

Psych Savvy

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Diane Poage,
Director

Joan Bohmann, Ph.D. NCSP
Editor

First Steps for Dealing with Attention Problems in the Classroom

Chris Tower Zafren, NCSP, School Psychologist
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Every year teachers will have students whose difficulties paying attention, completing work, staying organized and maintaining self control negatively impact their school progress. Attention problems exist on a continuum from mild to severe and can have a variety of causes (e.g. ADHD, depression, anxiety, learning disabilities, epilepsy, acculturation/language acquisition issues, hearing problems, autism, traumatic experiences and health problems). Some students may have significant attention problems that warrant medical diagnosis and treatment for Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. However, students with mild problems often can meet schoolwork and behavior expectations with support from teachers and parents and instructional or environmental modifications. Teachers can gain a better understanding of the nature of the student's attention problems by following the steps outlined below. Teachers should not diagnose ADHD, pressure parents to seek medical intervention or give testimonials about the efficacy of medication for attention problems. If attention problems are significant and unresponsive to interventions, an attention evaluation by the school's Special Education team should be considered prior to obtaining a medical evaluation. Physicians need clear and comprehensive information from the school in order to make an appropriate diagnosis. The decision about treatment options for ADHD is a matter between the parent and the physician. If a student has a diagnosis of ADHD, she/he may be eligible for Special Education assistance or educational accommodations under Section 504. To qualify for assistance, a physician must confirm the ADHD diagnosis and the behaviors associated with ADHD must result in **significant** academic and adjustment problems in school. A school-based evaluation would be necessary to document these needs. Many students who have been diagnosed with and treated for ADHD are able to perform adequately in school without special education or accommodations.

Step One: Research the problem

Observe the student in a variety of settings – when do attention problems happen (subject, time of day); what behaviors are occurring, how often, etc.

- Check the cumulative record for patterns of similar behavior in prior years, test/benchmark performance, report card marks
- Talk with previous and support teachers to learn what they observe
- Perform academic assessments in reading, writing, math and spelling to get baseline information on the student's skills

Step Two: Whole class interventions to increase attention and work completion

- Teach listening and attending skills – provide feedback to students, require students to stop and look at you when you are giving instructions
- Require the use of organization aides (e.g. folders, assignment sheets, baskets for completed work, charts to show completed work/steps for projects)
- Create consistent routines for transitions, homework, and daily schedule
- Communicate with parents about homework/project expectations
- Institute weekly desk cleaning
- Track work completion and require that missed work be completed
- Train the class to work quietly - most students perform better in quieter classrooms
- Increase the power of your instruction – students with attention problems usually perform better when instruction is presented in a novel way, is activity-based, requires frequent responding (e.g. direct instruction), connects to prior learning, and involves visuals and demonstrations.
- Increase motivation – help students to see their progress and celebrate their accomplishments.
- Provide reinforcement for reaching goals (e.g. popcorn parties, fun Friday, extra recess, etc.)

Step Three: Individual interventions

- Enlist parent support - share your concerns with parents, detail the behaviors you are seeing, interventions you want to implement, and support you need from home. Explain how the parents can help in monitoring homework and reinforcing behavior feedback from the teacher.
- Reduce distractions – provide preferential seating near the source of instruction and away from distractions, access to study carrels, or a separate supply box for the student who fiddles with desk materials excessively.
- Increase supervision – increase proximity monitoring, progress checks, and requiring a certain amount of work to be done before lunch or recess.
- Try self-monitoring of attention – have the student (or class) rate his/her attention to task when you give a cue (a kitchen timer can be set for varying amounts of time). The monitoring can be done on an index card taped to the student's desk. Compare your rating with the student's.
- Give behavioral feedback to parents – use a daily behavior card to give the parents information about the student's attention, self-control, listening, etc. Reinforcement for satisfactory ratings can be given at home.
- Provide ways for the student to take brief breaks to re-energize.
- Reduce written output demands – permit typed work, printing, scribing.

Step Four: Seek support from your school team (if you are still concerned after rigorous and consistent interventions for one month to one quarter)

- Contact the parent to review the interventions you have tried and their results. Inform them that you will be working with the school team to get additional ideas on how to help their child.
- Request support from your school intervention team – be specific about the behaviors that concern you. The team will need information on the student's academic progress since initial assessments, and the results of the interventions you have tried. Before and after work samples, comparisons with other student's work, progress reports, the report card and the cumulative file should be brought to the team meeting. The school team may suggest additional interventions or decide to conduct an assessment to document the severity of the

attention problems and to rule out learning disabilities. Because there is no specific medical test for ADHD, it is important to rule-out other possible environmental, emotional and physical causes for attention problems. Since physicians rarely see direct manifestations of attention problems in the office setting, it is important that they get a clear picture of the child's school functioning from the school. A school based attention evaluation is the best way to provide this information to the physician.

For additional assistance/information:

- Your school psychologist
- The ADHD Parent Support Group meets twice monthly at the Special Education Parent Resource Center. SEPRC also has an extensive library of books and materials about ADHD. For information contact SEPRC at 742-3872.
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (ChADD) <http://www.add.org>
- *Driven to Distraction* by Hallowell & Ratey. Simon & Schuster. New York, 1995