

The Challenge of Returning the ADHD Child to School

By Ernest J. Bordini, Ph.D., Clinical Psychology Associates of North Central Florida, P.A.
CPANCF.COM Gainesville - Ocala Florida 352-336-2888

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ATTENTION-DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood psychiatric disorders. Media attention and increased awareness among educators have helped to improve the identification of these children. This has also helped to increase the likelihood that they will receive appropriate accommodations. However, each school year presents the parents and the child with new challenges.

Some preparation needs to happen before the child has started the new year. This includes visiting the school if new, acquainting the child with rules and procedures, the schedule, and reviewing the school conduct code. Find out the school policy about medication. Make sure it is not embarrassing to the student.

Has the child's previous testing been for-warded to the school? Have the teachers read it? Beware of teachers who refuse to read the folders since it might prejudice them. A good evaluation provides a map for assistance, and the accommodations may be mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Be assertive in setting the expectation that the teacher will have read this by a certain date, and set a meeting to discuss this with them. The evaluation is only as good as it is current. Young children change rapidly and the curriculum and schedules change every six months to a year. Children with borderline reading, writing, or math difficulties could actually be classified as learning disabled a year or even four years later.

For younger ADHD children, it may be helpful to plan ahead how you will monitor critical areas of conduct and how to track and turn in work. A quick and easy weekly if not a daily rating sheet can be tied into rewards, privilege and consequences at home. Review these with the child a week prior to the beginning of school and again the day before school starts. Follow-up and be consistent.

Do a self-appraisal to determine if you are expecting your child to be more consistent than you are. What do your schedule and demands look like? How will it interact with the child's schedule? Delegate if you fear becoming overwhelmed. Using school or community resources that provide homework assistance can go a long way to reduce parent burnout. Many parents try to do it all themselves with the consequence of great strain and frustration in the parent-child relationship. Ask yourself if your time with the child is balanced between providing instruction and assistance and with spending time recreating with the child. It need not be a one-to-one balance, but you want more than the aggravation of dealing with homework to be remembered by the child as they enter their teenage years.

Planning for return to school involves consulting with the school about seating, class schedules

(put more demanding classes in the morning), and setting paths of communication between the teacher and parents. In middle school the teaching team leader or a designated teacher that can serve as a point-person to track progress with other teachers is often very critical.

Presenting new teachers with information as to previous assessments and what has worked in the past is important. Setting a follow-up meeting once the teachers have had the opportunity to interact with your child is even more critical. Setting priorities and monitoring progress on a regular basis will help identify successes, providing opportunities for much needed praise. This will also help identify problem areas early.

Elementary School children may show one of two patterns at the beginning of children. Some ADHD children become overstimulated by the novelty and chaos of a new classroom, teacher, or school, while for others the novelty raises their level of arousal and they do well until the novelty wears off. Reviewing your child's past patterns help you anticipate when you may need to devote more time in preparing the child or checking in with the teacher to see if the child is sustaining the *Honeymoon period*. Letting teachers know what to expect based on previous experience will help teachers catch problems early.

Middle school children often face difficulties adapting to having multiple classes and multiple projects due at varying times of the week and semester. Attempts to make the child's schedule as predictable as possible can be done. Familiarize the student and yourself with the procedures and school resources that are available for help.

Organization is often the most difficult task facing middle school children. This is even more difficult for ADHD children. It is common for the child who has worked toward success in late elementary school to nosedive upon entering middle school. This is usually due to the increased organizational demands and complexity of multiple classes with different rules and assignments.

Investing energy into establishing structure and organization, and even more importantly reexamining whether the child is persisting with the method once is mastered will pay off in avoiding repeated crises and failure. Lists, reminders, notes, organizational planners, and periodic reorganization are survival basics. Many of the systems and techniques used for busy executives work wonderfully for ADHD children because both have the same problem: Too much to track without help. Organizers also help modulate executives and ADHD children's difficulties in setting realistic expectations of themselves. Looking ahead in the organizer helps determine what what realistically can be added, or may pinpoint the need to set priorities. Organizers are available commercially and there is even one available through the local CHADD Organization.

Some ADHD children have extreme difficulties in planning ahead and organizing what material they will need for school. A heavy-duty backpack is often the solution. Laptop computers are increasingly affordable, with older models often available for as much as a fancy calculator. Even an old word processing program and scheduler can go miles in helping your child with these tasks.

Dr. Halloway, author of *Driven to Distraction*, recommends arranging for a "study buddy" in each subject, with phone number. This will be a resource for study notes or the correct

assignment if they were forgotten or mysteriously confiscated by aliens on your child's way home from school. Obviously, picking on someone who is well organized and takes good notes is important.

If your ADHD child is starting middle school ask to schedule a meeting among all the child's teachers, the counselors, the special education coordinator, the vice-principal, and the principal, etc. Changing schools is a significant change in placement that warrants a review of the child's accommodations and educational plan. This may also create an opportunity to request further assessment if the past assessment was outdated and the last year was problematic.

An important recommendation conveyed to me by one of the frequent contributors to the CHADD website (www.chadd.org) is to try to understand your child's feelings. Walk in his shoes. Appreciate his struggle. Help her understand what her unique gifts and natural limits are. Help them see themselves as the special people they are. Find "*Islands of Competence*". These are areas your child has interests and aptitudes in. Feed and reinforce the *Islands*.

Don't neglect the importance of social acceptance and development of a sense of interpersonal competence for the middle school ADHD child. Research indicates that difficulties with social skills are among the most persistent of ADHD problems. Provide opportunities for positive interactions in setting which do not stress performance. Community and professional resources are available for more intense assistance in this critical area for self-esteem.

Attend school meetings, and school board meetings. Join CHADD, a national nonprofit organization devoted to assisting and educating ADHD Children and Adults. Attend local meetings and volunteer for your support group. There is strength in numbers. You are not alone, although it sometimes feels that way.

Check our Calender Page for local CHADD meetings. Also check CHADD.ORG for your local chapter and membership information.

See the CPANCF.COM website Articles and Archives Section for Dr. Bordini and Clifton's "12 Tips" for getting your ADHD child ready to return to school.