

## Everyday Strategies for Surviving and Managing ADHD

J. Matthew Orr, PhD, LMFT

Parents of children with ADHD will find that the following strategies can stand on their own or compliment common specific behavior management approaches they may be using. The intent of these strategies is to help promote a sense of “survival” and success for both you and your child as you compete with the everyday demands of home and school. It is expected that you will need to adapt these strategies to fit the needs, abilities, and resources, of your child and family and that they are not one size fits all. The idea is that these types of strategies are ones that your child will learn, through repetition of experience over time, to apply him/herself when he/she is able and ready.

- 1. *Modify your Expectations.*** It seems to make for a higher quality of life when parents are able to accept that having ADHD means their child will do well in some situations but not others and are able to adjust their expectations accordingly. For example, if you find yourself saying, “My child cannot go to the grocery store without asking for something,” you are probably right in that she cannot do that yet. If this makes for a miserable experience consider doing the shopping without your child when time and your energy are of the essence until she develops the ability over time to go into the store without disrupting the trip or can respond well enough to redirection.
- 2. *Identify Success.*** Identify in what situations and under what circumstances your child does well and give yourself permission to let him do more of it. For example, if one of the primary issues is related to homework completion ask yourself, “Under what circumstances does my child seem to complete his homework the best?” The answer may be that he is most successful doing homework laying on his belly with his work spread out in front of him on the floor, or standing at the table, or sitting on the front porch, or having someone sitting with him at the table. Now determine what would make it possible to do more of this “skill,” which he has learned helps him be able to adapt to the demands of the situation.

**3. Get Moving.** Physical activity (namely proprioceptive sensory stimulation or stimulation of the muscles, tendons, and joints) can calm an anxious brain or arouse a bored brain. Be sure your child is getting enough playtime during or after school. You will be the best judge of what is “enough” based on what is overstimulating and understimulating to him, but a good guideline is 20 minutes of “recess” every couple of hours throughout the day. Some children will not get this much at school, which makes it even more important to give this to the child afterschool and before homework. If your child is in an afterschool program be sure to find out how much and what type of activity he is getting. Twenty minutes of arguing with other children about who is going to play basketball does not count; the child should actually be playing basketball. Rather than thinking of recess or playtime as a means of getting energy out, think of it as getting stimulation in; the ADHD brain craves stimulation. If you are not convinced of the power of play and physical movement, think back to the last time you were bored or frustrated, perhaps while you were waiting for this appointment. What parts of your body did you move to manage the wait?

*Some examples:*

- Games with running, jumping, bouncing, etc.
- Play wrestling, jumping jacks, pushing and pulling activities
- Pull-ups, playing on the monkey bars, climbing

Keep in mind also that research suggests that physical activity *outdoors* among nature is more effective than it is in indoors.

**4. Fidget to Focus.** Instead of discouraging fidgeting, encourage it. While vigorous physical activity may result in more obvious shifts in behavior and attention, allowing children opportunities to fidget or squirm while they are working can help them sustain their attention better during mundane tasks. Children with ADHD often stand at their desk, sit on their feet, or wiggle in their seat in an attempt to regulate the sensations of boredom and the subsequent reaction of the brain to stimulate movement. This can be thought of as an adaptive skill that allows them to complete their work, however, many parents and teachers view this behavior as disruptive and discourage it. Putting a wobble or balance cushion (found in any sporting goods store with the fitness equipment) underneath the child for him to sit on while he is working promotes wiggling in his seat and provides stimulation up through his legs and bottom. Fidget toys, such as gel-filled squeeze balls, magnetic toys, and even chewing gum (for children who constantly chew on pens and pencils) can help the child maintain self-control and focus enough to survive and complete tasks that are not motivating or stimulating. Of course, each of these items or activities can serve as distractions for some children, so it is important to introduce items from the least to most obvious and see what you notice before you add anything else. For example, introduce a wobble cushion for him to sit on, then move on to items that the child can hold in one hand and write with the other such as a squeeze ball, and then move on to items that are a little more involved, such as magnetic toys or sitting on an exercise ball while reading.

- 5. Apply the “Breaks” and Chunk It.** Schedule and/or allow for your child to take breaks during homework or chores. These breaks may consist of activities listed above or activities such as going to the mailbox, sitting outside, or having a conversation with someone. It can also be useful to pair breaks with “chunking” the homework or chore assignments. That is, break the task up into manageable chunks that begin and end with a break. For example, “First, we are going to do your math and then you will get 10 minutes to shoot the basketball, and then you will do your vocabulary words. After that you will work on your project for 20 minutes and then you can go back outside.” Some parents find it is easier to put the easier tasks first so that a sense of completion is realized by the child sooner and acts as a motivator to get the rest of the work done. It is common for parents to fear the length of time these methods will seem to add to getting homework done, but most parents realize that the goal is to get the homework and chores done and utilizing *chunks* and *breaks* can actually shorten the length of time and the quality of time spent doing these tasks overall. It may take some time to determine the right length of break and the type of activity done during the break.
- 6. Background sound.** Another concentration aid that helps some children with ADHD is to have a constant sound in the background while they are trying to do homework or some other task that requires them to sustain attention. Some examples include, a running box fan, bathroom fan, white noise machine (found in the Baby section of many stores and online retailers), and music. Of course, as with each intervention, parents must determine which approach and intensity works best to stimulate attention without over-stimulating and exciting the child.

#### References:

- Faber Taylor, A. & Kuo, F.E. (2009). "Children with attention deficits concentrate better after walk in the park." *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 12, 402-409.
- Katz, D. L., Cushman, D., Reynolds, J., Njike, V., Treu, J. A., Walker, J., Smith, E., Katz, C. Putting physical activity where it fits in the school day: Preliminary results of the ABC (Activity Bursts in the Classroom) for fitness program. *Prev Chronic Dis*, 7:A82. Epub 2010 Jun 15.
- Kiluk, B. D., Weden, S., Culotta, V. P. (2009). Sport participation and anxiety in children with ADHD. *J Atten Disord*, 12:499-506. Epub 2008 Jul 2.
- Pellegrini, A.D. & Bohn, C. (2005, January/February). The roles of recess in children's cognitive performance and school adjustment. *Educational Researcher*, 34, 13-19.
- Whalen, C. K., Henker, B., Jamner, L. D., Ishikawa, S. S., Floro, J. N., Swindle R., Perwien, A. R., Johnston, J. A. (2006). Toward mapping daily challenges of living with ADHD: maternal and child perspectives using electronic diaries. *J Abnorm Child Psychol*, 34:115-30. Epub 2006 Feb 4.