



Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario: Supporting Students with Special Education Needs through Progressive Discipline, Kindergarten to Grade 12

Submission By the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada

The Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, CADDAC, is a national charity providing leadership and support in awareness, education and advocacy for those impacted by ADHD. CADDAC receives calls and e-mails from parents throughout Ontario, on a weekly basis, expressing their concerns regarding their children's education. They are often seeking guidance on both behavioural and academic issues that have occurred with their children in Ontario schools. Over the past two decades, CADDAC has advocated for students with ADHD with the Ontario Ministry of Education and Ontario school boards and assisted parents advocate individually with their schools. We greatly value the opportunity to supply feedback on these guidelines as they significantly impact the students and families we support.

Feedback will be provided as per chapters in the Guidelines.

Introduction

In the introduction to these guidelines, it states that one of the goals is to provide information on appropriate strategies and resources to assist school leaders with addressing behavioural challenges of students, in particular those with special needs. It also speaks about amendments initiated in 2008 mandating professional supports and training for teachers and principals. The introduction goes on to define the term progressive discipline as a whole school approach using prevention programs, interventions, supports and consequences to address inappropriate behaviour and requires schools to, use a range of interventions, supports and consequences that are developmentally appropriate and include learning opportunities.

CADDAC strongly believes that since many educators' knowledge on ADHD is insufficient, due to a lack of training, it would be very difficult for these educators to implement appropriate interventions, supports and consequences that are developmentally appropriate for students with ADHD. Furthermore, the lack of recognition of ADHD as a disability under Ontario's categories of exceptionality has not supported educators' understanding that ADHD is a significant risk to learning and behaviour regulation, nor has it been helpful in the promotion of training for educators on ADHD. Please access, the Ontario information in CADDAC's recent national report card on [ADHD in the Canadian school systems](#) and [Inequitable Access to Education for Canadian Students with ADHD](#).

ADHD is a complex psychiatric disorder. It is categorized as a neurodevelopmental disorder, as are Autism and learning disabilities. ADHD impairs attention regulation and increases hyperactivity, impulsivity. Impairments in executive functioning are also most often a part of these students' profiles. Less understood by educators is the fact that ADHD, at its core, is a disorder of self-regulation, which also decreases the ability to regulate behaviour and emotions. All of these symptoms impair a student's functioning on a daily basis and significantly decrease decision making ability around their behaviour. Students with ADHD become frustrated more easily and are then unable to react in appropriate ways. They are often poor at reading social cues and interacting with peers and adults. When ADHD is a part of a student's disability profile, even if other disabilities are recognized, if ADHD impairments are not taken into account, behaviour will not be understood or handled correctly.

The introduction also states that mitigating factors are to be taken into account when considering suspension or expulsion. It asks whether the student has the ability to control their behaviour and understand and foresee consequences. It further states that for students with an IEP, the principal should consider whether their identified disability has contributed to the behaviour and whether appropriate accommodations have been provided. Principals will be far more likely to consider the mitigating factors of ADHD if they understand ADHD's insidious effect on a student's functioning. If they think of ADHD as simple inattention, the complexity of how ADHD impacts a student's behaviour will not be taken into account. For instance, in certain environments and when at their optimum, the student with ADHD may be able to control their behaviour in a particular situation, however when their self-regulation and executive functioning skills have been depleted, due to a myriad of reasons, the same situation may elicit an inappropriate reaction, or meltdown. Students with ADHD may be able to understand, foresee and even list the consequences in a time of calm, but their ADHD impairments of; attention dysregulation, impulsivity, self and emotional dysregulation will prevent them from considering consequences prior to beginning a behaviour. They will act or react and only, sometimes, after calm has returned will be able to rethink their actions.

CADDAC recommends that it should be thoroughly explained in the introduction that although it may appear that the student can control their behaviour and understand consequences and even when some accommodations have been put in place, certain complex neurodevelopmental disabilities such as ADHD, cause behaviours that look like "bad behaviour" but are really manifestations of the student's medical disability. Support from outside medical professionals or specialized board staff may be required to assist principals in understanding why these behaviours are occurring and even how they themselves may be contributing to them.

Promoting Positive Behaviour Through a Caring and Safe School Culture

It is stated in the introduction and throughout this chapter that schools should be seen as a safe and caring environment. It must be noted that many students with ADHD see schools as being the total opposite. For some of these students the entire day is filled with unfair judgement,

negative comments and even bullying. Some medical professionals question whether the development of coexisting disorders such as anxiety and depression are being fueled by children's negative school experiences.

Several places within this chapter speak about different types of diversity such as race, gender and socio-economic background, but never mention neurodiversity. This is an oversight that needs to be corrected within the entire document.

Understanding Student Behaviour

In this chapter, the document lists four things that those seeking to understand behaviour must keep in mind. Two of these things, that behaviour is learned and that behaviour serves a function for the individual, may not necessarily be true for students with ADHD. This misinformation can be harmful for the student if taken as fact by a teacher or principal who is unaware or uneducated about ADHD. The student may be so impulsive that little, or no, conscious thought has been used prior to acting or reacting. They may be reacting to strong unregulated emotions and unable to self-regulate. In fact, when asked to explain their actions they are at a loss because there is no explanation to be found. They had a thought and acted on it before thinking about consequences. They may have reacted to a heightened emotion such as frustration or anger or may simply have been bored. Yes, perhaps the act has some positive impact, such as getting them removed from the classroom during a challenging or boring task, but more often these students' behaviour causes them significant negative consequences they did not consider or anticipate.

The question of being able to change a student's behaviour is also interesting. If the behaviour is driven by attention dysregulation, hyperactivity, impulsivity, self and emotional dysregulation or executive functioning impairments, it may take medical interventions to be able to change the behaviours in any significant way.

This chapter goes on the list four things that can influence someone's perception of a behaviour. It must be noted that a lack of knowledge of ADHD, or other neurodevelopmental disorders, would also impact someone's perception of a behaviour. Their tendency would be to believe that the behaviour was learned, thought out, intentional, manipulative and under the student's control.

It should be noted that students with ADHD frequently also have impairments with executive functioning and language skills, even when not diagnosed with a learning disability, which will significantly impact their behaviour and ability to communicate.

Executive Functioning

This area of the chapter fails to inform the reader that the majority of students with an ADHD diagnosis, or ADHD impairments, also have deficits in executive functioning. It should also note that, just because a student with ADHD does not show as impaired in their executive

functioning in psychoeducational testing, it does not mean that they are not impaired in their daily executive functioning, since this testing is commonly inaccurate in those with ADHD.

CADDAC's policy paper, [Understanding ADHD as a Disability in the Post-Secondary Environment](#), explains this further.

Resources from Russel Barkley and Thomas E. Brown would be a great addition.

Mental Health Problems

This section should also include data on the comorbidity of ADHD with other mental health disorders such as, anxiety, depression, OCD, eating disorders and substance use and abuse, as well as the common comorbidity of neurodevelopmental disorders, such as Autism, Tis disorders and LDs.

Educators must be made aware of the increase of suicidal ideation and attempts especially in females with ADHD. They should also be informed on how ADHD presents very differently in girls with ADHD. We continue to significantly underdiagnose or misdiagnose ADHD in our girls. Please access, [ADHD in Girls and Women](#).

Investigative Strategies, Tools and Resources

Comments from a school psychologist who presents for CADDAC.

The ABC charts, which are also required before requesting more intense supports for challenging behaviours, contribute to the problem - they assume behaviour is communicative and intentional (which flies in the face of experience for impulsive children) and they call for the teachers to make assumptions about the "behaviour" they see and those assumptions are very, very often "attention" or "escape" or "wanted their way" assumptions. They also have no space for a child's thoughts or ideas about what happened, which is a huge problem. The ALSUP ([livesinthebalance.org](#)) provides a far, far better measure to document concerns that actually looks to see what skills the child may be lacking. This along with trauma-informed practices and a self-reg (Stuart Shanker) lens would be much more effective. There are some good research studies that have shown CPS to be highly effective in schools (reducing seclusion, restraint, and suspensions, etc.), and Shanker's self-reg information is widely used in Durham.

Additional Comments from CADDAC

CADDAC also recommends the teaching of Ross Greene's CPS approach, <https://lostatschool.org/> be touch to educators for use with students with behavioural challenges.

CADDAC has added an [additional column to our ABC charts](#). We include a column that evaluates whether the intervention, or consequence, applied has escalated or deescalated the behaviour. This will supply information on whether the adult's behaviour has been helpful or harmful.

CADDAC Parent Training Programs

CADDAC hosts several [parent training programs](#) as well [many webinars](#) that cover self-regulation, emotional regulation, social skills and parent behavioural techniques, as well as a wide variety of other ADHD topics, that schools may wish to share with parents.

Progressive Discipline

Comments from a school psychologist that presents for CADDAC.

Document referred to are attached.

I am unaware of any evidence indicating that "progressive discipline" works to solve problems related to behavioural infractions. Even in animal research, punishment needs to be intense and immediate to have what limited impact it has. And that's assuming they have control over their behaviour and are willfully breaking rules. This very rarely applies to the kids I see being suspended or expelled.

2. Research has consistently shown that excluding children as punishment actually increases their chances of being subject to suspension or expulsion again - i.e., if anything it increases the likelihood of repeating behaviours we want them not to engage in, which is literally the definition of reinforcement. If it clearly does not work, why do they keep doing it, especially given the data that shows that the vast majority of students who are disciplined this way are racialized, have disabilities, and/or have experienced significant adversities (e.g., abuse, trauma)? I mean, I would come armed with some stats that show what this form of discipline really does, and then discuss why - i.e., students who are consistently unable to meet behavioural expectations are unable to meet those expectations for a reason, and it is almost never just willful disobedience, therefore punishment cannot work because it cannot address any problem other than willful disobedience (if that).

3. I have attached a 2017 TDSB document - pg. 28 and 29 (or p. 24 and 25 by the physical page numbers vs. adobe) have the demographics for students who were expelled, specifically. For disability-related issues that page looks at "has special education needs" without definition...but on page 45 (part of appendix B) they break it down more. You can see the vast majority have an IEP or are identified. On page 47 you can see some interesting data on what interventions were attempted...very, very low rates of referrals for psychological and psychiatric support. On page 48-49 they have some telling data on suspensions and EQAOs.

4. There are better ways. I have attached some evidence/articles I've collected. The "Helping Behaviourally Challenged Students" one is a bit old (ADHD is still identified as an externalizing condition where it was mentioned), but there's a section with some good stats and suggestions for proactive responding.

5. It is highly problematic that in order to receive more intensive supports principals often seem to think they need to show a history of suspensions and discipline. There must be another way - such as incident reports - that do not require punishment for disability-related behaviours

Additional Comments from CADDAC

Mitigating Circumstances

A strong statement must be included indicating that mitigating circumstances (such as a diagnosis of ADHD) must be considered regardless of whether a student is IPRCed or has an IEP. Principals have frequently informed parents that these circumstances cannot be taken into account because students who are not IPRCed are not recognized as having a disability by the school board. Furthermore, figure 14 assumes that a principal will have the knowledge to know whether a student has the ability to control his or her behaviour or understand the foreseeable consequences. Unfortunately, this is often an arbitrary decision from an administrator who knows little about ADHD.

Suspension process

In figure 16, it states that information gathering and fact finding must occur in tandem with considering mitigating factors. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, students with ADHD are often impaired in language and social skills. They can find it very challenging to explain, their thinking process, what happened, how and when it happened and why it happened. Since they often do not understand their impulsivity and self-regulation issues, they will frequently deny what they did because they cannot explain it. Unfortunately, this often leads to further consequences for that student by educators who do not understand what is occurring.

These are a list of questions that CADDAC suggests parents ask themselves and the school, when the school is suggesting, or has imposed, a suspension.

- How will suspension help my child correct their behaviour?
- Does my child have a good understanding of why they were suspended?
- Do you as parents feel the suspension will favourably impact your child's behavior in the future?
- Is the suspension of your child due to "a failure to accommodate" under Human Rights?
- How are suspensions impacting your child's self-esteem?
- How will the suspension impact your child academically?
- Are there alternative consequences that can be applied?

Summary

In summary, CADDAC recommends that throughout this document additional information needs to be included to help educators and administrators understand how their students' neurodiversity and impairments will significantly impact their behaviour. Viewing these students' behaviours through the same lens as neurotypical students, then reacting and using the same consequences as with other students, would be inequitable and discriminatory.