



NASET ADHD SERIES

Part # 8 - Classroom Management Techniques for Students With ADHD

Behavioral Interventions

Introduction

A major component of effective instruction for children with ADHD involves the use of behavioral interventions. Exhibiting behavior that resembles that of younger children, children with ADHD often do not act age appropriate 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.

The focus of this issue of *NASET's ADHD Series* is to provide effective behavioral interventions for teachers to use when working with students with ADHD.

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Effective Behavioral Intervention Techniques

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 not just children with ADHD frequently, but ALL children frequently, and look for a behavior to praise before, and not after, a child gets off task. The following strategies provide some guidance regarding the use of praise:

- **Define the appropriate behavior while giving praise.** 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 math lesson on time.
- **Give praise immediately.** The sooner that 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.

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.
- **Parent conferences.** Parents have a critical role in the education of students, and this axiom may be particularly true for those with ADHD. As such, parents must be included as partners in planning for the student’s success. Partnering with parents entails including parental input in behavioral intervention strategies, maintaining frequent communication between parents and teachers, and collaborating in monitoring the student’s progress.
- **Peer mediation.** Members of a student’s peer group can positively impact the behavior of students with ADHD. Many schools now have formalized peer mediation programs, in which students receive training in order to manage disputes involving their classmates.

Effective teachers also use behavioral prompts with their students. These prompts help remind students about expectations for their learning and behavior in the classroom. Three, which may be particularly helpful, are the following:

- **Visual cues.** Establish simple, nonintrusive visual cues to remind the child to remain on task. For example, you can smile at the child while looking him or her in the eye, or you can hold out your hand, palm down, near the child.
- **Proximity control.** When talking to a child, move to where the child is standing or sitting. Your physical proximity to the child will help the child to focus and pay attention to what you are saying.
- **Hand gestures.** Use hand signals to communicate privately with a child with ADHD. For example, ask the child to raise his or her hand every time you ask a question. A closed fist can signal that the child knows the answer; an open palm can signal that he or she does not know the answer. You would call on the child to answer only when he or she makes a fist.

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.

For many children with ADHD, functional behavioral assessments and positive behavioral interventions and supports, including behavioral contracts and management plans, tangible rewards, or token economy systems, are helpful in teaching them how to manage their own behavior. Because students' individual needs are different, it is important for teachers, along with the family and other involved professionals, to evaluate whether these practices are appropriate for their classrooms. Examples of these techniques, along with steps to follow when using them, include the following:

- **Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA).** FBA is a systematic process for describing problem behavior and identifying the environmental factors and surrounding events associated with problem behavior. The team that works closely with the child exhibiting problem behavior (1) observes the behavior and identifies and defines its problematic characteristics, (2) identifies which actions or events precede and follow the behavior, and (3) determines how often the behavior occurs. The results of the FBA should be used to develop an effective and efficient intervention and support plan. (Gable, et al., 1997)
- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).** This method is an application of a behaviorally based systems approach that is grounded in research regarding behavior in the context of the settings in which it occurs. Using this method, schools, families, and communities work to design effective environments to improve behavior. The goal of PBIS is to eliminate problem behavior, to replace it with more appropriate behavior, and to increase a person's skills and opportunities for an enhanced quality of life (Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999).
- **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. Behavioral contracts and management plans are typically used with individual children, as opposed to entire classes, and should be prepared with input from parents.
- **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 (DuPaul & Stoner as cited in Shinn, Walker, & Stoner, 2002).

Behavior Intervention - Examples to Give to Parents

Behavior Intervention for Parents to Use #1- Be an executive

Provide structure, routines, assistive devices, external supports, and guides.

Think of the executive as the boss who creates a work environment in which all the workers know what they have to do to do their jobs appropriately. The boss also provides the necessary structure for them to do so. Performance expectations and company rules are clear. The executive supervises and directs but does not over-manage or micro-manage. Children who have difficulty with planning, thinking, organizing, concentrating, and self-monitoring need to have systems in place to guide and direct them. Parents and teachers need to be the executives in the child's life.

Examples:

- Make your expectations clear. Say, "I expect you to..."
- Try to do things at the same time every day-homework, playtime, recreation, bedtime. Post the schedule on the fridge.
- When making schedule changes, give advance warning as much as possible.
- Have simple systems for organization-where to keep possessions and needed items such as backpacks, gym clothes, pens, and so on.
- Use homework organizers, notebook organizers, day planners, weekly planners, computers, or even laptops-when called for.
- Do backpack cleaning and notebook organization once a week.

Understand that you and your child's teachers will need to provide much more direct supervision than seems necessary for the chronological age. Remember, ADHD is a developmental disability, so these youth usually fall short of age expectations.

Behavior Intervention for Parents to Use #2 -Develop behavior management strategies

Use positive attention, rules and consequences, and formal systems such as contracts and charts.

The main goal of all behavior management strategies is to increase the child's appropriate behavior and decrease inappropriate behavior. The best way to influence any behavior is to pay attention to it. Thus, the best way to increase a desirable behavior is to catch the child being good.

Children with ADHD receive a tremendous amount of negative feedback. Parents and teachers need to learn to give much more positive attention and feedback. That means you have to pick your battles carefully and let a lot of nonessential stuff slide. Otherwise, increased conflict and arguments between you and the child can result.

How do you make the bulk of your interactions positive and yet still provide discipline? Answer-With thought and planning. Effective parents (and teachers) know ahead of time what behavior is acceptable and not acceptable. They know what issues they are willing to negotiate and which ones, like safety, are non-negotiable. In a nutshell: Don't sweat the small stuff, and don't ignore the good stuff no matter how small.

Much of behavior management is about changing what you do. House rules set by the parents (or the classroom rules) need to be carefully designed. First, you want to structure them so that the child will be able to meet the expectations. In other words, you don't wait for a behavior to happen or not happen. You change what happens before the behavior-head it off at the pass, so to speak. For instance, if the child constantly forgets things for school, design a system for where to put things so they get picked up on the way out the door.

Your son or daughter needs to know ahead of time what behavior is expected. He or she also needs to know what the consequences will be for behaving (following the rules) or misbehaving (breaking the rules). Consequences are given as soon as possible. Give far more positive consequences and rewards than punishment. Children who hear too much negative feedback often become oppositional or depressed. Managing behavior thoughtfully, without a lot of reaction, especially undue punishment or criticism, helps to prevent unwanted side effects of poorly managed AD/HD.

Some families need to use formal behavior management systems. These include charts or contracts. The difference between the two is simple.

Generally, contracts are used during early to mid-adolescence. In a contract, the involved parties (usually the parents and child, or teacher and student) talk about certain chores or obligations that the youth will fulfill. They draw up an agreement. The youth receives certain agreed-upon privileges or rewards for meeting the terms of the contract.

Charts are usually used for children ages 11 or younger. A chart lists behaviors that the child must display. Points are given or taken away depending on the child's behavior. Accumulated points may be traded for rewards.

If you decide to make a behavior modification chart, you may wish to follow these three simple steps.

- Make a list of problematic behaviors or ones that need improving.
- Select three to five behaviors from the list. Review the list and, with input from your child, select the behaviors to work on. Pick behaviors that occur on a daily or frequent basis, such as doing homework, going to bed on time, being respectful to all family members, or doing chores.
- Create a reward system. Assign a point value to each listed behavior. Throughout the day, give points for appropriate behavior. At the end of the day or week, your child can "cash in" points for rewards or privileges that have been agreed upon in advance.

In order for rewards to work, they must have value to the child. Since children with ADHD tend to become disinterested in the same thing over time, the rewards usually need to be changed frequently to have value.

About punishment: Children and teens with ADHD respond best to motivation and positive reinforcement. It is best to avoid punishment. When punishment is necessary, use it sparingly and with sensitivity. It is important that you and your child's teachers respond to the inappropriate behavior without anger and in a matter-of-fact way. Your child needs to be taught to replace inappropriate with appropriate behavior.

About time-out: When your child is misbehaving or out of control, time-out can be an effective way to manage the problem. Time-out means that your child is sent for a short period of time to a previously agreed-upon place-usually out of the main hub, like a special chair or area of a room. In general, he or she stays in time-out and must be quiet for three to five minutes. The time-out

place should not be a traumatic place, such as a closet or dark basement. The purpose of time-out is to provide a cooling off place where your child can regain control.

Time-out works best with pre-adolescent kids. You can also use time-out with teens. Usually that means asking your teen to go to his or her room until he or she calms down.

Behavior Intervention for Parents to Use #3- Use problem solving

Develop skills in the art of negotiation, give and take, and conflict resolution through peaceful means.

Problem solving helps take the reaction out of parenting. It is results-oriented. If your child is mature enough, involve him or her in this process. Good problem solving has three parts:

- accurately defining the problem
- coming up with workable solutions
- evaluating results and trying something else, if necessary.

Very often, people spend a lot of time solving the wrong problem. It's important to analyze problem areas. Pay attention to the facts and not the emotions of the situation. Brainstorm to find possible solutions. Put down all ideas that come to mind. Evaluate them. Pick the one that seems most likely to work. Go back to the drawing board if it doesn't. This approach helps to stop conflict from escalating.

For example: Suppose your child argues when you ask him or her to do a chore. While it appears as if arguing is the problem, actually that behavior might be the result of some problem with the request to do chores. Instead of focusing on the arguing, direct your attention to the chore and what that problem is. For instance, do you have a regular chore schedule? Are expectations clear? Does the child understand all the task expectations? Is there a definite time line? To some children, picking up the room means moving a couple of things out of the way.

Once you clearly define the problem, then you can brainstorm for a workable solution. Let's say your child understands all aspects of the chore, but it still doesn't get done without your nagging or threatening. Come up with a plan where the child knows exactly what to do by when. Decide if reminders will be given. Give a reward for on-time chore completion. Give a bonus if the chore is done ahead of time. Penalize the child if the chore is not done on time, but don't nag. Take action. Don't react. Make not doing the chore the child's problem and not yours.

Behavior Intervention for Parents to Use # 4-Use good communication skills

Say what you mean in a firm, loving way. Practice listening without judgment and discussion without attack. Recognize that your child with ADHD has trouble listening. Be brief and to the point.

Screaming, yelling, speaking through clenched teeth, stamping feet, throwing things, finger pointing, and making threats are violent forms of communication. These escalate problems, as do put-downs, sarcasm, lecturing, preaching, and name calling. When we are using good communication skills, we:

- let the speaker finish
- concentrate on what is being said
- show interest
- avoid judgment
- eliminate putdowns
- express our agreement
- use praise

Problem solving and good communication help to eliminate some of the oppositional and hostile encounters that often accompany the disorder of ADHD.