
- Does he anticipate and move early?
- Can he wait for the cue?

Red Flags

- Repeatedly moves before “go”
- Laughs or becomes dysregulated when stopping
- Needs physical blocking to stop

Suggests

Impulse control difficulties → needs **movement control games, wait cues**

CLASSROOM IDEAS

2. Attention Control (focus and sustain attention)

1. Timed **tractor building challenge** (short duration)
2. “**Find the animals**” in a busy picture
3. Sorting animals by **type or size**
4. Listen for a **specific sound or word**
5. Colour within **clear boundaries**
6. Quiet **puzzle work** with visual endpoint
7. “**Eyes on me**” imitation games
8. Farm-themed **I-spy**
9. Focus on task until **sand timer** ends
10. Gradually increase **work time** by 1–2 minutes
11. Online **interactive attention games**
12. Spot differences between two pictures
13. Whole-body listening games
14. Focus on adult reading for a **short section**
15. Concentration games using preferred toys only.

Challenge Three: IC

Pair work (WITH TEMPTATIONS!)

Great
Effort

Success

1. Inhibitory control is an EF skill that develops later – and unevenly

Inhibitory control is the ability to:

- Pause an action
- Stop a thought or movement
- Resist an impulse
- Wait before responding

This skill relies on the prefrontal cortex, which:

- Develops slowly in all children
- Develops atypically and unevenly in autistic children
- Is highly sensitive to stress and overload

For Oscar, this means:

The “stop button” exists, but it doesn’t activate quickly or reliably, especially under pressure.

So when people say “stop”, “wait”, or “think first”, they are often asking for a skill that is still under construction neurologically.

2. Oscar’s brain prioritises action before inhibition

Many autistic children process the world in this order:

Perception → action → processing

Rather than: Perception → thinking → action

So:

- His body often responds *before* his brain has filtered the response
- Movement, speech, or grabbing can happen automatically
- The pause required for inhibition comes too late

This is not a choice — it is a processing timing issue.

3. Strong interests intensify impulses

Oscar's deep interests (e.g. farm vehicles, animals) are emotionally meaningful.

When something matters deeply to him:

- Excitement rises quickly
- Dopamine spikes
- Motor urges increase
- Inhibition becomes harder, not easier

So paradoxically:

Oscar may struggle *most* with inhibitory control when he is happiest or most engaged.

This explains why:

- He may interrupt
- Rush ahead
- Grab or move impulsively
- Struggle to stop an enjoyable activity

This is enthusiasm without a brake, not poor behaviour.

4. Language-based inhibition is especially hard

Many inhibitory demands are delivered verbally:

- "Wait"
- "Stop"
- "Not yet"
- "In a minute"

For Oscar:

- Language takes time to process
- Emotional/motor signals move faster than words
- By the time meaning lands, the action may already have happened

So he may:

- Appear to ignore instructions

- Do the thing as he's being told not to
- Stop only after physical or visual cues

This is why visual or physical stop cues are far more effective than repeated verbal commands.

5. Stress collapses inhibitory control

Inhibition is one of the first EF skills to drop under stress.

When Oscar is:

- Overstimulated
- Confused
- Anxious
- Tired
- Faced with non-preferred tasks

His brain reallocates resources to:

- Survival
- Escape
- Emotional regulation

The result:

There is less capacity left for stopping himself.

This is why inhibitory difficulties often escalate during:

- Transitions
 - Busy environments
 - Demanding academic tasks
 - Unexpected changes
-

6. Movement is regulation for Oscar, not misbehaviour

For many autistic children, movement is:

- A way to organise sensory input
- A way to regulate emotion
- A way to stay alert

Suppressing movement requires inhibitory control, but that movement may be:

- Helping him stay regulated
- Preventing emotional overload

So asking Oscar to inhibit movement can:

- Increase internal dysregulation
- Lead to bigger impulsive behaviours later

This is why planned, permitted movement reduces impulsivity more effectively than repeated stopping.

7. Why “learning to stop” takes time

Oscar is not failing to learn a rule. He is gradually developing:

- Neural braking systems
- Emotional regulation capacity
- Body awareness
- Timing between thought and action

This development happens best when:

- He is calm, interested, and supported
 - Expectations are matched to capacity
 - Inhibition is scaffolded, not demanded
-

Oscar finds inhibitory control difficult because his brain processes action faster than conscious stopping, his regulation is interest- and stress-sensitive, and the neurological systems needed for inhibition are still developing. What looks like impulsivity is often his body acting before his brain can apply the brakes.

Why this matters

Understanding this means:

- **Behaviour should be approached with support, not consequence**
- **Strategies should focus on predictability, visual cues, movement, and immediate feedback**
- **Success comes from building regulation first, not enforcing inhibition**

3. Inhibitory Control Probe

Skill: Stopping impulses

Task

Play “Red Light / Green Light” or a stop-and-go toy game.

Observe

- **Can he stop immediately?**
- **Does he anticipate and move early?**
- **Can he wait for the cue?**

Red Flags

- **Repeatedly moves before “go”**
- **Laughs or becomes dysregulated when stopping**
- **Needs physical blocking to stop**

Suggests

Impulse control difficulties → needs movement control games, wait cues

CLASSROOM IDEAS

3. Inhibitory Control (impulse control)

1. Red light / green light

2. Freeze dance (stop/start control)

3. Turn-taking board games

4. Waiting game before opening a box

5. “Hands down until your name”

6. Stop-and-go obstacle course

7. Rolling a tractor **only on your turn**

8. Copy clapping rhythms (wait before copying)

9. Breath in/out before starting

10. “Simon Says” with deliberate pauses

11. Marshmallow-style **delayed reward** game

12. Waiting before answering a question

13. Put card down only when colour matches

14. Use **cue cards** (“Wait”, “Go”)

15. Calm body check before action

Challenge Four: PO

Small Group work

Great
Effort

Success

4. Planning & Organisation Probe

Skill: Planning steps and materials

Task

Ask Oscar to **set up a small activity** (e.g. build a farm scene) with no step-by-step help.

Observe

- Does he gather materials?
- Does he plan before acting?
- Does he get stuck mid-task?

Red Flags

- Starts without materials
- Abandons task partway
- Needs adult to organise

Suggests

Planning overload → needs **checklists, modelling, pre-planning support**

CLASSROOM IDEAS

4. Planning & Organisation

1. Plan steps to build a **farm scene**
2. Use checklist for **morning routine**
3. Pack school bag using picture list
4. Sequence pictures into correct order
5. Plan a **shopping list**
6. Lay out clothes in correct order
7. Build LEGO from **multi-step instructions**
8. Sort toys into labelled boxes
9. Draw then follow a **simple plan**
10. Prepare snack by sequencing steps
11. Calendar crossing-off days
12. Map a route through obstacle course
13. “What do we need first?” prompts
14. Organise desk with visual zones
15. Plan a pretend farm day timetable

Oscar finds **planning** difficult not because he lacks intelligence, motivation, or experience, but because **planning is one of the most executive-function-heavy skills**, and it places simultaneous demands on multiple systems that are particularly effortful for an autistic child.

Below is a clear, joined-up explanation you can use at home, school, or in professional conversations.

1. Planning requires several EF skills working at the same time

To plan even a simple task, Oscar has to:

- Hold the **goal** in mind (working memory)
- Sequence **steps in order**
- Predict what materials are needed
- Inhibit impulses to start immediately
- Flexibly adjust if something changes
- Regulate emotion if it feels hard

For Oscar, each of these skills develops **unevenly**. When they are all required at once, the system can overload.

So planning is not one skill — it's a **multi-system demand**, and if one part slips, the whole plan collapses.

2. Oscar's brain favours doing over pre-thinking

Many autistic children — Oscar included — process in this direction:

Idea → action → reflection

Rather than: **Idea → plan → action**

This means:

- He may start straight away without gathering tools
- He may act on the strongest impulse first
- Planning *after* starting feels more natural than before

Adults often interpret this as "poor organisation", but neurologically it reflects:

A brain that prioritises **concrete action over abstract pre-planning**

When planning is demanded verbally before action, it goes against his natural processing style.

3. Planning is abstract — Oscar thinks best when things are concrete

Planning requires imagining things that are:

- Not yet visible
- Not yet happening
- Not yet tangible

This is hard because:

- Abstract future thinking is cognitively expensive
- Language-heavy explanations increase load
- “What if” thinking can trigger anxiety

Oscar plans best when:

- Steps are **visible**
- Materials are **laid out**
- Sequences are **illustrated**

Without these, planning feels like thinking in a fog.

4. Uncertainty triggers anxiety, which blocks planning

Planning involves uncertainty:

- “What comes next?”
- “Will this work?”
- “What if I get it wrong?”

For autistic children, uncertainty is emotionally costly.

When anxiety rises:

- The brain shifts into threat-management mode
-

- Cognitive flexibility and planning **shut down**
- Starting now feels safer than thinking ahead

So Oscar may:

- Rush into tasks
- Avoid planning discussions
- Abandon tasks halfway through

This isn't avoidance — it's **protective behaviour**.

5. Language-based planning is especially hard

Most planning support is delivered verbally:

- "First do this... then that... then finally..."
- "What do you think you'll need?"

For Oscar:

- Processing multi-step language is effortful
- Holding verbal instructions strains working memory
- Visual or physical cues are much more accessible

This is why he may plan better when:

- Steps are shown, not said
 - Objects are present
 - Checklists or models are available
-

6. Strong interests can bypass planning difficulties

When a task aligns with Oscar's interests (e.g. farm scenes, vehicles):

- Motivation is intrinsic
- The goal is emotionally clear
- Sequencing often happens naturally

Planning appears stronger not because the difficulty vanished, but because:

Interest reduces cognitive load and anxiety, freeing EF capacity.

This again shows the difficulty is contextual, not global.

7. Oscar's planning difficulty is developmental, not fixed

Planning is one of the **last executive skills to mature**, even in neurotypical children.

For autistic children:

- It develops later
- Progress is uneven
- Stress can knock it offline temporarily

Oscar is not "behind forever" — he is **still building the neurological scaffolding** for planning.

Oscar finds planning difficult because it requires holding future steps in mind, managing uncertainty, inhibiting impulses, and organising abstract information — all of which place heavy demands on executive function systems that are still developing and highly sensitive to stress. His brain is built to act first and plan best when support, visuals, and interests reduce the load.

Why this matters practically

It means Oscar needs:

- Planning *supported*, not expected
- Visual scaffolds, not verbal pressure
- Co-planning before independence
- Recognition that difficulty with planning ≠ refusal or laziness

With the right support, planning **can be learned gradually**.

Challenge Five: CF

Small Group work

Great
Effort

Success

5. Cognitive Flexibility Probe

Skill: Adapting to change

Task

Halfway through a preferred game, **change a rule** gently:

“Now tractors can only move backwards.”

Observe

- Emotional response
- Ability to adapt
- Time taken to recover

Red Flags

- Distress or shutdown
- Refusal to continue
- Insistence on original rule

Suggests

Difficulty with flexibility → needs **pre-warning, Plan B scripts**

CLASSROOM IDEAS

5. Cognitive Flexibility (adapting to change)

1. Change rules halfway through a game
2. Sort animals by **different criteria**
3. Use object in **two ways**
4. Different endings to same story
5. Take turns swapping roles
6. Switch from writing → drawing
7. New route to same destination
8. “What else could this be?”
9. Change seating location gradually
10. Guess animal from changing clues
11. Accept different answers to questions
12. Play games with **rule cards**
13. Build same model using new materials
14. Change timetable visual with explanation
15. Flexible thinking stories (“Plan B”)

Why Cognitive Flexibility Is Hard for Oscar

1. Autism favours predictability and sameness

Cognitive flexibility involves switching thinking, rules, or plans. For many autistic children, the brain works best when things are stable, predictable, and familiar. Changes—especially unexpected ones—can trigger anxiety, which makes flexible thinking much harder in the moment.

Oscar isn't being stubborn; his brain is trying to keep things safe and manageable.

2. Strong attention to detail can make “switching” harder

Autistic children often focus deeply on specific details or rules. This is a real strength—but when a situation changes, letting go of the original rule or idea can be difficult.

Example:

- “We always do maths before break”
 - If that changes, Oscar may struggle to update that mental rule quickly.
-

3. Other executive function differences

Cognitive flexibility is part of executive function, alongside:

- Working memory
- Planning
- Self-regulation

In autism, these systems can develop unevenly. Oscar may:

- Understand something well
 - But struggle to *shift* to a new way of thinking when conditions change
-

4. Emotional load reduces flexibility

When Oscar is:

- Overstimulated
- Tired
- Anxious
- Faced with social uncertainty

...the brain prioritises coping over adapting. Flexibility drops sharply under stress.

This is why he may appear:

- Rigid
- Oppositional
- “Stuck”

—but it’s a physiological response, not a behavioural choice.

5. Language can lag behind thinking

Cognitive flexibility often relies on internal self-talk:

“This didn’t work — I’ll try something else.”

If language processing is slower or effortful, that internal dialogue is harder to access quickly, especially in real-time social or classroom situations.

What This Means Practically

Oscar will usually find it easier to be flexible when:

- Change is signposted early
- Choices are limited and concrete
- He is emotionally regulated
- Adults explicitly model flexible thinking (“That’s ok—we can do it another way”)

Over time, cognitive flexibility *can* be taught—but it develops best through support, not pressure.

Challenge Six: ER

Small Group work

Great
Effort

Success

CLASSROOM IDEAS

6. Emotional Regulation

1. Name feelings using **visual cards**
2. Scale feelings (1–5 thermometer)
3. Deep pressure activities
4. Calm breathing with counting
5. Sensory calm corner
6. Emotion check-in times
7. Draw feelings with colours
8. Safe movement breaks
9. Use favourite toy for grounding
10. “What helped?” reflection
11. Emotion matching games
12. Role-play calming responses
13. Schedule predictable down-time
14. Guided body relaxation
15. Use calm-down sequence cards

6. Emotional Regulation Probe

Skill: Managing feelings

Task

Introduce a **small frustration** (missing piece, brief wait).

Observe

- Speed of emotional escalation
- Coping strategies used (or not)
- Recovery time

Red Flags

- Big reaction to small issue
- No self-soothing attempts
- Needs adult to calm fully

Suggests

Regulation support needed → **emotion coaching, calm strategies**

Why Oscar Finds Emotional Regulation Difficult

Understanding the Autistic Brain

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice, manage, and recover from emotions such as frustration, anxiety, excitement, or disappointment. For autistic children like Oscar, this is particularly challenging because the brain systems responsible for emotion, stress, and self-control develop and communicate differently.

1. The Autistic Brain Detects Threat More Quickly

In all children, emotions are processed first by the limbic system, especially the amygdala, which acts as a threat detector.

In autistic children:

- The amygdala is often more reactive
- It can interpret change, uncertainty, noise, social demand, or confusion as danger
- The emotional response is fast and intense

Once this alarm system is triggered, the brain shifts into:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

At this point, thinking shuts down and emotional regulation becomes biologically unavailable.

Oscar's reactions are not choices — they are survival responses.

2. The “Thinking Brain” Is Slower to Regain Control

Emotional regulation relies on communication between:

- The emotional brain (amygdala / limbic system)
-

- The thinking brain (prefrontal cortex)

In autism:

- This connection is less efficient
- The thinking brain takes longer to come back online
- Oscar may *know* what to do later, but cannot access that knowledge in the moment

This explains why:

- He may melt down over small things
 - Reasoning or consequences don't work mid-crisis
 - Regulation only returns after he feels safe again
-

3. Sensory Processing Overloads Emotional Systems

Oscar's emotions are tightly linked to his sensory experience.

Autistic children often experience:

- Sounds as louder
- Lights as harsher
- Touch or movement as overwhelming
- Internal sensations (hunger, tiredness, anxiety) more intensely

Sensory overload:

- Drains emotional regulation capacity
- Increases irritability and panic
- Reduces tolerance for frustration

When sensory load is high, emotional tolerance is low.

4. Feelings Are Experienced as “All or Nothing”

Neurotypical children often feel emotions on a gradient:

- A bit annoyed → managing → annoyed → upset

Autistic children often experience:

- Calm → flooded

Oscar may struggle to notice early warning signs because:

- Interoception (recognising internal body signals) can be weak
- Emotions arrive suddenly and powerfully
- There is little time to deploy coping strategies

This means he often needs external regulation before self-regulation is possible.

5. Language Can't Always Support Emotion

Emotional regulation relies heavily on language:

- Naming feelings
- Self-talk (“I can handle this”)
- Asking for help

When Oscar is overwhelmed:

- Language processing reduces
- He may lose words entirely
- Behaviour replaces communication

This is why he may:

- Shout, cry, withdraw, or resist
- Seem “unreasonable” or “stuck”

He isn't refusing to communicate — the pathway is temporarily offline.

6. Stress Accumulates Invisibly

Autistic children expend enormous energy managing:

- Social expectations
- Sensory information
- Transitions
- Unclear rules

This creates cumulative stress.

Oscar may appear calm all day, then:

- Collapse emotionally at home
- React strongly to a minor trigger

The emotional system finally reaches capacity.

What This Means for Supporting Oscar

Oscar will regulate best when adults:

- Reduce demand during distress
 - Stay calm and predictable
 - Offer co-regulation (calm presence before problem-solving)
 - Use visuals, routines, and warnings
 - Teach regulation skills outside emotional moments
-

A Helpful Reframe

Instead of asking:

“Why won’t he calm down?”

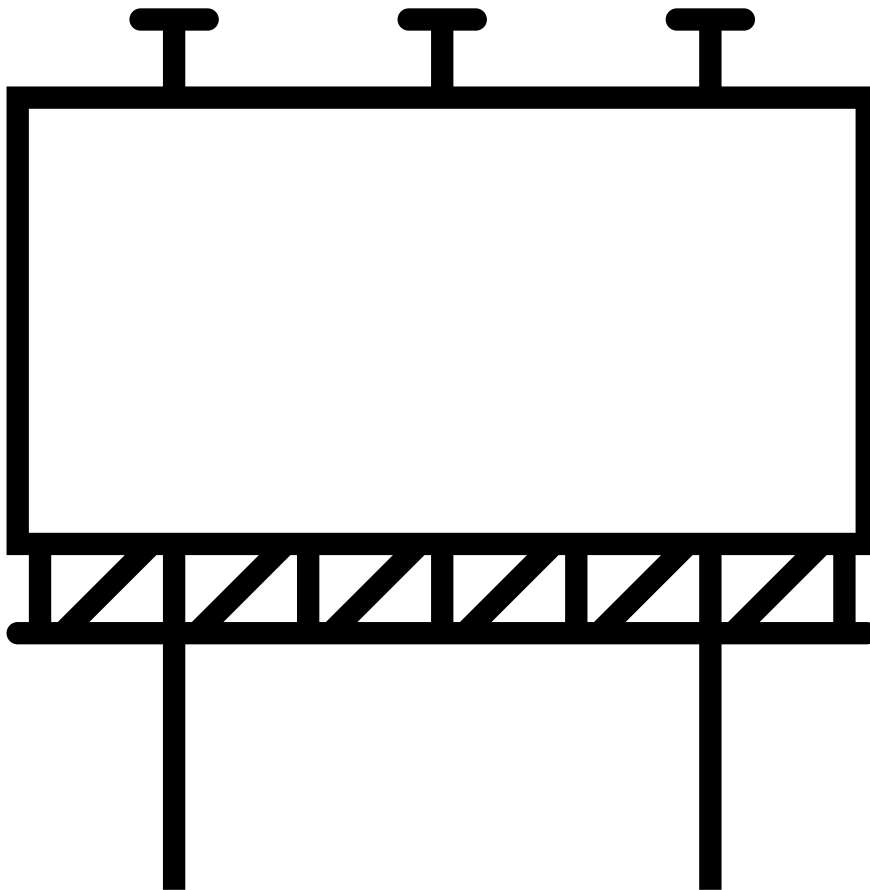
The more accurate question is:

“What’s overwhelmed his nervous system — and how can I help it settle?”

With safety, understanding, and repeated support, Oscar’s ability to recognise and manage emotions will grow — but it will always rely on environment and relationships, not pressure.

Challenge Seven: SM

Individual Task



7. Self-Monitoring Probe

Skill: Noticing performance and behaviour

Task

After a task, ask:

“How do you think that went?”

“Is there anything you’d change?”

Observe

- Accuracy of reflection
- Awareness of mistakes
- Ability to accept feedback

Red Flags

- “All fine” despite errors
- Emotional reaction to review
- Doesn’t notice incomplete work

Suggests

Weak self-monitoring → **visual success criteria, gentle review routines**

Accuracy of reflection?

Great
Effort

Success

Awareness of Mistakes?

Great
Effort

Success

Ability to Accept Feedback?

Great
Effort

Success

CLASSROOM IDEAS

7. Self-Monitoring (noticing and adjusting behaviour)

1. “Did I finish?” checklist
2. Before/after work comparison
3. Reflect using smile/neutral faces
4. Adult models error-fixing
5. Tick tasks when complete
6. Self-rating effort scale
7. Preview success criteria pictorially
8. Spot own mistake in example
9. Explain how task was done
10. “What would I do next time?”
11. Traffic-light behaviour check
12. Video model then self-copy
13. Prompted pause to review work
14. Celebrate corrections not just success
15. Use mirror for body awareness

Summary

EF Area	Key Probe Question
Working Memory	Can he hold 2–3 steps in mind?
Attention	How long can he stay focused?
Inhibition	Can he stop on cue?
Planning	Can he organise without prompting?
Flexibility	How does he cope with change?
Regulation	How does he recover from frustration?
Self-Monitoring	Can he reflect on his work?

Important note (SEND-aware)

For autistic children like Oscar:

- Difficulty ≠ unwillingness
- Performance varies with stress, sensory load, novelty
- Probes should be repeated across days for patterns, not one-offs

Important notes

These **build EF skills gradually**. For autistic children like Oscar:

- **Consistency**
- **Visual support**
- **Short, predictable sessions**
- **Linking to interests (farm animals & vehicles)**

are far more effective than repetition alone.

- Turn these into a **weekly EF plan**
- Match activities to **EHCP outcomes**
- Adapt them for **low-energy or high-sensory days**
- Create **visual cards or checklists** specifically for Oscar

I hope you have enjoyed my workshop, please feel free to email me:

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