

## Helping Your AD/HD Student Succeed

By  
Natalie Leyton, MA, MFT

While the struggles and concerns of children with **AD/HD** are varied, the common thread is the issue of the school's role in working with these children. There is a void between the common, cliché information and the accurate, invaluable information regarding the physical, medical, emotional, and behavioral aspects associated with AD/HD.



Most teacher education and support personnel training programs are neither comprehensive nor specific enough to cover AD/HD in order to adequately prepare an educator for all that he/she must know to work successfully with such students. Many educators struggle with the needs of special students due to a lack of special training or information.

### The Program

A pilot program at an elementary school in the Hawthorne Unified School District utilizes a multi-faceted approach of working with AD/HD students, teachers, administration and parents. The first part of the program involves meeting once a week so a student has a chance to discuss issues and his/her feelings. The nature of AD/HD is discussed and the child learns to understand what it is and the various ways in which it affects him academically, behaviorally and socially. Oftentimes, he/she may express the pain of being laughed at, ridiculed and/or ostracized by classmates and even by teachers who don't understand that their actions aren't always an intentional choice that he/she makes.

Additionally, either individually or many times as a group, there is work on [social training skills](#). The students role play situations that for other kids may be no problem, but for them may be quite difficult.

Anger management and alternative behavior to use when they are confronted with situations that bring up feelings of anger, frustration or confusion are taught. Children then have the possibility of understanding their feelings and redirecting behavior that will be more acceptable, productive and keep them safe and out of trouble.

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## The Process

The second part of the program involves providing support for the teachers and staff. It is aimed at helping them learn interventions so that they will feel more successful as they work with their AD/HD students. It is crucial to acknowledge the difficult task teachers face of managing a classroom of 25 students in addition to making special provisions for one or two special needs children. Oftentimes, they really do want to help these students but are extremely frustrated. They use methods that are successful with other kids, but don't realize that these ways won't produce the same results with an AD/HD child. A cycle begins where the teacher feels ineffective and frustrated in his/her efforts to get the AD/HD child to conform. As a result, the child's self-esteem deteriorates, as well as their academic and behavior performance.

The success of the intervention techniques rests, in part, on instituting reward systems along with lots of verbal praise. Each week the teachers prepare for a brief summary of how the AD/HD child did during the week and pinpoint a new goal for the following week.

The general areas targeted are non-compliance, aggressive behavior, anger management, organizational skills, self-management and academics. Individual meetings are held with the student to see how he/she thinks the prior week went.

Through discussion and play therapy the child has a chance to express his/her feelings regarding particular issues that have occurred both at school and home during the prior week. The sessions end with setting a goal for the following week, which is a combination of what was discussed in the therapy session, as well as what the teacher saw as a need to be targeted. The teachers are given a weekly sheet stating the goal for the week and suggestions for intervention techniques that they can use to help the child achieve the goal.

Weekly teacher support groups can be another source of support. Such groups give teachers an opportunity to interact with each other while learning, sharing and commiserating about the difficulties they face. Additional literature and intervention strategies can also be provided. As the teacher feels more successful and less overwhelmed, he/she is more apt to want to stretch and bend to meet the ongoing needs of the child.

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## Parent Involvement

Although teachers have been successful in making changes in the classroom, additional success is achieved through uniting the parents with the school. [Parent education and family therapy](#) is invaluable, as parents must learn to understand and cope with the special needs and difficulties that may arise for both their child and for the family. Parents need to understand how their child's behavior affects others and how they can help their child to foster better interpersonal relationships by teaching behavior that is more socially acceptable.

Developing a plan where the parents, teachers and administrators are all teaching, implementing and rewarding the child in the same manner lessens the possibility of confusion for the child. Through the consistency of learning one system, there exists the potential for greater success for the child. Educators spend a very large part of the day with the students. They potentially may be able to have a very dramatic and successful impact on the AD/HD student, but can't be expected to do it on their own. They need the acknowledgement, support and "hands-on" assistance for the difficult job that is before them.

Although important at all grade levels, the primary grades indeed need to be targeted as the crucial time to assist teachers in learning how to manage AD/HD children. At this point, the child's self-esteem can be fostered or crushed. Here is the time where the child can learn that his way of learning may be different, but that he is still accepted even with his differences. But such goals can only be achieved if the teacher is empowered with the knowledge and the skill to do so. Kids are capable of change, especially when they know that somebody cares, understands their pain, and is willing to accept them not for what they do incorrectly but for who they are and for what they can do. Many AD/HD children are yearning to be successful, and with knowledge and support available to their teachers, they can soar!

## Teacher Interventions

Effective teachers are knowledgeable about AD/HD, accept that it is a disorder and realize that most AD/HD students are capable of learning but do so in a way that isn't necessarily the same as other students. They talk with their student about AD/HD, help the child to understand it

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better and create an environment that reassures him that they will work together as a team. Positive teachers show that they are compassionate and know that some things are quite difficult for the student, while encouraging responsibility on the part of the student and reinforcing the fact that he/she plays a large part in determining his own success.

These teachers forget about their personal determination to get the student to do things their way, knowing that it leads to power struggles. Even if a teacher gets the student to comply to their request, the cost will be the student's loss of self-esteem followed by increased anger, which will result in more behavior difficulties.

Successful teachers also understand that many AD/HD students have low self-esteem and therefore use a great deal of positive reinforcement and interact with the student in a discreet manner to avoid embarrassing him/her. Effective teachers create a calm, safe environment, adopt a policy of flexibility with accommodations, but still maintain a controlled environment with firm rules and boundaries. These teachers find that the situation can improve as they improve their philosophy and approach.

## Non-Compliance

Defined as excessive behaviors or a pattern of not doing what is requested, breaking rules, arguing, making excuses, delaying and doing the opposite of what is requested.

- Be a confidant; Set up times when the student has the opportunity to talk and express feelings about issues bothering him; Work on a plan together for potential success in those areas.
- Use more praise than reprimands at all times.
- For success in behavior management it is important to give feedback quickly (not later in the day), more frequently (known as the "again and again" rule) and take whatever action is needed immediately (versus talking about it).

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- Rewards may be natural, edible and verbal. **Natural:** Student can be first in line, be team captain, choose activity or game for class, help decorate classroom, display student's work, pass papers, run errands, sharpen pencils, sit at teacher's desk, change to another seat, tutor younger student. **Edible:** Find out his favorite foods! **Verbal:** Use constantly both privately and in front of the other students. Always look for something positive that you can say about the student.
- Any reprimands are to be done quickly and directed at the problem, not the student. Student needs to know what to do in order to avoid problems: Have him repeat what he is supposed to do. Tape a list of rules to student's desk as a helpful reminder.
- Give choices whenever possible (builds self-esteem).
- Make an agreement where a structured activity will be followed by a novel one or one that the student is particularly interested in doing.
- Learn to micromanage at all times. AD/HD students need to work on tasks in small increments with constant follow-up by teacher.
- Be proactive all times. Be aware of how much time your student can sit without getting antsy: Have lists of alternatives for him to do as not to disrupt the rest of the class. (Suggestions: drawing, using the computer, puzzles, bring note to office or teacher, arrange, sort, straighten items.) Look for activities that are unique and a physical release.
- Ask student if he would like to use a desk divider or move to a quieter work space. During directed lessons when student needs to remain quiet and still, employ the use of a koosh-ball, silly putty, sand or flour filled balloon, or a string of paper clips that he can play with in his lap to keep him occupied.
- Have lunch with the student and find out what activities he prefers and use as an incentive.

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- For problems with arguing, hand student a "No Arguing Ticket" which means that he must stop talking at that time, but will be given the opportunity later in the day at which time he will have 30 seconds to speak with the teacher about what occurred earlier. It's important that the student know that he will be heard later.
- Be aware of the student's strengths and use those whenever possible to build self-esteem.

## Aggression

Aggression results from anger, anger is the result of the build up of frustration, and frustration for the AD/HD student is what they constantly encounter as they experience an environment that expects them to perform in the same way as the other students.

- To ward off aggression, give energy breaks and the opportunity for focused movement. Decide with student what physical outlets he can employ.
- Use "Angry Passes"(permission to get up and leave situation).
- Empowers student to self-manage, to identify his anger level and to be responsible in de-escalating situations.
- Learn to recognize signs of "anger brewing" in the student and be proactive by diverting student's attention and redirecting it before an explosion occurs.
- Discuss and practice relaxation techniques to employ such as counting to 10, taking deep breaths, self-talking by saying to yourself what you would like to say out loud, taking a physical stance that will communicate feeling, and constantly reminding yourself what the outcome will be for aggressive behavior.
- Teach other students when to be sensitive and when to ignore behavior.

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## Self-Management

Problems with self-management show up more at school because school requires particular behaviors and regulates what a student can do. Successful teachers forget their ideal of what is normal and remember that an AD/HD student needs to be praised and rewarded often.

There is a great deal of power in a few kind words.

- As student success rises, behavior problems fall. Therefore, teachers must design ways in which the child can be successful in taking care of himself.
- Pay attention to good behavior and praise, praise, praise. Make sure that praise is specific to the behavior.
- Students often know what they need to do or would like to work on. Create a plan together with input and feelings from the student. Identify the problem, discuss possible solutions, select a solution(s), decide on the goal behavior and what the reward will be, and draw up a contract.
- Use daily reminders to let him know how he is doing. Let the student decide what he is having a problem with and write up his own goals and contract for the week.
- Tape charts or re-inforcers and refer to them often as a way of keeping the student focused on his weekly goal. (For example: outline directions or a checklist for making sure that assignments are complete). The more the student is successful and recognized positively, the more likely he will be to repeat that behavior.
- Review routines daily. Don't expect the student to remember from one day to the next.
- Make clear "antecedents and consequences," that is, the student needs to know what the result will be for particular behaviors.
- Discuss and make clear by always having student repeat information.

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- Always model (roll-play works well), practice and have student repeat or re-enact directions, rules, etc.
- Be clear as to when student movement and/or talking is permitted and when it's discouraged. Use colors as indicators. Visual reminders are very helpful.
- Use a timer and explain that it will indicate periods of intense independent work and reinforce. Use cue words to teach appropriate time for when movement and activity is allowed. Communicate clearly when the activity will start and end. Encourage student to use a watch or timer in order to be aware of periods of time for directed work or for other types of work.
- Use signals to indicate when changing of activities will take place - flashlights, ring bell, shaker or verbal cues work well. Assign a buddy to help with reminders.
- Build in stretch breaks. Privately discuss student's restlessness and decide together when and what he will do when he begins to feel antsy. (Use "break-time" tickets where student determines when he needs to take a walk, go get a manipulative, do an errand).
- Determine factors that contribute to distractibility and teach (non-embarrassing) cues that will remind the student that he needs to refocus or that behavior is inappropriate (e.g., Tap on the shoulder, teacher touches her ear, teacher taps her fingers on student's desk).
- Use self-monitoring devices which serve the purpose of helping student to know when he is on or off task and takes some responsibility off of the teacher. Self-monitoring can also be used for problems with blurting out and talking out. This can be done with a timer, watch with an alarm, or audiotapes which beep at 2, 4, 5 minute intervals. Child hears sound and records on a chart whether he was on or off task. If he was off task, sound serves as a reminder to redirect himself to task. Student is self-rewarding every time he indicates on check off sheet that he was on task. Teacher can follow up with



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rewards for "on task" work and behavior either while student is doing this and/or at a convenient time soon after.

- For organization, discuss and practice loading and unloading of student's backpack, how to set up a work area at home, what he will need, and how to repack the backpack including all items necessary for the next school day.

## Academics

Crucial to [teaching the AD/HD child](#) is learning to give very clear directions. When giving directions:

- Stand near student.
- Maintain eye contact with student.
- Give directions in a concise and clear manner. Simplify complex directions.
- Give only 1 or 2 directions at a time.
- Write directions and/or have student write them.
- Teach cue words when writing directions as a reminder.
- Have student repeat directions before starting task.
- Encourage student to ask questions when he doesn't understand.
- Teach hand raising gestures as signal between teacher and student as to inform teacher that student is having a problem. For example, an open palm means that student knows the answer and wants the teacher to call on him vs. a closed fist which indicates that he doesn't understand and needs further explanation.

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- Seat a peer helper near the student. Use the strengths of both to help each other.
- Use a checklist of materials needed before beginning work or leaving to go home.
- Reduce the amount of repetition in assigned work and the amount of homework.
- Set up expectations and goals with child for the hour, day, week, etc.
- Encourage student to have a clear desk with only material needed at that time.
- Color-code all materials to help in locating needed materials quickly.
- Above all, always view your student as capable of learning, but in a different way. Be encouraging and treat him in a respectful, positive manner. Change begins with doing something different. The success of your work depends on it.

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