

Tips for Early Childhood Educators/Parents & Strategies for the Classroom

Introduction

A 2019 [Sandford Medicine study](#) found that 79% of the 4 and 5 year old children with ADHD in the study were impaired in school readiness compared to 13% of children without ADHD. But perhaps more importantly, the study also found that the impairment was not always obvious at first glance. Those with ADHD were not impaired in their IQ and levels of cognition and knowledge; they knew their letters, numbers, shapes and colours as well as the children without ADHD. However, when the study compared a broader measure of school readiness it was found that the children with ADHD were seventy-three times more likely to be impaired in their approaches to learning, more than seven times more likely to be impaired in social and emotional development, six times more likely to be impaired in language development and three times more likely to be impaired in physical well-being and motor development.

The study's authors stated that these findings suggested that identifying and supporting preschoolers with ADHD symptoms could help reduce their future struggles in elementary school.

Early childhood educators are in a very unique position that allows them to more easily recognize red flags that may be early signs of ADHD:

- ① short attention span, difficulty focusing, easily distracted;
- ① difficulty staying on task;
- ① difficulty following directions;
- ① difficulty with cognitively shifting, mentally moving from one activity to another;
- ① impulsive behaviour, acting before thinking, above what is expected for their age; and
- ① being easily frustrated and unable to deal with frustration in appropriate ways.

Early assessment and diagnosis of ADHD allows for the implementation of specialized behavioural strategies, school and home supports and other ADHD treatments; this would then help mitigate the long-term side effects of not treating ADHD.

Steps for Educators

1. Educate yourself on how ADHD impairs a child's functioning. Learn about executive functioning impairment and how it goes hand in hand with ADHD. Understanding that ADHD symptoms and executive functioning impairments are not their choice will alter your perception and interaction with the student.
2. Learn how ADHD affects this specific child.
3. Observe and document any behaviour and skills that appear to be delayed. Also, document any interventions that you have tried and their outcomes.
4. Meet with your supervisor/colleagues to discuss if observations are aligned.

Steps for Educators (cont)

5. Meet with the parents to share your observations, concerns and implemented interventions.
6. Agree on further strategies to be implemented as they can be helpful with or without a diagnosis.

It is always the parents' decision whether to obtain a medical assessment right away or continue to monitor the child's functioning, however providing them with appropriate and continuous feedback will assist their decision. Sharing the fact that an assessment is possible, without suggesting your thoughts on a diagnosis, which would be inappropriate, offers them an opportunity to make an informed decision.

Starting Preschool

Encourage a visit to the school so the child can familiarize themselves with the new surroundings and meet the teachers. This will reduce some of the anxiety that the child will be feeling about entering a new environment.

Encourage the child to share their thoughts and feelings about this new experience. This may give you some insight into the child's expectations and what they think will be expected of them.

Prior to the child starting school meet with the parents to discuss the student's profile. Encourage them to share the child's strengths and weaknesses, any concerns they may have and strategies they have found work in the home environment. The child may already have been diagnosed with ADHD, but at this young age this is often not the case. Parents may however share some "red flags" during the meeting that may alert you to the possibility of ADHD. Do not jump to any conclusions, but once the child starts school observe how they function in a structured environment and watch to see if the child's skills improve with minor interventions.



Tips and Strategies

General Tips

- ✓ Recognize and use the child's strengths. This will also increase self-esteem.
- ✓ The child will be more engaged if they feel that you understand their struggles and are on their side.
- ✓ The child will likely already have received an abundance of negative feedback in their short lifetime so keeping it to a minimum is best.
- ✓ Positive interactions should be three times that of negative interactions.
- ✓ If the content, concept or situation is new, early intervention and support will be required.

Classroom Structure and Routines

- ✓ Children with ADHD may require an alternative activity, in another location, to napping.
- ✓ Schedule activities that require more attention during times they routinely have more energy and focus, possibly but not always in the morning.
- ✓ Arrange areas for work and play so the child knows what is expected in what environment.
- ✓ Post schedules using pictures.
- ✓ Have a consistent routine; this helps children anticipate what will happen next.
- ✓ If change occurs allow for frequent prompts and reminders that things will be different.
- ✓ Anticipate the need for additional monitoring during times of change, transition and stimulating or frustrating activities and use calming strategies.

Supporting Attention Regulation Impairments

- ✓ Reduce as many distractions as possible.
- ✓ Place the child away from areas of distraction, like a doorway or window.
- ✓ Understand that distractions (daydreaming) may also be internal.
- ✓ Alert the child's attention by saying things like, "This is important!".
- ✓ Some children increase attention with eye contact, but others may become anxious.
- ✓ Work out a code between you and the child, with the parents' approval, that can be used to bring them back to the task or reengage attention, a touch on the shoulder, tap on the desk, or a raised finger etc.
- ✓ Interchange quieter focused activities with movement breaks or activities that allow for movement.

Giving Instructions

A child with ADHD will have difficulty following a list of instructions:

- ✓ break instructions into one or two simple steps, then confirm the child's understanding of the instructions by having them explain what they need to do;
- ✓ ask the child to report back to you when the task is completed;
- ✓ praise and offer next steps, or repeat what was expected; and
- ✓ when completed praise and offer next steps.

How to Work with Hyperactivity

- ✓ Encourage them to have frequent movement breaks.
- ✓ Proactively develop appropriate ways for them to move within the classroom.
- ✓ Build movement into your classroom activities.
- ✓ Be aware that these kids may need increased supervision during breaks and times of movement.
- ✓ Allow them to use fidget toys.
- ✓ Allow them to sit outside the circle to facilitate additional movement.

Strategies for Impulsivity

Impulsivity, a core symptom for some children with ADHD, prevents children with ADHD from considering consequences before they act. Therefore, adults need to be proactive rather than reactive to this behaviour. Anticipate times when impulsive behaviour generally occurs and use

- ✓ frequent reminders, redirection and limit distraction;
- ✓ prepare and cue for physical and mental transitions;
- ✓ keep to a structured schedule as much as possible;
- ✓ teach and model stop and think behaviour, but realize this may be out of their control;
- ✓ praise any time that you see them considering consequences.

Impairment in Self Regulation

Understanding the child’s specific impairments in self-regulation and their triggers will allow you to assist the child to self regulate. Some common triggers are

- ❶ being required to do something that they find difficult, frustrating or requires the use of skills they do not have;
- ❶ both physical and mental transitions;
- ❶ environmental sensitivities, or an over stimulating environment; and
- ❶ difficulty in expressing feelings verbally. They may act out instead by: crying, retreating, running away, hitting, pushing or biting.

Rules and Behaviour Management

Children with ADHD will require specialized behaviour strategies.

- ✓ Develop very simple, clear rules.
- ✓ Review and post picture reminders and review consequences.
- ✓ Confirm the child’s understanding of the rules.
- ✓ Talk less and act more – do not nag or the child will tune you out.
- ✓ Don’t argue, debate, or be drawn into power struggles – state rules calmly and make the rule the “bad guy”.
- ✓ Use consistent, immediate positive verbal feedback and positive consequences (rewards) – be very specific on exactly what was done right so they will know what behaviours to repeat.
- ✓ Allow the child to choose between two options, both of which are acceptable to you.
- ✓ Ignore as much of the minor annoying behaviour as possible – it is often not under the child’s control.
- ✓ Learn to recognize triggers for the child and proactively implement accommodations.
- ✓ Try and use behaviour missteps as teaching opportunities. Review what they could have done differently, expected behaviours and then have them explain what they plan to do the next time.
- ✓ Observe any new and improved behaviour and praise frequently.

Strategies for Executive Functioning Impairment in: Organization/Time Management and Transitions

Children with ADHD are almost always significantly challenged in organization and keeping track of time.

- ✓ Practice organizational skills like packing a backpack – use pictures of what should be included.
- ✓ Use visual reminders – charts with pictures for steps of an activity.
- ✓ Use verbal reminders and cueing prior to switching activities.
- ✓ Colour code items that belong together.
- ✓ Use special count down clocks and timers to assist with the understanding of time passing.
- ✓ Use chants and songs to review steps to tasks.

Times of transition like moving from one area or task to another and lining up or waiting their turn are all activities that children with ADHD find challenging. Use strategies like

- ✓ a ten, five and two minute cue that a change will occur, or an activity needs to stop;
- ✓ have the child stay at the front of the line beside the teacher;
- ✓ have the child hold something for you so they won't be tempted to touch others;
- ✓ allow another child, who they have bonded with, to accompany them; and
- ✓ frequently praise how well they are doing and how close they are to achieving their goal.

Emotional Dysregulation in Children with ADHD

Self regulation and executive functioning impairment in these children will make it more difficult for them to regulate and express their emotions in acceptable ways. While their feelings are normal, children with ADHD will be more easily frustrated, quicker to anger, more excitable and sillier, less flexible and slower to return to emotional calm. They will find it very difficult to moderate their reaction to strong emotions and self soothe. The more their impaired skills are taxed the quicker they will reach their limit of regulation, resulting in a “meltdown”.



Strategies to Assist the Child with their Emotional Regulation

- ✓ immediate and greater rewards;
- ✓ pep talks by others which will also elicit future positive self talk;
- ✓ frequent breaks, ten minutes on, three minutes off;
- ✓ three-minute relation exercises;
- ✓ visualization of goals;
- ✓ routine physical exercise;
- ✓ high glucose drinks;

Strategies to Assist the Child with their Emotional Regulation (cont)

- ✓ teach, and model calming strategies – have a calm place for them to retreat to, such as: a tent, bean bag chair in a quiet location, or a quiet, safe place outside the classroom; and
- ✓ use an ABC chart to track the times and circumstances of the child’s melt downs, as well as the adult’s intervention and the final outcome: did it help return the child to calm or escalated the meltdown?

How to Support the Development of Social Skills

- ✓ Actively discuss, teach and model social skills.
- ✓ Use pictures to teach body language and facial expressions. (Do not assume children know that a teacher’s frown etc. means displeasure.)
- ✓ Use social stories with pictures to review common tasks and interactions.
- ✓ Actively search for and pair them with other children with who they have things in common.
- ✓ Set up situations so you can teach, remind and have the child practice social skills.
- ✓ Share strategies with parents so they can set up scheduled playdates to further practice skills.
- ✓ Make sure that your unintentional body language, or passing comments, do not give other children the message that this child is unliked by the teacher and Ok to bully.

Sources used for Tips for Early Childhood Educators/Parents & Strategies for the Classroom

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