

Beyond BookSmart

A photograph of three young people walking outdoors. On the left, a young man with short brown hair, wearing a teal button-down shirt and a black backpack, is smiling and looking towards the right. In the center, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue shirt, is also smiling and looking towards the right. On the right, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt, is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery.

BREAKING THE ACADEMIC CRISIS & RESCUE CYCLE

*How students can learn
to be their own hero*

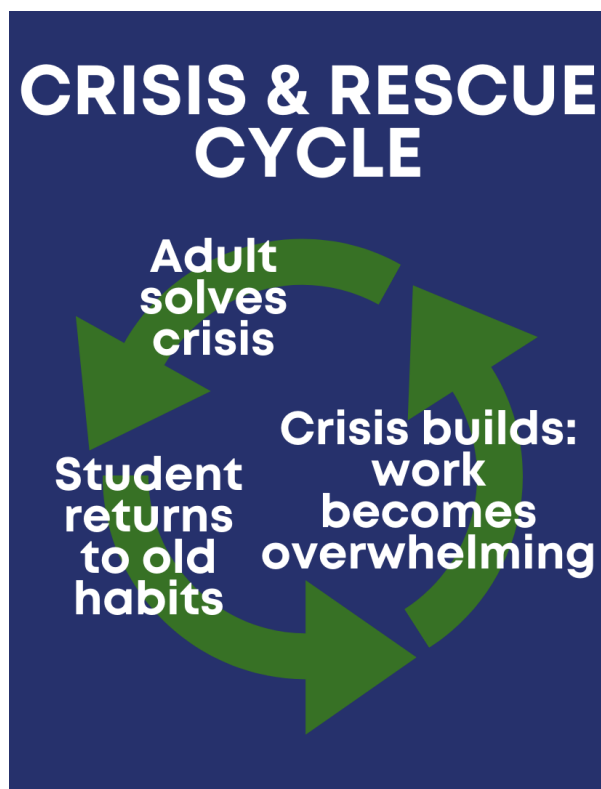
INTRODUCTION

Executive Function coaching at its core exists to help individuals develop the critical skills they need to plan, prioritize, and fulfill their responsibilities - and eventually to do so independently. Even though the rate at which students develop these skills may vary, the circumstances that lead an individual to look for outside support through coaching in the first place are fairly consistent, and many of them can be summed up in one word: crisis.

Although all students face stressful points in their academic career where work may pile up or they have to bounce back from a disappointing test score, it's a different matter entirely when these kinds of circumstances become a regular occurrence. When this happens, we enter the crisis scenarios where a student may be at risk of failing a class, have insufficient grades to continue at their course level, or be on the brink of hurting their chances of getting into (or staying at) their preferred college. In these extreme circumstances, coaches become a resource to get students back on track while also empowering them to continue their success. The coach essentially rescues the student. Problem fixed, right?

Not necessarily.

To achieve continued progress, getting out of a crisis is just the beginning of a long journey toward addressing and refining the Executive Functioning weaknesses that led to the dire situation in the first place. This requires consistent sessions and a continued commitment to improve. However, in our 15 years of providing coaching services to thousands of students, a trend emerged that hindered some clients' full potential for improvement: crisis coaching. When a parent or student finds that a coach can help them out of a difficult situation in school, this sometimes becomes their primary purpose for continued coaching. After all, the coach helped to fix a tough problem, didn't they? Instead of weekly sessions, these students may begin to space theirs out between weeks, sometimes even months, in order to get help from their coach only when a new crisis arises.



On paper, this may not seem like a bad use of coaching. We understand that the help we provide is an investment and that limiting sessions to an “as needed” basis seems like a smart way to maximize that return on investment. However, it’s important to remember the primary purpose of coaching:

To help individuals develop the critical skills they need to plan, prioritize, and execute on their responsibilities - and eventually to do so independently.

When coaching becomes a resource solely for managing difficult situations in school, its purpose shifts away from that bigger picture goal of independence. Instead of being an opportunity to strengthen critical skills, coaching becomes something that resembles academic crisis management and students may become reliant on their coach to manage stressful situations. As a result, students repeat the same mistakes that lead to a crisis scenario in the first place and miss out on the opportunity to develop the confidence and self-reliance they hoped to gain.

When comparing the outcomes for these students with the ones who have consistent, weekly sessions, we find that the results and overall satisfaction with the process are radically different.

In this report, we’ll analyze the effectiveness of coaching through the lens of real examples of past clients. In doing so, we’ll have the opportunity to see why crisis coaching may be a useful way to make it through one crisis, but an inadequate way to develop the important habits and Executive Function abilities needed to succeed in school and beyond.



ANATOMY OF AN ACADEMIC CRISIS

In order to better understand the origins of the crisis and rescue cycle, we need to first look at the anatomy of an academic crisis - or more specifically, what they are, how they happen, and what some of the ones we've seen over the years look like.

For the purpose of this report, we're going to define an academic crisis as a situation where the responsibilities or high-stakes deadlines at school become overwhelming to the point of seeming impossible to complete. Typically, these crises are the culmination of an extended period of bad habits, which often consist of some combination of poor time management, inefficient studying, or scattered focus.

While the occasional class crisis is not atypical, when these crisis scenarios are a regular part of the school year, it often points to an underlying deficit in Executive Function skills. Those weaknesses take intentional work to improve, so it's unsurprising that students can experience countless academic crises without ever seeming to learn how to avoid them in the first place.

This is why coaching is the intervention of choice. Coaches are well equipped to facilitate change within students and help them gain insight about their habits. Moreover, coaching is best viewed as a collaboration between families and coaches. In other words, scheduling those first sessions is only the beginning of the journey.

In order to better illustrate what this means in practice, we're going to look at two examples of Beyond BookSmart clients and their different experiences with Executive Function coaching.

**Disclaimer: Identifying details of the clients described next have been modified to protect their anonymity.*



JANA'S STORY

Jana started coaching as a junior in high school. Years prior, she had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and anxiety. She struggled with getting started on her work and balancing her priorities. Sometimes, she worked for hours non-stop on math and science related tasks, but ignored other assignments she was less interested in. As a result, when she came to Beyond BookSmart, she was in danger of failing her junior-level English class for the year if she didn't get an A her last term. This would have seriously reduced her GPA, narrowed her college prospects, and potentially prevented her from advancing to her senior year of high school. In other words - Jana was in an academic crisis situation.

When Jana began coaching, the focus became passing English for the year. By implementing a number of tools and strategies centered around writing, time-management, and prioritizing, as well as committing to consistent, weekly sessions that term, she received the grades needed to pass the class while also maintaining the best case scenario for her GPA.

However, after the school year ended and the English crisis was over, she began scheduling less frequent, shorter sessions. Soon, the sessions became spaced by 3 or 4 weeks. In the meantime, Jana fell into old habits in her English class and found herself at risk of failing the class for the first semester while also now panicking to finish college applications in time. To address these dual crises, coaching sessions once again became more regular.

Once these current crises were overcome, Jana returned to spacing out her coaching sessions. However, upon getting rejected from her top college choices in Early Decision, Jana realized she had to scramble yet again to meet the regular application deadlines for her other schools.

JANA'S STORY

She leaned on her coach in order to complete them all in time, even though it was a formidable undertaking.

Around this time, Jana's parents started expressing frustration with the coaching process and her lack of progress in gaining self-management skills. It was hard for them to connect the dots between inconsistent coaching sessions, Jana's cycle of crises, and the reasons why all those emergency "fixes" never seemed to translate to changed habits in the long run. Her coach worked to help Jana's parents understand how the crisis-intervention patterns posed a roadblock to developing the skills she so badly needed. Nonetheless, when she started college, Jana continued to access coaching only when she encountered crises. Our most recent update shows that Jana withdrew from college for a year and "hoped to return soon."

Students need steady, consistent sessions with their coach in order to practice and solidify new habits.

It's easy to slip back into bad habits!

DANIEL'S STORY

Daniel started coaching half way through his sophomore year of high school after having a difficult first semester of 10th grade. As a bright student, Daniel rarely found himself struggling to learn or recall information for exams but he often had trouble staying motivated without impending urgency. These tendencies were especially clear during his freshman year of high school, where he received excellent grades in all of his classes but would often stay up all night finishing assignments at the last minute. Despite these habits, Daniel was recommended by most of his teachers to move up a level and take honors classes for his sophomore year.

Daniel soon found himself buried in the workload of these higher-level classes and struggling to meet their requirements and deadlines. By the end of his first term, he was failing one class, nearly failing another, and squeaking by with Cs in the rest. In response to these grades, his parents reached out to Beyond BookSmart in search of the right support for Daniel as they were concerned about how his grades would narrow his college choices. Daniel, on the other hand, was initially unconvinced that he needed coaching, chalking up the poor academic performance to simply “not trying” hard enough. Even so, he agreed to give coaching a try to help him learn to manage his workload more effectively.

The next term, Daniel and his coach began meeting weekly and working to address some of his bad habits. Some of the initial steps included breaking down large tasks into more manageable chunks, experimenting with different tools to prioritize and plan out coursework, and examining the thinking that contributed to Daniel procrastinating on important tasks.



DANIEL'S STORY


Daniel improved his grades considerably that term, but he still finished with a C+ average for the semester. Although his parents were happy with the improvement, they wanted him to reach a B average to stay competitive for college. However, Daniel didn't need any push from them to meet this goal, as he was motivated by his progress and the realization that he had potential to do much better.

For the next semester, he continued weekly sessions where his coach continued to help with his time-management and task initiation skills. Over time, his parents reported that it had really “sunken in” for Daniel that getting important things done early (rather than waiting until they build to an unmanageable level) improves the quality of his work and eliminates stress.

In addition to providing an opportunity to hone his skills, the continued frequency of sessions allowed for regular feedback from his coach, who monitored his incremental progress. Most significantly, Daniel and his coach established an effective working relationship that helped Daniel see that benefits of his new skills extend beyond simply getting better grades.

At the end of the second semester, he had improved in all of his classes enough to surpass the B average goal he and his parents had set. Although the bump in grades was a great outcome, his parents reported a renewed sense of confidence and level-headedness they hadn't seen before.

Daniel continued regular sessions through junior year until he felt he could take ownership over his progress and graduate from coaching.



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THE EVIDENCE FOR COACHING

In addition to the many examples of students like Jana and Daniel we've had over the past 15 years, we've also sought systematic information about the effectiveness of our Executive Function coaching. We conducted a 2 year study using the widely accepted gold standard rating for Executive Function assessment, the BRIEF-2 (Behavioral Rating Inventory of Executive Function - second edition). The student subjects, ages 11-18, were chosen randomly among coaching clients at Beyond BookSmart. Both parents and students completed the rating scale before coaching started and after a period of consistent coaching. Among students who were ready to make a change in their habits and who had consistent coaching sessions for an average of 8-9 months, both students and parents reported statistically significant gains in their Executive Function skills, as seen by overall scores on the BRIEF-2.

THE TAKEAWAY

Jana and Daniel are two examples that perfectly illustrate why coaching takes consistency and time to gain traction toward students' goals. The cycle of crisis that so many students find themselves mired in takes proactive steps to break. Simply reacting to a student's problems and rescuing them from their current crisis does nothing to help them gain agency and learn to rescue themselves - or better yet, learn how to avoid self-made crises altogether.

Students can equip themselves with the skills to manage themselves today so they can thrive tomorrow. Our coaches are here to help students break the crisis and rescue cycle for good.