

Behavioral Interventions for Parents

The A.D.D. Resource Center 646/205.8080

Provide Structure & Consistency

- **Enforce daily routines**, including time to awaken, do homework & go to sleep.
- **Maintain the same schedule during non-school days.**
- **Post schedules.**
- **Prepare your child for change-** most children with ADD have difficulty with transitions. It's important for the child to have the security of structure and routine, since they can't depend on their own ability to do what should be done (which is scary to the child).
- **Enforced structure and routine helps eliminate many arguments:** If sometimes the child doesn't have to do things and other times they do, they'll try to get out of it every time.
- **Consistency creates habits.** The average person takes about 3 months to develop a habit. The person with ADHD takes 2-3 times as long. They need your support and positive reinforcement during that time.

Teach the Skills of Anger Management

- **Speak clearly, quietly and calmly.**
- Role model desirable behaviors. Take problems in stride and keep things in proper perspective, but make it clear that they do matter. When you "lose it," admit that you overreacted. Help your child learn to identify her feelings and understand she's not bad; that everyone sometimes does things they shouldn't.
- **Avoid arguments and power struggles** through the use of management techniques such as:
 - **Disengagement** - You can't have a rational discussion with an irrational child; separate yourself from the interaction until your child is ready and able to listen.
- **Written contracts** - *"I never said I'd clean my room before playing computer games!"* is better disputed by calmly stating, *"That's what you agreed to in writing when we purchased the computer - shall we look at the contract?"*
- **Teach your child how to disagree;** what is appropriate and what isn't: tone, action, language and body language. Explain the difference between annoyed and angry.
- **Model what you teach! Explain the importance of setting and timing** - disagreeing with a teacher may be appropriate, but not when done in front of the entire class. Getting argumentative about wanting new shoes isn't advisable when the refrigerator just stopped working and you're concerned about paying for a replacement.
- **Help your child to cope** with his frustration and anger by acknowledging they exist, and may even be justifiable - **but must be contained.**
- **Teach useful anger management techniques**, such as counting to 10, distraction, etc. (there are many books on these, and your child's school may have suggestions). Meanwhile, help your child - or have the child work with a professional - to discover and deal with the source of his anger and frustration.

Strive for Order & Keep Things Calm

- **Maintain order in the house and child's room.** If he can't do it himself, help. Keep things grouped according to purpose (a clear plastic box for Legos, another for art supplies). It's easier to clean up when everything has its place. Keep an extra clothes hamper in his room - an attached basketball hoop makes it more likely the dirty clothes will stay off the floor!
- **Leave extra time so there's no need to rush.** Prepare for school the night before, making sure all papers and needed books are in the schoolbag and the schoolbag is next to the door.
- **Prepare the child in advance.** Transitions are difficult for people with ADHD. So is time management. By giving notice in advance, it is easier for the child to comply: *"We'll be leaving in 15 minutes, so put your game away now." "We'll be leaving in 5 minutes, so get your bookbag and make sure you have your homework."*
- **Avoid crowds and hectic environments.** They can "feed" the hyper characteristics and/or overwhelm the child. Block in quiet time.
- **Minimize TV viewing and computer games.** Monitor what and when they watch and play. Violent shows and games have been *proven* to have a negative impact on children.
- **Limit playdates and the number of playmates** (one or two is usually best). Keep playdates short - it's better for the children to want more time than for it to go too long and result in behaviors that jeopardize the friendship.
- **Make sure the child has enough sleep** (fatigue creates problems)
- **Monitor food intake and quality** - it's okay to say no to junk food. Also, some children on stimulant medication will not eat as much when medicated, so have lots of healthy snacks available in the evenings, when the meds wear off and the child is more likely to eat.
- **Promote regular exercise** (independent sports are usually best, such as swimming, running, bicycling, karate, fencing, horseback riding, etc.)

Have a Positive Attitude

- **Emphasize the child's strengths.**
- **Reinforce your unconditional love;** you may dislike the behavior, but not the child.
- **Try to look at things from your child's perspective.**
- **Think before you speak and re-language your comment** if necessary (see section on Re-Languaging and Re-Framing)
- **Keep your expectations realistic.**

Maintain a Close Watch

- **Don't assume that something will (or won't) be done** just because your child knows what she should (or shouldn't) do. Check on activities, schoolwork, etc.
- **Don't assume that if something is working, it will continue to work.** Monitor the situation and be prepared to make changes.
- **Allow autonomy, but on your terms. An Elastic Contract** gives the child more independence, but requires the child to show more responsibility: You agree to stop monitoring homework so closely, but only if your child gets it done, on time and correctly. If he doesn't keep up his end of the Contract, you go back to closer supervision. As his work improves, you back away. Or your child wants to stay up

later. You agree to 15 minutes if she then goes to bed without complaints. If she complies, you can allow her to stay up 15 additional minutes (30 minute total). If, however, she starts whining or delaying bedtime, you go back to the original bedtime. YOU must stick with whatever you've agreed to - if she gives you a hassle, she must lose the privileges based on her agreement to comply. **Offer Choice of Two Acceptable Options** - the child gets to choose whether he wants to do his homework before his half-hour of TV time or after, but it still gets done! (Or he loses TV privileges.)

Work for Success

- **Limit tasks and activities to one at a time**, to finish & put away before beginning the next.
- **Strive for improvement, not perfection.**
- **Reward effort, not just achievement.**
- **Keep social activities short**; end a playdate while both children are still enjoying each other.
- **Problem-solve with your child's input.** Have his agreement on an appropriate course of action. When a person "buys into" a plan, it's more likely to be successful. Your child has a vested interest in making it work, since he agreed (or even suggested) the plan.
- **When appropriate, offer your child choices**, but limit them to two and make sure that both are acceptable to you. "Do you want to put the dishes in the dishwasher or fold the laundry?" "Would you like to prepare the salad or set the table?" "Do you want to do the math homework now or after you've practiced your piano lesson?"
- **Make sure your child knows you care about him for WHO he is**, not what he can accomplish.
- **Be a role model:** Take problems in stride and keep things in proper perspective, but still show they matter

Be a Detective

- **Know your child** - track what works, and what doesn't; anticipate reactions and behaviors.
- **Experiment with different intervention techniques.**
- **Help your child discover things** that really interest them, skills and abilities.

Rules - Consequences - Rewards

- **Have both verbal AND written expectations.**
- **Clearly posted charts listing Individual Responsibilities and House Rules.**
- **Pre-determined consequences.** The child must know what to expect if rules are not followed, and the parent should not determine punishments in the heat of anger or disappointment. Saying, "*No TV for you for a year!*" may be unrealistic and counterproductive.
- **Immediate application of those consequences.** For the child to understand that the consequence is due to a specific action, it needs to be given immediately upon the child's action, or it's too easy for the child to disassociate or forget (or for the parent to forget to administer the consequence).
- **Rewards should reflect the child's age.** Star Charts may be very effective for a younger child, but not for an adolescent, who may be more appreciative of a Coin Bank or TV-Time.

- **Rewards should be immediate and attainable.** Offering the student with ADHD a new road bike for a year of good grades is too much of a good thing too far in the future.
- **If you want to change behavior, don't require 100% compliance for success.** Offer a reward if the child does XXX 3 out of 5 days. Otherwise, if they fail on the first day, what motivation do they have to keep trying?

The Home-School-Child Care Connection

- **Any behavior management system is more effective if consistently followed.** That means both parents should agree, whenever possible, on what to expect from the child and what consequences/rewards are suitable. Other relatives who are involved with childcare should also work with the child in the same way.
- **Be explicit in how to address specific mis-behavior issues,** such as what to do if a child "throws a tantrum."
- **Teachers should be kept informed of important behavior management concerns and approaches.**
- **Babysitters should be kept informed of important behavior management concerns and approaches - and monitored.** Too often a babysitter will call a misbehaving child "bad," and it sticks with them.
- **Parents should request teachers to keep them informed about concerns BEFORE** they turn into problems (such as not handing in homework on time).
- **Parents should let teachers know if the child is experiencing any special problems,** such as illness, a sleepless night, parental problems, a new baby in the family, etc.

ReThinking - Reframing - ReLanguaging

- Often, the way we THINK about something is based on HISTORY and HABIT.
- The words we use can describe the same thing in either a POSITIVE or NEGATIVE manner.
- When we choose our words, we also communicate an ATTITUDE.
- **The words our children hear help frame their self-image.**

Unfortunately, words commonly used to describe children with ADD include:

Lazy Unmotivated Irresponsible Immature Selfish Inconsiderate
Insensitive Disappointing Careless Sloppy Inept Troublemaker / Bad

When you use these words, the child hears:

"I'm a failure." "I can't do anything right." "I'm stupid." "I'm not worth loving."

"I do nothing but cause problems." "I'm no good."

"I'll never amount to anything - it's useless to try."

Instead of feeling good about what they can do, the child feels:

Guilty Hopeless Ashamed Hurt Inadequate

Their self-image becomes distorted (disAbilities far outweighing Abilities) and their self-esteem is damaged. They become less capable of succeeding than they were initially.

A child might cope with his or her negative feelings by:

- Acting out, becoming aggressive, getting into fights, being verbally combative, engaging in reckless and/or antisocial behaviors, etc.
- Internalizing the pain, guilt and shame by withdrawing, becoming depressed, taking on the passivity of a "victim mentality," etc.
- Channeling feelings through their bodies, with headaches, stomach or backaches, generalized aches and pains in hands or legs, feeling sick, lethargy, developing food -related disorders, etc.
- Attempting to control their environment, avoiding stressful situations through manipulation. An example is when a child is the "class clown." This role provides the child with attention (stimulation), and a way to avoid appearing dumb in class or having to do boring work: say something which will disrupt the lesson, or push the button that gets you thrown out of class.

We ask our children to "TRY HARDER," when they are already putting in tremendous effort just to be where they are.

We want them to "DO BETTER," when they haven't the skills or appropriate motivation.

We tell them, "YOU CAN IF YOU WANTED TO," when they can't, at least not without help. They may even want the same things we do, but aren't able to figure out the "how" or drum up sufficient internal motivation to "just do it."

ADD is Not an Excuse, But It Is An Explanation

What Can You Do Differently?

- **Rethink how you interpret a situation or comment:**

"This homework is sloppily written, misses the point of the assignment, has poor spelling and you haven't included the date."

-VS-

"I think your teacher wanted you to write your opinion of the story, rather than a summary of it. Would you like my help to pull this together?"

- **Praise whatever you *honestly* can, or the child will not believe/value your comments, not grow from them:**

"This story you've written is absolutely wonderful!"

-VS-

"I really like the way you described the main character, but I'm confused about the plot... where did the monkey come from and who is Zap?"

- **Point out something that has improved (reinforce the positive while improving the negative):**

"You refuse to put your dirty clothes in the hamper!"

-VS-

"I appreciate that you've taken your dirty clothes out of your room. Could you please start putting them in the hamper instead of on the bathroom floor?"

- **Criticize the action, NOT the individual:**

"You're inconsiderate."

-VS-

"Leaving your bike in front of the entry door was an inconsiderate thing to do. Please don't leave it there again - it goes in the garage."

- **Express things from your perspective; "This is how I feel...":**

"You don't care about anyone else!"

-VS-

"I feel you don't care about my needs when you blast the stereo while I'm trying to work"

- **Be very specific when you criticize (and when you give directions):**

"Your room is a disaster area." (Think how your child will interpret this sweeping comment that has no attached plan of action for improvement of the item being criticized)

-VS-

"Your room needs to be cleaned up. There are papers on your bed and racing tracks all over the floor. Please put them away before you go over to Jennie's house."

- **Stop Using Words That Hurt**

"How can you be so stupid? Can't you do anything right?"

-VS-

"You certainly misjudged that situation. What can you do about it now?"

- **Avoid Using "Fighting Words" like: "Always - Never - Ever"**

Such words are so "total" that the recipient is backed into a corner and there's little room for face-saving or negotiation, so you're less likely to gain cooperation or improved behavior.

- **To criticize the past doesn't change the present**, and these words refer to history.

- **To express doubt about the future doesn't encourage change**, and these words are open-ended. If I always have (or haven't) done something and always will, what is the use of trying to change? These words also provide a welcome opportunity for the person being criticized to sidestep the real problem (what was done) and refocus on a debate about the accuracy of your comment, in terms of whether or not they are "always" a certain way.

- **Choose Your Battles** Spend your energy and your child's on the most pressing issues. Your goal is to help your child improve behavior and performance, while maintaining a positive relationship and family harmony. There's only limited time for getting things done, so it's foolish to harp on everything at once.

- **It's easier for a person to acquire 1 or 2 skills at a time** than to try to learn everything at once. Jointly target 3 areas for improvement, and don't worry too much about other issues: If getting up, ready and out on time in the mornings is the target area, narrow your "improvement focus" until the situation improves, then move on to another target area, such as being more responsible about keeping pet cage clean.

Help Your Child Accept the Reality - & Opportunity - of Failure

- Children with ADD are going to experience disappointments in life. **Learning to deal with adversity and failure is healthy.** It's important to put things in perspective.
- **Teach your child that he can be good and still do something that's wrong.**
- **Let your child know that you empathize with her pain,** but believe in her and all she has going for her -that it's not the end of the world, although it may feel that way.
- **Help your child to understand that when one door shuts another one opens;** that there are many options in life and because one is no longer available at this time doesn't mean there aren't others, perhaps better, that are open now --or that could open with some effort on the child's part.

Strive for Progress - NOT Perfection

- **Children with ADD tend to see things in black and white.** If they can't do it perfectly, there's no reason to bother doing it at all. If they want something, they want it NOW. Parents often have the same narrow perspective, which can make them very demanding.
- **Learning to have a realistic and balanced perspective is important** for everyone, but critical for people with ADD.
- Although it's easy to say, it's hard for many people (both children and adults) to **believe that you can still feel good about something even if you don't excel at it;** that you don't have to be perfect and making a mistake or not being the best is not the end of the world.
- **Growth comes from "baby steps," advancing little by little.** This is okay. Next time you may be able to do it better, but look at how far you've come!"
- **Explain how important it is to build on achievements and abilities;** that each new accomplishment is a building block towards future success, and an achievement in itself.
- **Reframe your attitude about Failure** - if people never fail, they are playing it too safe, and not growing nor living up to their potential.

Catch Your Child Being "Good"

- **Look for different ways of interpreting a situation or a behavior:**

Complaint: "I was embarrassed today during an open class visit. My daughter refused to participate in the class discussion and sat in the back of the room reading."

Rethink: "I was really pleased to see how my daughter handled things at school. She felt overwhelmed at the presence of all the parents during an open class visit. But instead of acting out, she was in

touch with her feelings and knew enough to 'regroup' by choosing to go to the back of the room and read quietly."

- **Help your child examine their behavior, become less judgmental, and view situations differently:**

Complaint: "My teacher has it in for me to give me THAT project - the other kids in my group got easier stuff."

Rethink: "I know you're not looking forward to the time you'll have to put in on the project, but it sounds more interesting than the others. I think your teacher knew you'd find this less boring and actually enjoy the work. It's terrific that he understands you do better with 'hands-on' projects, rather than written research work."

- **Practice Positive Criticisms - Criticize only the important things:** It's easy to criticize a child for doing something wrong, but how often do you notice -- and praise -- the little things he or she does right?

"You did an especially good job folding the laundry. Thanks."

"It was very considerate of you to call your classmate to see how he was feeling after getting hit with the ball during recess."

"I noticed you put away the game when you finished playing with it."

"Knowing it's difficult for you to sit still, I'm really proud of the way you kept Grandma company."

Promote a Positive Attitude in Your Family

- **Tell each member of the family one thing they did especially well each day.** It might be something they've done (finishing homework without being hounded) or said ("I liked that you took the time to tell me that funny story"), or perhaps just something about them ("When you smile you light up my heart").
- **Don't forget your spouse/partner** - Sometimes we get so caught up in the family issues that we forget to nourish our adult relationships.
- **Boost your child's self esteem in every way possible** -including establishing a bedtime ritual of telling the child 3 reasons why he or she is so special (be inventive, but honest)
- **Praise yourself!** Recognize the good stuff you do, and the bad stuff you put up.
- **Ignore one thing that annoyed you**, whether it's something someone else did or didn't do, or something you wish you did or didn't do (self-blame is rarely constructive; self-awareness accompanied by a realistic effort to improve is much more valuable). The experts say anger is more debilitating to the person experiencing it than to the person deserving it!

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include coaching, parenting classes, home and office organization, time, project and paper management, study skills, group seminars, career and business development, couples workshops and more.

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