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Creating Supportive Classroom Environments

“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look into the reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like lettuce.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh 1991, p. 78

Students with AD/HD need supportive learning environments to succeed in school. Often, students have the knowledge and skills to meet curriculum demands, but their difficulties with attention, impulsivity, activity level, organizing and planning prevent them from performing consistently.

The suggestions provided in this chapter work in conjunction with the strategies offered in other chapters. The needs of students with AD/HD vary widely. No single student will need all of these strategies and supports.

MYTH

AD/HD results from ineffective teaching and/or poor parenting.

FACT

AD/HD is primarily biological and genetic in its origins. It is not caused by external influences. However, environmental factors can minimize or intensify the difficulties experienced by an individual with AD/HD.

Many of the strategies and supports suggested in this chapter will also benefit other students in the classroom, not only students with diagnosed attention difficulties.

Teacher attitude

The key to a supportive classroom environment is a teacher who is willing to establish a caring relationship with each student, learn about a student's individual needs and strengths, and provide the support and encouragement each student needs to be a successful learner. Students with AD/HD will benefit from teachers who are highly organized, plan for challenges ahead, and establish predictable and effective classroom routines. Because students with AD/HD often have difficulty remaining motivated and focused, they need teachers who are enthusiastic and who actively engage students in the learning process. They also need teachers who are flexible and willing to try new ways to teach and assess. Along with flexibility, these students need teachers with high expectations who believe that all students are capable of learning and doing well.

Dr. Ross Greene cites these additional characteristics of teachers as likely indicators of positive learning outcomes for students with AD/HD:¹¹

- responsiveness
- warmth
- patience
- humour
- positive attitude toward inclusion
- knowledge of and willingness to work with students with exceptional needs
- knowledge of different types of effective interventions
- willingness to work collaboratively with other teachers (e.g., sharing information, requesting assistance as needed, participating in conferences involving students).

11. Cited in Fowler 1992.

Teachers with these traits provide a positive role model for all students and show how to understand and accept students with AD/HD. Teachers play a key role in helping students with AD/HD have a positive school experience.

Organize for success

There are a number of proactive strategies teachers can consider when setting up the physical environment of the classroom to reduce distractions and facilitate supervision.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Organize the physical environment to reduce distractions

- Seat student with AD/HD near teacher's desk or in the area of the class where the teacher spends most of the time.
- Surround the student with other students who are good role models.
- Avoid distracting stimuli. Try not to place the student near air conditioners, heaters, high traffic areas, doors, windows or pencil sharpeners.
- Provide a stimuli-reduced study area accessible to all students. For example, set up an "office area" using a study carrel or a cardboard screen to provide students with a quiet place for uninterrupted work time. This office area should only be used for specific tasks at specific times or when the student chooses. It should not be viewed as a time-out or a punitive strategy.
- It is sometimes helpful for students to listen to music on a headset to screen out other distractions.

■ Organize materials so they are easy to identify and easy to store

- Ensure students have their names prominently displayed on all personal supplies.
- Organize desks or lockers with labels and designated places for certain items.
- Establish a regular time for all students to clean and organize their desks and lockers. For the student with AD/HD, provide a “map” or picture of how the desk or locker should look when it is organized.
- Encourage students to use folders and binders with different colours or labels with pictures to separate subject work or materials for each class.
- Encourage use of pocket folders organized with new work on one side and graded work and class notes on the other side.
- Before leaving one place for another, students use the routine of self-questioning: “Do I have everything I need?”
- Be willing to supply extra copies of misplaced handouts or materials.

■ Establish routines for writing down and turning in homework

- Provide several reference points for students to check for details on homework. For example, use the same area of the whiteboard to list assignments, write all homework due dates on a class calendar, post homework assignments on the school Web site and record homework assignments in a class assignment book that students can check.
- Establish consistent routines for turning in assignments and homework. For example, use clearly labelled collection bins and always require homework to be handed in at the start of class. Establish routines for due dates by always assigning homework on a Monday with a due date on a Thursday.

Take a proactive approach to behaviour

All students, but especially students with AD/HD, benefit from clearly established classroom rules, behavioural expectations and routines. Ongoing use of monitoring strategies will ensure these expectations and routines are in place and reinforced.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Establish three to five basic classroom rules

- State rules in positive terms in student-friendly language. Post them and refer to them frequently. For example:

In our classroom, all students will:

- be ready to learn
 - treat others with kindness
 - keep hands and feet to themselves
 - make safe choices.
- Discuss what it “looks like” to follow the rules.
 - Provide opportunities for students to role-play positive responses to the rules to help them better understand the expectations.

■ Use monitoring strategies to minimize opportunities for off-task or disruptive behaviour

- Move around the classroom during instructional sessions and quiet work periods.
- Talk to individuals and groups of students to build rapport. Use personal contact to expand understanding of new concepts and skills.
- Provide immediate, specific feedback on positive behaviours.
- Establish eye contact with students with AD/HD prior to giving instructions to the class.

- Move close to the student when verbal reminders are necessary. Use a quiet, firm voice to specifically describe the behaviour that is required.
- Remove nuisance items. Certain objects (such as rubber bands and noisy toys) can divert the attention of students with AD/HD in the classroom. When these items are interfering with learning, make one request to put them away immediately. If the student does not do this, follow up by taking the item away from the student, placing it in a labelled envelope and returning it to the student to take home at the end of the day.

Give positive feedback

Use specific language to describe positive behaviour demonstrated by students. Also take time to describe specific behaviours that need to be increased. Ensure that you are maintaining a 4:1 ratio: *give at least four positive comments to every one negative comment.*

Be aware of how you are using a student's name throughout the school day. If particular students require constant verbal reminders (particularly if they are delivered in a frustrated or impatient tone of voice), these students may develop negative associations with their names. These feelings may ultimately begin to erode their self-confidence and comfort level in the classroom.

Structure transition times

Many students with AD/HD have difficulty making transitions from one activity to the next. They may have difficulty remembering the routine and what to do next or they may have difficulty with impulse control during these less structured times.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Develop routines for transitions between activities

- Alert students to changes in routines that will be coming up. Build a preview of the day into the regular classroom routine so that students are aware of any changes and can mentally prepare for them.

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- Use auditory cues, such as bells or egg timers, to provide cues that signal when to take a break or return to work.
- Embed cues in the instructional routine to indicate when there is a shift in activity. For example, when speaking to the class, stop and indicate information that students should write down.
- Some transition times normally involve noise and movement, and may throw some students off task or create too much stimulation for that student. Consider sending a student who may be distracted to do an errand outside the classroom until the transition is complete and the groups are on task.
- Work with individual students to establish specific parameters for common transitions. For example:
 - how they will walk (quietly and at what pace)
 - with whom (by themselves or with an assigned partner, in the middle of the line or at the end of the line)
 - where (on right side of the hall).

Students can practise this routine ahead of time. With consistent and friendly reminders from teachers, this routine can make transitions between activities smoother and incident-free for everyone.

- Provide additional support during transitions to individual students as required. For example, when moving from one location to another, give students a purpose to help them focus on something positive while moving. For example, ask a student to carry the teacher's clipboard to the gym or library books to the library.
- Review the expectations for behaviour when there is a special presentation or guest speaker. Large gatherings and performances can be difficult for students with AD/HD.

Use low-key cues

Collaborate with individual students to identify a cue that indicates that a specific behaviour is interfering with learning. Cues should be unobtrusive and simple, such as a hand on the desk or on the shoulder. This works for minor behaviours, such as interrupting or talking off topic. A simple unobtrusive gesture can remind the student to get back to task without singling him or her out.

Some students will need explicit instruction using these low-key cues. This cueing should be presented as a friendly reminder, not a reprimand, and delivered in a low-key, positive manner.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Establish low-key cueing systems

- Post reminders on students' desks. When possible, encourage students to design and make reminder cards. When needed, simply walk by and point to the reminder. This works for such skills as:
 - asking politely for help
 - focusing on work
 - taking turns.
- Use coloured file cards with key messages, such as “Talk in a low voice” or “Keep working.” If students need reminders, lay the cards on their desks, without comment. After five minutes, if behaviour has improved, quietly remove the card. If the behaviour continues, add a second card.
- Signals can also be used by a student to let the teacher know that he or she needs assistance or clarification of directions. In upper grades, consider using coloured cards (one or two per subject time block) that students can display on their desks to indicate that they need assistance from a teacher or a peer helper.

Use a problem-solving approach

Engage students in a problem-solving process to increase their understanding of their behaviour and their responsibility for finding appropriate solutions. Consider the following six-step strategy.

Problem Solving

1. Define the problem. Provide descriptive feedback about the student's academic or social behaviour to increase his or her awareness of what he or she is doing and the impact it has on others.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions. The student may need assistance in coming up with ideas.
3. Evaluate the options. Assist the student to think about the possible outcomes or consequences of each option.
4. Select an option and make a plan.
5. Carry out the plan.
6. Evaluate the outcome. Was it successful? If not, why not? What else could be done? If yes, congratulate and celebrate!

Help students manage impulsivity

Waiting for help from the teacher can also be challenging for some students with AD/HD and can lead to some impulsive behaviour. Many students with AD/HD also need help channelling excessive physical energy into more acceptable behaviours.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Teach strategies for what to do while waiting for help

- Encourage students to continue with easier parts of tasks while waiting for help. For example, they could underline, highlight or rephrase directions before beginning a task.
- Teach strategies for jotting down keywords or questions so students won't forget what they want to say as they wait for their turn. Sticky notes can be great tools for marking the spot in a book or writing down keywords.

- Give students substitute verbal or motor responses to make while waiting. For example, students may sing a song or say a poem quietly to themselves or use worry beads.
- Reward short intervals of waiting and gradually increase the length of the waiting period.

■ Create opportunities for movement

- Use active responses as part of instructional activities. For example, students may turn and talk with a partner, stand up to indicate agreement, or move to different parts of the room to use materials. Allow students to work at different stations such as at a large table, the board, an easel or chart paper on a wall.
- Look for nondistracting ways for students to move while working at their desks. For example, replace a student's chair with a large ball. Students may bounce gently at their desks while working. Small inflatable cushions also provide students with an opportunity to move in their seats without distracting others. Some students may find it helpful to stand while working at their desks. Others may work better sitting at a counter or on a stool.
- Provide individual students with fidget toys (e.g., squeeze ball, eraser, wooden beads) to keep in their pockets and use quietly as needed.
- Provide stretch or movement breaks as needed or make them part of the classroom routine. Arrange an area in the classroom where students can move around without distracting others. Give students the option of going to this area when they need a stretch break.
- Space permitting, provide two seats for the student and allow the student to change locations throughout the school day.
- Create opportunities for students to do regular errands in the classroom, such as passing out papers or putting materials away, so they have opportunities to move in the classroom in appropriate, helpful ways.
- If an individual student often needs a break throughout the school day, consider setting up a system whereby students can use printed cards to signal when they need a break from a classroom activity to go to a supervised prearranged area. This strategy requires teamwork and planning to develop a routine such as the following.

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1. Individual students keep file cards at their desks that say “I need a break.”
2. When a student needs a break, the student places a card on his or her desk to signal the teacher.
3. The teacher acknowledges the request, and if it is an appropriate time, the teacher exchanges the request card for a card that says something like, “Lee needs a five-minute break.”
4. The student then carries this card to the office or library and gives the card to an adult such as the school secretary or librarian.
5. The student spends the next five minutes engaging in a prearranged relaxing activity such as working on a puzzle or looking at a favourite book.
6. When the time is up, the supervising adult thanks the student for the visit, comments on positive behaviour, and then gives the student a card to return to the classroom teacher. The card might say something like, “I enjoyed having Lee come to the office for a five-minute break.”

This strategy can also be expanded to help students plan their breaks throughout the day. For example, students could receive a set number of “I need a break” cards at the beginning of the school day and be responsible for planning how they will use them throughout the day. This strategy addresses a student’s need for movement and should not be linked to rewards or punishments.

- Ensure students go out at recess, take breaks or participate in physical activities. They may be more attentive and productive after a break because of the opportunity to run off excess energy and restlessness. If you notice that a certain student has difficulty handling the stimulation of exiting for a break with the larger group of students, you may want to delay his or her exit for a minute or two until the other students have left.

- Help students successfully manage recess or other less-structured activities by taking a few minutes each day before the activity to rehearse a positive experience. For example, just before recess a student could review a series of planning questions with a teacher or a peer, such as:
 1. Who are you going to play with this recess?
 2. What kind of activity are you going to do?
 3. If you have difficulty, what will you do?

Support positive social interactions

Some students with AD/HD may have social difficulties with peers while other students with AD/HD are highly social and may make friends easily and be well-liked. For those students who need support establishing and maintaining positive social interactions, plan learning activities that depend on mutual cooperation for success. To successfully enhance positive social interactions, the activities need to be structured, well monitored and include specific tasks with clear expectations. Some teaching may need to be in small groups while other activities may benefit the whole class.

Some students need explicit instruction in social skills, and the most effective way to learn, practise and reflect on these skills is within the classroom setting, in real situations. Help students learn alternative behaviours by discussing socially appropriate interactions. Build on typical classroom scenarios and create opportunities for students to “try it again” and “do it a better way.” Use “what if” scenarios for discussing and role-playing acceptable behaviour in challenging situations. Provide helpful feedback so students can improve their performance. Help them begin to explore how their behaviour may be affecting others.

Consider the individual needs and strengths of students and how this will affect their social interactions. For example, some students with AD/HD have difficulty managing all the demands for attention during team sports and will have more success doing individual physical activities such as swimming, gymnastics, karate, biking, skiing or track and field.

When students are working in partners or small groups, use low-key strategies such as moving around the room, quietly redirecting students who may be off-task and suggesting alternative strategies for students who are having difficulty. Ensure students have an opportunity to try all group roles, including observer. Students may benefit from being encouraged to attend to social cues that they might otherwise miss.

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Help students mediate conflicts with a structured approach such as the following five-step approach.

Resolving Conflicts

1. Identify each point of view (“So you’re saying that ...”).
2. Frame it as a common problem to reduce defensiveness (“That’s a problem” not “You have a problem”).
3. Involve students in solution (“What are we going to do about it?”).
4. Generate alternatives with adult help.
5. Try to reach a solution that is acceptable to each student and that encourages ownership of the solution.

Build your support base

Managing a classroom in which there are diverse student needs can be challenging. Students with AD/HD can present extra challenges. It is important for teachers to build a base of support to draw on.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

- Ask for help when needed. Enlist the support of colleagues and the school administrator.¹²
- Look for a knowledgeable person with whom you can consult when you need advice, such as a behavioural or educational consultant, or a psychologist. Look for professionals who understand AD/HD, have worked with many children with AD/HD and are familiar with the classroom.¹²
- Learn all you can about AD/HD. Read books, attend related professional development workshops, and talk to children and parents about how AD/HD affects learning and school success.

12. Hallowell and Ratey 1994.

Develop individual behaviour support plans

Some students with AD/HD may require an individualized behaviour support plan to increase specific positive behaviours or reduce specific negative behaviours. A behaviour plan can begin with a functional analysis of behaviour that identifies and describes the behaviours targeted for change. Analyze the A-B-Cs of the behaviour—Antecedents-Behaviour-Consequences. Use classroom observations to gather information about:

- what the student does (i.e., behaviour)
- the events that occur just prior to this behaviour (i.e., antecedents)
- the events that occur just after the behaviour (i.e., consequences).

These observations can provide useful information about the positive and negative influences on an individual student's behaviour. This information can then be used to establish a plan to monitor and reinforce changes in behaviours.

To set goals, clearly describe both the specific behaviours that need to be increased or decreased to achieve success and the new behaviours the student will need to learn to replace the inappropriate behaviours. Prioritize these behaviours. Make a plan to address a manageable number of goals, one at a time.

A home-school daily report is an effective intervention to help identify, monitor and improve a student's classroom behaviour. At the same time it provides a way for parents and teachers to communicate regularly. This approach can be highly motivating to students if parents select the right reinforcement to use at home after the child reaches his or her daily goals. The following steps offer a guide for establishing this kind of behavioural intervention.

Use the following six steps to prepare and implement an individual behaviour support plan with a daily report.

1. Select the area for improvement

Involve all school staff who work with the student, as well as the student and his or her parents. Identify the key behaviours that if changed, would improve the student's learning and if left unchanged, would have long-term negative consequences. Areas could include:

- academic work (e.g., task completion and accuracy)
- peer relations (particularly decreasing aggression and other negative interactions)
- independence (e.g., following class routines, working independently, managing transitions)

- relationships with adults (e.g., cooperating with requests, accepting consequences, disagreeing in an agreeable way, asking for help).

As much as possible, involve students in identifying the areas that they need to work on. Ask them questions such as “What kinds of things would you have to do to have a better day in school?” “What kinds of behaviours get in the way of having a good day?” or “What could you do instead?”

2. Define the goals

Identify specific academic or social behaviours that need to be changed to help the student reach the goals. These are called target behaviours. These behaviours must be clearly defined in a way that students, parents and teachers all understand. Target behaviours must be observable and measurable by the teacher and the student. Depending on the age and ability of the student, consider between two and five target behaviours. As much as possible, use student-friendly language and state the goals in positive terms.

Target behaviours include:

- moving from one activity to another cooperatively
- using a polite voice with others
- keeping hands and feet away from other students
- having books and supplies ready
- completing assignments on time
- starting to work right away
- enjoying an incident-free recess.

3. Decide on criteria for daily reporting

Consider recent classroom observations and records to determine how often a student is demonstrating the problematic behaviour that is interfering with the student’s learning or relationships. Use this information to determine which behaviours need to be included and to prepare the initial criteria that will be used to determine success.

Set reasonable criteria for defining success. A fair criterion is one that students can achieve between 75 percent and 90 percent of the time. To encourage improvement, set initial criteria at a rate slightly better than what the student is doing now. For example, if a student currently interrupts an average of ten times per class, the initial criteria might be “interrupts less than five times per class,” and a few weeks later the target might be more like “will interrupt less than two times per class.” Set criteria to be met for each part of the day, not the overall day. Keep the scoring manageable but within reach of the student’s current ability. Reinforcements can be awarded on a graduated scale.

Evaluate target behaviours at several intervals throughout the day to provide frequent feedback to the student. Only include targets that are significant to the student's improvement. See the following example of a daily report developed for a student in Grade 2.

My School Day

Date: _____

	Polite voice		Hands and feet to myself		Following teacher's requests	
	Me	My teacher	Me	My teacher	Me	My teacher
9:00 to 10:30						
10:45 to 12:00						
1:00 to 2:15						
2:30 to 3:00						

4—great!

3—okay

2—needs work

1—not acceptable

What went well today

What we need to work on

Encouraging words from parents

A-4

See Appendix A-4 for an alternate sample of a daily report.

4. Discuss the daily report with students and parents

Explain that the daily report will be used to help everyone focus on the targets and that the ultimate goal is for the student to have a happier and more successful school day. If possible, involve the student in setting the goals and developing the criteria. Use language that is meaningful to the student. Consider building in a self-monitoring component so the student evaluates his or her own behaviour before the teacher does. The object is not to match the teacher's response but to encourage students to reflect on their own behaviour and begin to self-monitor. Often students with AD/HD have a limited perception of how their behaviour appears to others; they need structured opportunities to develop this skill.

Sending the report back and forth between home and school daily can be challenging for some students. Look for strategies to make this routine easier on everyone, including parents and teachers. If there are positive comments in the report, the student is more likely to take it home. If the student is having difficulty remembering to take the report home or to school, use alternative strategies, such as the following.

- Designate a special plastic labelled envelope for this purpose and attach it to the student's homework agenda.
- Add the daily report to a list of items that the student checks off before leaving school at the end of each day.
- When possible, fax or e-mail the report directly to the student's home.

5. Establish a reinforcement system

Consult with the parents to ensure they have an effective reward system established at home for positive performance reflected in the daily report. Encourage them to use natural rewards rather than objects or activities that are artificially added. Also look for short-term rewards so students are receiving them the same day or week of the behaviour. For example, a child's access to television or computer games, which was previously "free" or noncontingent, can be made contingent on receiving a positive daily report. Rewards need to be motivating for the child, but not so elaborate or influential that they cause stress for either the child or parent. The focus should not be on the reward, rather it should be on the change in behaviour. Ideally families will establish a menu of rewards and the child may choose which one he or she prefers.

At home a sample menu of reinforcements could include these activities:

- computer games for X minutes
- choosing family television show or video
- television time for X minutes
- video games for X minutes
- listening to music for X minutes
- special snack
- talking on phone to friend or relative
- participating in special activity with a parent (e.g., hot chocolate, conversations, playing a board game, going on a bike ride)
- other rewards suggested by the child.

It may sometimes be necessary to provide school-based rewards when the student is not responding to the home-based system, particularly for younger children who may require more immediate rewards. Such rewards can bridge the gap between meeting the behavioural criteria at school and earning the rewards at home. What is reinforcing to one student may not be reinforcing to another. Teachers need to work with students to make sure the consequences are motivating.

At school the menu of novel rewards, those typically not part of the regular classroom routine, could include these activities:

- free time for X minutes
- talking to friend or relative
- listening to recorded music or stories
- using felt markers or other art supplies
- choosing a book for teacher to read to class
- caring for class pet
- using specific computer software programs
- choosing stickers
- choosing a seat for specified time
- playing cards or board games
- taking digital pictures
- drawing prize from grab bag
- other rewards suggested by the student.

Teachers may need to change the menu of rewards regularly to maintain student interest and motivation.

6. Monitor and modify interventions

Always combine the daily feedback on the report with appropriate social reinforcement. When completing the daily report, describe positive behaviour and note improvements and benefits. Respond matter-of-factly to missed targets with an encouraging statement about the next day.

Keep daily records of how often the student meets each target. Gradually increase appropriate behaviour by increasing the criteria once the student consistently meets the target. If the student regularly fails to meet the criteria, make it easier for a week or two. Building on success is easier than building on failure.

Once the student has met the criterion for a target at an acceptable level and you are confident the student is able to consistently demonstrate it, announce that the target behaviour is achieved. Simply tell students that they are now doing so well that they don't need that target anymore. Periodic review may be necessary for some students. If necessary, replace with another target. If the student is doing so well that daily reports are unnecessary, move to a weekly report and reward system. Work with the student to determine what is meaningful and motivating to him or her.

If this intervention is not working, meet with parents and discuss possible new strategies that might support the intervention. It might be necessary to move to a more intensive behavioural intervention.

FYI

For more information on using behavioural interventions, including daily reports, see resources from the Center for Children and Families, University at Buffalo, at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/psychology/adhd/>.

