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Teaching students with ADD/ADHD

If you're a teacher, you know these kids: The one who stares out the window, substituting the arc of a bird in flight for her math lesson. The one who wouldn't be able to keep his rear end in the chair if you used Krazy Glue. The one who answers the question, "Who can tell me what the 6th Amendment guarantees?" with "Mrs. M, do you dye your hair?"

Students who exhibit ADD/ADHD's hallmark symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity can be frustrating. You know the brainpower is there, but they just can't seem to focus on the material you're working hard to deliver. Plus, their behaviors take time away from instruction and disrupt the whole class.

Challenges of ADHD in the classroom

Think of what the school setting requires children to do: Sit still. Listen quietly. Pay attention. Follow instructions. Concentrate. These are the very things kids with ADD/ADHD have a hard time doing — not because they aren't willing, but because their brains won't let them. That doesn't make teaching them any easier, of course.

Students with ADD/ADHD present the following challenges for teachers:

- They demand attention by talking out of turn or moving around the room.
- They have trouble following instructions, especially when they're presented in a list.
- They often forget to write down homework assignments, do them, or bring completed work to school.
- They often lack fine motor control, which makes note-taking difficult and handwriting a trial to read.
- They often have trouble with operations that require ordered steps, such as long division or solving equations.
- They usually have problems with long-term projects where there is no direct supervision.
- They don't pull their weight during group work and may even keep a group from accomplishing its task.

Students with ADD/ADHD pay the price for their problems in low grades, scolding and punishment, teasing from peers, and low self-esteem. Meanwhile, you, the teacher, wind up taking complaints from parents who feel their kids are being cheated of your instruction and feeling guilty because you can't reach the child with ADD/ADHD.

What teachers can do to help

So how do you teach a kid who won't settle down and listen? The answer: with a lot of patience, creativity, and consistency. As a teacher, your role is to evaluate each child's individual needs and strengths. Then you can develop strategies that will help students with ADD/ADHD focus, stay on task, and learn to their full capabilities.



Successful programs for children with ADHD integrate the following three components:

- **Accommodations:** what you can do to make learning easier for students with ADD/ADHD.
- **Instruction:** the methods you use in teaching.
- **Intervention:** How you head off behaviors that disrupt concentration or distract other students.

Your most effective tool, however, in helping a student with ADD/ADHD is a positive attitude. Make the student your partner by saying, "Let's figure out ways together to help you get your work done." Assure the student that you'll be looking for good behavior and quality work, and when you see it, reinforce it with immediate and sincere praise. Finally, look for ways to motivate a student with ADD/ADHD by offering rewards on a point or token system.

Dealing with Disruptive Classroom Behavior

To head off behavior that takes time from other students, work out a couple of warning signals with the student who has ADD/ADHD. This can be a hand signal, an unobtrusive shoulder squeeze, or a sticky note on the student's desk. If you have to discuss the student's behavior, do so in private. And try to ignore mildly inappropriate behavior if it's unintentional and isn't distracting other students or disrupting the lesson.

Classroom accommodations for students with ADHD

As a teacher, you can make changes in the classroom to help minimize the distractions and disruptions of ADHD.

Seating

- Seat the student with ADD/ADHD away from windows and away from the door.
- Put the student with ADD/ADHD right in front of your desk unless that would be a distraction for the student.
- Seats in rows, with focus on the teacher, usually work better than having students seated around tables or facing one another in other arrangements.

Information delivery

- Give instructions one at a time and repeat as necessary.
- If possible, work on the most difficult material early in the day.
- Use visuals: charts, pictures, color coding.
- Create outlines for note-taking that organize the information as you deliver it.

Student work

- Create a quiet area free of distractions for test-taking and quiet study.
- Create worksheets and tests with fewer items; give frequent short quizzes rather than long tests.



- Reduce the number of timed tests.
- Test the student with ADD/ADHD in the way he or she does best, such as orally or filling in blanks.
- Show the student how to use a pointer or bookmark to track written words on a page.
- Divide long-term projects into segments and assign a completion goal for each segment.
- Let the student do as much work as possible on computer.
- Accept late work and give partial credit for partial work.

Organization

- Have the student keep a master notebook, a three-ring binder with a separate section for each subject, and make sure everything that goes into the notebook has holes punched and is put *on the rings* in the correct section.
- Provide a three-pocket notebook insert for homework assignments, completed homework, and “mail” to parents (permission slips, PTA flyers).
- Color-code materials for each subject.
- Allow time for student to organize materials and assignments for home. Post steps for getting ready to go home.
- Make sure the student with ADD/ADHD has a system for writing down assignments and important dates and uses it.

Teaching techniques for students with ADD/ADHD

Teaching techniques that help students with ADD/ADHD focus and maintain their concentration on your lesson and their work can be beneficial to the entire class.

Starting a lesson

- Signal the start of a lesson with an aural cue, such as an egg timer, a cowbell or a horn. (You can use subsequent cues to show much time remains in a lesson.)
- List the activities of the lesson on the board.
- In opening the lesson, tell students what they’re going to learn and what your expectations are. Tell students exactly what materials they’ll need.
- Establish eye contact with any student who has ADD/ADHD.

Conducting the lesson

- Keep instructions simple and structured.
- Vary the pace and include different kinds of activities. Many students with ADD do well with competitive games or other activities that are rapid and intense.
- Use props, charts, and other visual aids.



- Have an unobtrusive cue set up with the student who has ADD/ADHD, such as a touch on the shoulder or placing a sticky note on the student's desk, to remind the student to stay on task.
- Allow a student with ADD/ADHD frequent breaks.
- Let the student with ADHD squeeze a Koosh ball or tap something that doesn't make noise as a physical outlet.
- Try not to ask a student with ADD/ADHD perform a task or answer a question publicly that might be too difficult.

Ending the lesson

- Summarize key points.
- If you give an assignment, have three different students repeat it, then have the class say it in unison, and put it on the board.
- Be specific about what to take home.