Strategies for Teaching Children with ADHD

Teaching children with ADHD can be challenging at times. It is important to remember that with additional support, children with ADHD can succeed in the classroom. These strategies have been found to successfully improve behavioral and academic functioning of children with ADHD.

General Guidelines

- Children with ADHD require frequent feedback to optimize their performance, especially at the beginning of an intervention.
- Reinforcers should be varied or rotated as needed to maintain child interest in them, and as a result, interest in the intervention. Consider the child’s interests when choosing reinforcers.
- Whenever possible, preferred activities (e.g., choice during free time, access to a classroom computer) rather than tangible items (e.g., stickers, candy) should be used as reinforcers.
- The design and selection of the intervention strategy should be guided by a thorough assessment of the presenting problem. For example, completing a functional assessment can be helpful in identifying the conditions that may be maintaining the problem.
- Continuously monitor the intervention in order to determine the effectiveness and modify intervention components as needed. Other school professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors) may be very helpful with intervention monitoring.
- It is helpful to collaborate with the child’s parents to develop interventions. Consistency across the home and school environments is very important.

Specific Considerations

- Classroom structure: The way that a classroom is physically arranged has important implications for academic engagement and social relationships. The physical environment should promote order, predictability, and structure for all students. For example, when desks are situated in rows rather than in group clusters, students tend to spend more time on task and less time engaging in disruptive behavior.

- Establish clear classroom expectations. All children need rules to establish what constitutes acceptable behavior within a given environment. Rules should be clearly and positively stated to indicate what they should do rather than what they should not do. For example, “Raise your hand when you want to speak” rather than “Do not call out.” Post these expectations where children can see them. In addition, examples and non-examples of these behavioral expectations should be explicitly taught to children.
• Utilize classroom routines. Routines increase predictability and classroom structure which may decrease the likelihood that children will engage in problematic behaviors. Routines during times of transition such as morning arrival, afternoon departure, and moving from one class to the next serve to provide clear direction for students regarding what is expected of them.

• Praise. Providing students with behavior-specific praise has been shown to increase the rate at which children engage in appropriate academic and social behavior. Praise should focus on a specific behavior, particularly behavior consistent with posted classroom rules (e.g., “I like how you raised your hand,” “Thank you for keeping your hands and feet to yourself”).

• Provide Attention Breaks: Contract with students to give them short breaks to engage in a preferred activity each time that they have finished a certain amount of work. For example, a student may be allowed to draw for 2 minutes each time that he has completed five problems on a math worksheet and checked his answers. Attention breaks can refresh the student—and also make the learning task more reinforcing.

• Reduce Length of Assignments: For new material, trim assignments to the minimum length that you judge will ensure student understanding. When having students practice skills or review previously taught material, break that review into a series of short assignments rather than one long assignment to help to sustain interest and engagement.

• Use Advance Organizers: Give students a quick overview of the activities planned for the instructional period or day. This ‘advance organizer’ provides students with a mental schedule of the learning activities, how those activities interrelate, important materials needed for specific activities, and the amount of time set aside for each activity.

• Providing Task-Related Choices: This strategy requires students choosing an activity from two or more concurrently presented options. It is important to note that the options provided should result in similar outcomes. For example, students could choose from a menu of assignments. Alternatively, students could choose among objects or activities, partners for activities, sequencing steps within a task, scheduling activities, where the activity is performed, amount of assistance given, or working conditions.

**Specific Strategies**

• Token Reinforcement and Contingency Contracting: Teachers can provide tokens (e.g., points, poker chips, stickers) on a relatively frequent schedule to students who are meeting behavioral expectations and goals. These tokens can be exchanged for larger rewards (e.g., preferred activities in the classroom) at a later point in the school day. Teachers and parents can work with the student to create a menu of larger rewards and assign point values to the rewards. For example, computer time = 10 points, homework pass = 15 points, and a special reward at home = 20 points. Alternatively, all prizes might be worth the same number of points, but the particular prize each day might be selected from a “treasure box.” Thus, token reinforcement programs allow for immediate feedback while also connecting expected behavior to more salient rewards.
Self-Management: Self-monitoring strategies involve training students to recognize and record whether they have demonstrated the goal behavior during an identified period of time. For example, a student might be taught to recognize and record instances of on-task behavior during independent seatwork. Typically, an auditory or visual cue (e.g., beep from a recording device, a hand signal from the teacher) prompts students to observe their behavior at various times. After recognizing their behavior, students record whether they were on-task on a behavior chart taped to their desks. As students display success with the intervention procedures, the involvement of the educator should be faded. Thus, the behavior of students should eventually be entirely self-managed.

Good Behavior Game: This intervention typically involves dividing the classroom into three teams with boys and girls evenly divided among teams. The teacher then clearly describes what behaviors are considered “good” (e.g., quietly working, actively participating in class activities) and what activities are deemed disruptive (e.g., talking without permission, physical aggression). Teams receive a check mark on a publicly posted chart whenever the team has gone a specified length of time (depending on the age of the students) without any disruptive behaviors. The team with the most check marks at the end of the game period and at the end of the week receives reinforcement (e.g., tokens, access to preferred activities). This strategy is initially implemented for short periods of time (e.g., 20 to 30 minutes) and then gradually extended to cover the entire school day as the students appear to understand and conform to the game rules.

Additional Resources:

Intervention Central (www.interventioncentral.org) – This website provides a great deal of information about classroom behavior management strategies. In addition, progress monitoring tools are available.


Problem Solver Guide for Students with ADHD: Ready-to-Use Interventions for Elementary and Secondary Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder written by H.C. Parker

National Resource Center on Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder website: www.help4adhd.org

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