

Teaching Students with ADHD

Helping Students with Attention Deficit Disorder Succeed at School



If you're a teacher, you know these kids: The one who stares out the window, substituting the arc of a bird in flight for her math lesson. The one who wouldn't be able to keep his rear end in the chair if you used Krazy Glue. The one who answers the question, "Who can tell me what the 6th Amendment guarantees?" with "Mrs. M, do you dye your hair?"

Students who exhibit ADHD's hallmark symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity can be frustrating. You know the brainpower is there, but they just can't seem to focus on the material you're working hard to deliver. Plus, their behaviors take time away from instruction and disrupt the whole class.

ADHD and classroom challenges

Think of what the school setting requires children to do: Sit still. Listen quietly. Pay attention. Follow instructions. Concentrate. These are the very things kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD) have a hard time doing—not because they aren't willing, but because their brains won't let them. That doesn't make teaching them any easier, of course.

Students with ADHD pay the price for their problems in low grades, scolding and punishment, teasing from peers, and low self-esteem. Meanwhile, you, the teacher, wind up taking complaints from parents who feel their kids are being cheated of your instruction and feeling guilty because you can't reach the child with ADHD.

Students with ADHD:

- Demand attention by talking out of turn or moving around the room.
- Have trouble following instructions, especially when they're presented in a list, and with operations that require ordered steps, such as long division or solving equations.
- Often forget to write down homework assignments, do them, or bring completed work to school.
- Often lack fine motor control, which makes note-taking difficult and handwriting a trial to read.
- Usually have problems with long-term projects where there is no direct supervision.
- Don't pull their weight during group work and may even keep a group from accomplishing its task.

What teachers can do to help children with ADHD

So how do you teach a kid who won't settle down and listen? The answer: with a lot of patience, creativity, and consistency. As a teacher, your role is to evaluate each child's individual needs and strengths. Then you can develop strategies that will help students with ADHD focus, stay on task, and learn to their full capabilities.

Successful programs for children with ADHD integrate the following three components:

1. **Accommodations:** what you can do to make learning easier for students with ADHD.
2. **Instruction:** the methods you use in teaching.
3. **Intervention:** How you head off behaviors that disrupt concentration or distract other students.

Your most effective tool, however, in helping a student with ADHD is a positive attitude. Make the student your partner by saying, "Let's figure out ways together to help you get your work done." Assure the student that you'll be looking for good behavior and quality work and when you see it, reinforce it with immediate and sincere praise. Finally, look for ways to motivate a student with ADHD by offering rewards on a point or token system.

Dealing with disruptive classroom behavior

To head off behavior that takes time from other students, work out a couple of warning signals with the student who has ADHD. This can be a hand signal, an unobtrusive shoulder squeeze, or a sticky note on the student's desk. If you have to discuss the student's behavior, do so in private. And try to ignore mildly inappropriate behavior if it's unintentional and isn't distracting other students or disrupting the lesson.

Classroom accommodations for students with ADHD



As a teacher, you can make changes in the classroom to help minimize the distractions and disruptions of ADHD.

Seating

- Seat the student with ADHD away from windows and away from the door.
- Put the student with ADHD right in front of your desk unless that would be a distraction for the student.
- Seats in rows, with focus on the teacher, usually work better than having students seated around tables or facing one another in other arrangements.
- Create a quiet area free of distractions for test-taking and quiet study.

Information delivery

- Give instructions one at a time and repeat as necessary.
- If possible, work on the most difficult material early in the day.
- Use visuals: charts, pictures, color coding.
- Create outlines for note-taking that organize the information as you deliver it.

Student work

- Create worksheets and tests with fewer items, give frequent short quizzes rather than long tests, and reduce the number of timed tests.
- Test students with ADHD in the way they do best, such as orally or filling in blanks.
- Divide long-term projects into segments and assign a completion goal for each segment.
- Accept late work and give partial credit for partial work.

Organization

- Have the student keep a master binder with a separate section for each subject, and

make sure everything that goes into the notebook is put in the correct section. Color-code materials for each subject.

- Provide a three-pocket notebook insert for homework assignments, completed homework, and “mail” to parents (permission slips, PTA flyers).
- Make sure the student has a system for writing down assignments and important dates and uses it.
- Allow time for the student to organize materials and assignments for home. Post steps for getting ready to go home.

Teaching techniques for students with ADHD

Teaching techniques that help students with ADHD focus and maintain their concentration on your lesson and their work can be beneficial to the entire class.

Starting a lesson

- Signal the start of a lesson with an aural cue, such as an egg timer, a cowbell or a horn. (You can use subsequent cues to show how much time remains in a lesson.)
- Establish eye contact with any student who has ADHD.
- List the activities of the lesson on the board.
- In opening the lesson, tell students what they’re going to learn and what your expectations are. Tell students exactly what materials they’ll need.

Conducting the lesson

- Keep instructions simple and structured. Use props, charts, and other visual aids.
- Vary the pace and include different kinds of activities. Many students with ADHD do well with competitive games or other activities that are rapid and intense.
- Have an unobtrusive cue set up with the student who has ADHD, such as a touch on the shoulder or placing a sticky note on the student’s desk, to remind the student to stay on task.
- Allow a student with ADHD frequent breaks and let him or her squeeze a rubber ball or tap something that doesn’t make noise as a physical outlet.
- Try not to ask a student with ADHD perform a task or answer a question publicly that might be too difficult.

Ending the lesson

- Summarize key points.
- If you give an assignment, have three different students repeat it, then have the class say it in unison, and put it on the board.
- Be specific about what to take home.

Recommended reading

[Teaching Students with ADHD: A Resource Guide for Teachers](#) - Covers every aspect of ADHD that can affect the classroom. (British Columbia Ministry of Education)

[Teaching Children with ADHD: Instructional Strategies and Practices](#) - Tips and teaching strategies. (U.S. Department of Education)

Authors: Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Melinda Smith, M.A. Last updated: May 2019.