

Behavioral interventions for children with ADHD at home and school



Social Science

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ABSTRACT

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common condition that affects children and adolescents and can continue into adulthood for some. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that 3% to 5% of children have ADHD. Some experts, though, say ADHD may occur in 8% to 10% of school-aged children. Experts also question whether kids really outgrow ADHD. Children with ADHD often act immaturity and have difficulty learning how to control their impulsiveness and hyperactivity. They may have problems forming friendships with other children in the class and may have difficulty thinking through the social consequences of their actions. The purpose of behavioral interventions is to assist students in displaying the behaviors that are most conducive to their own learning and that of classmates. Well-managed classrooms prevent many disciplinary problems and provide an environment that is most favorable for learning. When a teacher's time must be spent interacting with students, whose behaviors are not focused on the lesson being presented, less time is available for assisting other students. Behavioral interventions should be viewed as an opportunity for teaching in the most effective and efficient manner, rather than as an opportunity for punishment.

Bringing up normal children itself is a challenging and strenuous task these days. It is needless to say how challenging it would be to parent a child with ADHD. Parents require special sets of skills to deal with these children. Parents need to undergo training for parenting these children so that dealing with them is beneficial for both parents and children

Research has shown that children with attention deficit disorder (or ADHD) respond very positively to parent training interventions that parents who learn how to treat their ADHD child actually will help the child with ADHD get better and stay better in the long-term. Behavioral interventions for the home are generally simple, easy things any parent can learn to do without even seeing a therapist. They are:

- **Create rules for the home.**

Develop a set of basic, simple and straightforward household rules. No cursing, no running, no screaming. Keep the number manageable and stick to the largest, most problematic behaviors you're encountering in your own home (which may be different than Mr. x's home).

- **Ignore mild inappropriate behaviors and praise appropriate behaviors**

Parents too often get into hopeless and minor scuffles with their children about unimportant things. Focus on the big things and the little things, as they say, will take care of themselves. If your child left out his or her toys again, consider ignoring it once in awhile.

- **Use appropriate directives.**

While young children are not our pets, they often learn best when parents phrase their directions in the form of a simple yet firm and clear directive.

- Obtain the child's attention: say the child's name before your directive
- Use command not question language: please clean up your room before you go outside."
- Be as specific as possible
- Command is brief and appropriate to the child's developmental level — Talk to a 4 year old like a 4 year old and don't try to reason with them, appeal to logic, or expect their minds to work the same as a 14 year old's mind.
- State consequences and follow through: " Rohan please clean up your room before you go to bed or you'll be grounded tomorrow."

- **Keep daily charts**

Both a home daily report card and a school daily report card is vital to making any home behavioral intervention work. Chil-

dren need to see their progress on a day-to-day basis, or else it won't mean anything to them. It also allows them to achieve rewards based upon such progress.

- **Set up contingencies ahead of time**

Everyone works better when they know and understand the expectations ahead of time. If a child always expects to watch TV at a certain time every night, no matter whether their homework is completed or not, then the expectation is that homework completion is not important. If, however, the ADHD child is told "Rohan, no TV until your homework is completed," they know exactly what to expect in order to achieve TV time.

- **Point system with both reward and cost components**

Short-term rewards are usually more effective not completing certain tasks should also result in points being taken away, although positive reinforcement is always a stronger motivation for children than negative reinforcement or punishment.

- **Homework hour**

Homework hour is a good idea, even for children without ADHD, because it sets up a reliable schedule (and expectation) that learning doesn't simply end with school. It carries over into the home life, and provides the child with the expectation that every evening will have at least an hour devoted to that learning. Plus, homework hour also reminds parents to be there for their child, to answer any homework questions they might have, help them out with a difficult math problem, and just generally support their continued academic efforts.

- **Contracting/negotiating with adolescents**

Teens work different than children, and they should be treated differently. As young adults making their way in the world, they have all of your independence with none of the benefits of your experience and wisdom. As such, you should be willing to be more flexible and work with your teen treating them as the young adult they are. This can involve drawing up a kind of contract, which can be done in an email or handwritten.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Effective teachers use a number of behavioral intervention techniques to help students learn how to control their behavior. Perhaps the most important and effective of these is verbal reinforcement of appropriate behavior. The most common form of verbal reinforcement is praise given to a student when he or she begins and completes an activity or exhibits a particular desired behavior. Simple phrases such as "good job" encourage a child to act appropriately.

Effective teachers praise children with ADHD frequently and look for a behavior to praise before, and not after, a child gets

off task. Praise should be specific for the positive behavior displayed by the student: The comments should focus on what the student did right and should include exactly what part(s) of the student's behavior was desirable. Rather than praising a student for not disturbing the class, for example, a teacher should praise him or her for quietly completing a lesson on time.

- **Give praise immediately.**

The sooner the approval is given regarding appropriate behavior, the more likely the student will repeat it.

- **Vary the statements given as praise.**

The comments used by teachers to praise appropriate behavior should vary; when students hear the same praise statement repeated over and over, it may lose its value.

- **Be consistent and sincere with praise.**

Appropriate behavior should receive consistent praise. Consistency among teachers with respect to desired behavior is important in order to avoid confusion on the part of students with ADHD. Similarly, students will notice when teachers give insincere praise, and this insincerity will make praise less effective.

- **Praise rather than on punishment**

It is important to keep in mind that the most effective teachers focus their behavioral intervention strategies on praise rather than on punishment.

Negative consequences may temporarily change behavior, but they rarely change attitudes and may actually increase the frequency and intensity of inappropriate behavior by rewarding misbehaving students with attention. Moreover, punishment may only teach children what not to do; it does not provide children with the skills that they need to do what is expected. Positive reinforcement produces the changes in attitudes that will shape a student's behavior over the long term.

In addition to verbal reinforcement, the following set of generalized behavioral intervention techniques has proven helpful with students with ADHD as well:

- **Selectively ignore inappropriate behavior.**

It is sometimes helpful for teachers to selectively ignore inappropriate behavior. This technique is particularly useful when the behavior is unintentional or unlikely to recur or is intended solely to gain the attention of teachers or classmates without disrupting the classroom or interfering with the learning of others.

- **Remove nuisance items.**

Teachers often find that certain objects (such as rubber bands and toys) distract the attention of students with ADHD in the classroom. The removal of nuisance items is generally most effective after the student has been given the choice of putting it away immediately and then fails to do so.

- **Provide calming manipulatives.**

While some toys and other objects can be distracting for both the students with ADHD and peers in the classroom, some children with ADHD can benefit from having access to objects that can be manipulated quietly. Manipulatives may help children gain some needed sensory input while still attending to the lesson.

- **Allow for "escape valve" outlets.**

Permitting students with ADHD to leave class for a moment, perhaps on an errand (such as returning a book to the library), can be an effective means of settling them down and allowing them to return to the room ready to concentrate.

- **Activity reinforcement.**

Students receive activity reinforcement when they are encouraged to perform a less desirable behavior before a preferred one.

- **Hurdle helping.**

Teachers can offer encouragement, support, and assistance to prevent students from becoming frustrated with an assignment. This help can take many forms, from enlisting a peer for support to supplying additional materials or information.

- **Peer mediation.**

Members of a student's peer group can positively impact the behavior of students with ADHD.

HELPING STUDENTS MANAGE THEIR BEHAVIOR

In some instances, children with ADHD benefit from instruction designed to help students learn how to manage their own behavior:

- **Social skills classes.**

Teach children with ADHD appropriate social skills using a structured class. For example, you can ask the children to role-play and model different solutions to common social problems. It is critical to provide for the generalization of these skills, including structured opportunities for the children to use the social skills that they learn. Offering such classes, or experiences, to the general school population can positively affect the school climate.

- **Problem solving sessions.**

Discuss how to resolve social conflicts. Conduct impromptu discussions with one student or with a small group of students where the conflict arises. In this setting, ask two children who are arguing about a game to discuss how to settle their differences. Encourage the children to resolve their problem by talking to each other in a supervised setting.

- **Behavioral contracts and management plans.**

Identify specific academic or behavioral goals for the child with ADHD, along with behavior that needs to change and strategies for responding to inappropriate behavior. Work with the child to cooperatively identify appropriate goals, such as completing homework assignments on time and obeying safety rules on the school playground. Take the time to ensure that the child agrees that his or her goals are important to master.

- **Tangible rewards.**

Use tangible rewards to reinforce appropriate behavior. These rewards can include stickers, such as "happy faces" or sports team emblems, or privileges, such as extra time on the computer or lunch with the teacher. Children should be involved in the selection of the reward. If children are invested in the reward, they are more likely to work for it.

- **Token economy systems.**

Use token economy systems to motivate a child to achieve a goal identified in a behavioral contract (Barkley, 1990). For example, a child can earn points for each homework assignment completed on time. In some cases, students also lose points for each homework assignment not completed on time. After earning a specified number of points, the student receives a tangible reward, such as extra time on a computer or a "free" period on Friday afternoon. Token economy systems are often used for entire classrooms, as opposed to solely for individual students.

- **Self-management systems.**

Train students to monitor and evaluate their own behavior without constant feedback from the teacher. In a typical self-management system, the teacher identifies behaviors that will be managed by a student and provides a written rating scale that includes the performance criteria for each rating. The teacher and student separately rate student behavior during an activity and compare ratings. The student earns points if the ratings match or are within one point and receives no points if ratings are more than one point apart; points are exchanged for privileges. With time, the teacher involvement is removed, and the student becomes responsible for self-monitoring.

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