

Teaching Children with ADHD

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Abstract

The three main characteristics of ADHD, namely hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity, imply that teaching a child with this condition can be problematic. However, a number of strategies are available that can not only help to overcome some of the child's difficulties but can also be fun. These include techniques for decreasing physical activity, increasing attention span, helping the child to focus while ignoring distractions, and overcoming impulsivity by teaching the "hesitation response." Simple, black-and-white rules, coupled with instructions given one at a time, in language that the child will understand, can also help. Altering the classroom environment, applying some simple principles, can reduce distractions and increase the child's engagement with the teaching process; these principles might include seating the child at the front of the class where distractions from other students will be less, surrounding the child with good role models, avoiding environmental distractions such as heaters, windows or air-conditioners, and encouraging the child to ask for help when they need it. Although teaching the child with ADHD can be challenging, applying appropriate techniques and strategies can greatly enhance their learning.

Introduction

Students with ADHD often challenge teachers in 3 main areas:

1. Activity level.
2. Attention span.
3. Impulsivity.

There are strategies for managing these challenges in the classroom.

Dealing with the activity level

Whether it is controlling their body or their mind, some children appear to leap about. It seems as if they are unable to switch their motion on and off in a controlled way, as other children do. Teaching them can be a difficult process but strategies are available that can be both effective and fun as well.

One technique for younger children to help them sit still is called "playing statues" (1). The child is asked to sit like a statue for a certain time. This game can be played using a stopwatch and recorded in terms of a visual presentation, such as a bar chart. The time can be increased in stages. The strategy helps the child to focus and to control their bodies. As a self-taught system, it is much more likely to provide a long-term solution.

Variations on this theme include other games, for example "Catch me if you Can" (1) and playing to "Beat the Clock". These are approaches to limit extraneous movement and to help the child to focus tasks against a set of expectations in an activity set against a timed upper limit.

With older students much longer periods of sustained, controlled activity levels are expected. "Endurance training" involves lengthening the time and improving the skills in sitting still in a variety of settings.

The child will often need to have the session broken down into achievable time periods. For example, the objectives for a 40-minute lesson might be broken into stages as follows.

- To sit still during the 5 to 10 minutes introduction to the lesson. The teacher then indicates that part 1 is over.
- To focus on the task in the group discussion. The teacher then indicates that part 2 is over.
- To pay attention during the group discussion. The teacher then indicates that part 3 is over.
- To behave appropriately during clear-up time. The teacher then indicates that part 4 is over.

All of these games or techniques to harness activity level will need to be practiced. Feedback on success and failure on the initial trials will be crucial in determining long-term outcomes.

Improving attention span

Although being hyperactive and impulsive can be obstacles to learning, it is without a doubt the issue of poor attention span that is the most damaging feature for some children. Lengthening the attention span will be one of the most important factors in determining long-term educational success (2).

The teacher should not assume that the child understands what paying attention really is; for some children this does not come naturally. A series of role-playing activities between the teacher and child may help the child to achieve an improved attention span. For example, a taped story may be played to the child, during which the teacher role-plays a series of incidents or examples when he or she did not hear or understand what the story had been about. The child in this case would be asked to clarify examples of why the teacher did not hear the story. The child rates the teacher's listening skills. In addition the teacher might want to demonstrate daydreaming by reading to himself or herself while the taped story is being played. The child once again rates the teacher's performance in the style of being a detective.

Once the teacher feels that the child understands what is meant by paying attention then he or she can start to improve the attention span, timing the child's performance against a chart or similar visual prompt. If the child is younger then the teacher may have to do the timing for them but if they are older then they should do it themselves.

Additional strategies can include devising "attention cards" that can be placed on the student's desk or using computerised checks to "hook" the child into the overall situation by giving him or her a process to monitor self-performance on a regular basis while undertaking the work or activity required. This could be viewed as distracting the child in a proactive way.

Impulse control

For some children impulsivity is a major problem with significant, often negative, impact. Again, the first stage in management is to explain the concept of impulsivity to the child, who may react instinctively to situations. Other people may view the child as being "a risk taker" but in the child's own eyes their action was not taking a risk – it was a reflex action over which they had little or no control. Explaining impulsive behaviour may be easier with some students than with others. The best place to start is often to consider recent examples of their own impulsive behaviour and to ask them to express, through their own words, how these incidents might have been handled better. It may also be helpful to ask the child to consider a number of separate situations, listing an impulsive act on one hand and to contrast it with a "thought-out act" on the other.

Two examples follow.

Impulsive Act

Running into Street.
Interrupting conversations.

Thought-out act

Pausing at curb, checking for traffic.
Saying: "Excuse me", and waiting turn.

In essence, to overcome impulsivity the child needs to be taught the "hesitation response", to increase the length of time between thinking and acting. The way in which this is achieved will depend on the age and maturity of the child. The teacher is essentially telling the child that they can be in control of something, namely their own impulses.

Some tried and trusted strategies and suggestions for managing the child with ADHD in the classroom are listed below. In some cases these simply confirm good practice. As always, the key is to remain consistent with the overall structure but also to have some flexibility if minor distractions and incidents occur (3).

- Seat the student near the teacher but include him or her as part of the whole class.
- Place the student in front of the class with his or her back to the rest of the class, to keep other students out of view, to avoid distraction.
- Surround the student with good role models, preferably those seen as "significant others". Encourage peer-tutoring and co-operative learning.
- Avoid distracting stimuli. Try not to place the child near heaters, air-conditioners, doors, windows or high-traffic areas.
- For those who do not handle change well, avoid transitions, changes in schedule, physical relocation and disruptions. Monitor closely on field trips.
- Be creative! Produce a "stimuli-reduced area" for all students to access.
- Maintain eye contact with the student during verbal instruction.
- Make directions clear and concise. Be consistent with daily instructions.
- Simplify complex directions. Avoid multiple commands.
- Make sure the student understands before beginning the task.
- Repeat in a calm, positive manner, if necessary.
- Help the child feel comfortable about seeking assistance, keeping in mind that most children will not readily ask for help.
- Children with ADHD need more help for a longer period of time than the average child. Gradually reduce the amount of assistance, depending on the response of the child.
- Ensure that the student has a daily assignment notebook. Make sure that the student writes down the assignment and that both parents and teachers sign daily for homework tasks.
- Give one task at a time and monitor frequently.
- Modify assignments as necessary. Develop an individualised programme.

The key elements in teaching rule-governed behaviour management is to limit the rules to key areas of basic health and safety, physical and verbal behaviour, uniform and timekeeping. They should be given in the form of clear, basic black-and-white instructions. All instructions should be as specific as possible, using multiple prompts to initiate the rule-training and, when possible, providing immediate feedback on outcome. The process of learning the rules should be reinforced with constant use of positive (and negative) logical consequences.

If the teacher accepts the core systems of ADHD, then the student will not necessarily be seen as

“a rule breaker” but will be viewed as someone who cannot filter out the competing demands of environmental stimuli for their attention. For example, the average child might be able to ignore a chair being scraped behind them while the teacher is talking, but the child with ADHD might find this very difficult. Another way of viewing this is to think that, for the child with ADHD, everything in their environment is equally important in terms of gaining their attention. Consequently, the first principle would be to train them to prioritise where to focus their attention in a particular situation. Putting this another way, the task of the teacher is to help the child to overcome the “distraction zapper” that take their attention away from engaging with the teaching process. Teaching the child with ADHD to overcome distractions is not an impossible task but it is a time-consuming one. Before the child can learn to ignore distractions, he or she needs to be able to identify the matter that should be holding their attention; they are then enabled to provide filtering strategies so that distractions do not take priority. A useful way of starting this process might be for the child to make a list, in each class, of the distractions that generally compete for their attention or affect their behaviour; younger children will require help from an adult in completing this exercise. As a result, it might be possible to remove physical distractions or at least to adapt them so that they are less intrusive. Identifying whether visual or auditory distractions are more important for the individual child can also be helpful. Part of this exercise will be to record how strongly each of the distractions takes the attention of the child away from engagement in the teaching process and the length of time the distraction lasts (1). One method of beating distractions is “the distraction zapper.” This is a method of turning unwanted distractions into a game of recording successful attempts to ignore them, i.e. to ignore being led away from priority tasks. The zapper can be constructed as an imaginary laser gun for younger children; a different, age-appropriate device can be constructed for older children but the principle is the same: to blow the distractions away. This can be reinforced by recording how many “hits” the child achieves in the laser-quest game. Teaching this game by role-play with a supervisor can yield the best results but each child is an individual, implying that trial and error will play a part.

Conclusion

Classroom success can be much more difficult to achieve for the child with ADHD. However, if the teacher has a good understanding of the condition and implements some well-tried strategies, the chances of success can be greatly enhanced.

Editor’s note

In our opinion there is a great unmet need with regard to professional training on non-medication interventions for ADHD. For this reason, we are pleased to state that Fintan O’Regan is available to provide training presentations to teachers, GPs and other professionals.

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GP Comment.

What have I learned from this paper?

1. This paper illustrates how some important approaches and strategies to teaching can make a major difference to children with ADHD, both those who are being treated with medication, as will be necessary for severe ADHD, and those who are not being treated with medication, which should be the case for milder ADHD.
2. Understanding that apparent “risk-taking” might not be wilful naughtiness on the part of the child but may be a reflection of his or her difficulty in thinking before acting is of major importance in helping the teacher or carer to adopt the right approach.
3. Some basic strategies can greatly increase the chance of success in the classroom. These include such things as putting the child in the front of the class, where other children cannot easily distract

him or her, giving instructions one at a time, keeping instructions clear and simple, and applying some basic “black-and-white” rules.

4. The teacher who understands ADHD and applies appropriate strategies to overcome the overactivity, inattention and impulsivity is much more likely to achieve success.

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References

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