

Nonpharmacologic strategies for helping children with ADHD

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Disclosures

The authors report no financial relationships with any company whose products are mentioned in this article or with manufacturers of competing products.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affects 5% of children and adolescents worldwide.¹ Children with ADHD commonly have trouble with attention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, organization, and emotional reactivity, and these difficulties can result in behaviors that frustrate, worry, and overwhelm parents, teachers, and other caregivers.

Extensive evidence supports stimulants as a first-line treatment. However, nonpharmacologic interventions are important, yet often overlooked, adjuncts that can be helpful for children who have a partial response to stimulants or are not prescribed medication. Teaching caregivers to use the following interventions will allow them to help children better navigate situations that require managing their symptoms, such as in a classroom setting.²

Attention. Children with ADHD typically find it challenging to prioritize what to focus on, sustain that focus, and switch between tasks. Shouting instructions often is unproductive. Therefore, encourage parents and teachers to use clear and concise instructions with supplementary visual tools to aid these children. When providing instructions in classrooms, teachers should look directly at the student and call him (her) by name. It also can be helpful to have the student repeat the instructions. Seating students with ADHD near the front of the classroom, close to the teacher and away from other distracting students, can improve their focus and allow the teacher to more easily give nonverbal cues, such as tapping on the student's desk if his attention is waning.

Hyperactivity. Children with ADHD are prone to excessive talkativeness and continuous motor movement; therefore, sitting still for long periods can be exceptionally difficult. Teachers and caregivers should keep assignments short. For students whose primary manifestation of ADHD is hyperactivity, sitting near the back of the classroom will allow them to stand and stretch without disrupting the class. Occasionally giving these students a time-limited, acceptable outlet for their urge to move may be beneficial.

Impulsivity. Children who exhibit this symptom are more focused on the present and have difficulty weighing the consequences of their actions. Allowing these children to take frequent breaks (eg, more play time) will let their brains rest and recharge so that they can take a step back to evaluate the outcomes of their actions. Instruct parents and teachers to give children with ADHD regular verbal or written feedback to monitor and modify behaviors over time. Consequences for not following the rules should be immediate and consistent.

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Organization. School assignments require sequencing, planning, and time management. Therefore, having daily visual reminders of prioritized assignments and schedules is helpful for children with ADHD, both at school and at home. Teachers and parents can help children stay organized by checking and reviewing the child's agenda with him several times a day; this will allow him more time to think about what he needs to do to complete assignments.

Emotional reactivity. Children with ADHD become frustrated easily and often are particularly sensitive to disappointment because of the continuous redirection they receive. Normalizing their mistakes by reinforcing

that everyone makes mistakes and teaching them to learn from their mistakes can help reduce their embarrassment.

It also can be helpful to identify triggers for emotional reactivity. Parents and teachers should minimize the amount of talking when a child is unable to control his emotions. Helping children label their emotions, developing strategies for when they become upset, and outlining clear consequences for unacceptable behaviors can help modify their reactions.

References

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