

# REFRAMING HOW WE VIEW ATTENTION DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (AD/HD)

Students with AD/HD often go through a day with too few positive experiences. This can lead to low self-esteem, lack of motivation and feelings of stress. A teacher’s perspective on AD/HD can make a big difference in how they interact with students and consequently how the student feels about themselves. By understanding the basis for the difficulties experienced by students with AD/HD, it helps teachers to be more compassionate and focus on identifying and providing appropriate supports. “Reframing” how we look at AD/HD can lead to greater success for the student and teacher.

## Mental Shifts About AD/HD

From seeing the child as...	To understanding the child as...
Annoying	Challenged, having a low tolerance for frustration
Unwilling	Unable
Lazy, unmotivated	Tired of failing and feeling helpless, does not know where or how to begin
Trying to get attention	Needing contact, support, reassurance
Inappropriate	Unaware
Doesn't try	Can't get started, can't sustain attention, easily confused
Doesn't care	Can't show feelings, doesn't understand
Refuses to sit still	Overstimulated
Resisting	Doesn't “get it”, frustrated, embarrassed, anxious
Trying to annoy me	Can't remember
Showing off	Having poor judgement, overcompensating, unaware of impact on others

## **WHY IS WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH AD/HD SUCH A CHALLENGE?**

One of the biggest challenges for teachers and parents of students with AD/HD is learning to not personalize the behaviours of these students. Students with AD/HD are not intentionally trying to disrupt classroom activity or be difficult. Unfortunately, their disability is often invisible so it is harder to keep in mind that it is their condition that is resulting in the behaviour and not an intention to be difficult. We wouldn't punish a student in a wheelchair for not walking. We need to shift our thinking when dealing with students with AD/HD. If we focus on identifying and providing support and strategies for the underlying issue for these students, they will increase their academic success and likely demonstrate fewer behaviour issues.

Rethinking AD/HD can shift how teachers see their roles and their relationships with students. It could result in professional shifts such as:

- Moving from stopping behaviours to preventing problems and decreasing poor choices.
- Moving from behaviour modification to modeling and using visual cues.
- Moving from changing students to changing environments and changing strategies.

## **WHAT IS AD/HD?**

AD/HD is a neurological condition that can cause inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity, along with a number of related difficulties considered to be inappropriate for an individual's age.

A hallmark of AD/HD is difficulties with higher-level brain functions required to perform the following kinds of tasks:

- Regulating alertness, sustaining effort, and processing information at consistent and appropriate speeds.
- Focusing and sustaining attention.
- Organizing and prioritizing tasks.
- Planning and using foresight.
- Self-monitoring and regulating actions.
- Remembering details and accessing short-term memory.
- Distinguishing essential from nonessential detail.
- Elaborating on single basic points.
- Delaying gratification.
- Inhibiting behaviours.
- Managing frustration and other emotions.
- Evaluating information and own performances.

It's important to remember that no two children with AD/HD are alike and no one solution fits all.

## Facts About AD/HD

- It describes a set of symptoms: excessive inattention, overactivity and impulsive responding.
- It's believed to reflect a neurobiological difference in the brain.
- There is no apparent single cause – probably a variety of mechanisms.
- Has a genetic component (80% inherited).
- Is found in four to 12% of children.
- It is more often diagnosed in boys than girls. Girls tend to be missed because they typically exhibit “inattentive” behaviours.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Students with AD/HD may be inattentive, hyperactive, impulsive or a combination of all.

#### Inattention

- Careless mistakes
- Poor sustained attention
- Poor listening
- Lack of follow-through and work completion
- Disorganized
- Poor sustained mental effort
- Loses things
- Easily distracted, forgetful

#### Hyperactivity/Impulsiveness

- Fidgets/squirms
- Leaves seat
- Runs/climbs a lot
- Can't play quietly
- “On the go”
- Talks excessively
- Blurts out answers
- Difficulty waiting
- Interrupts/intrudes

Inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity can also contribute to social-emotional difficulties such as:

- Limited confidence in self as a learner.
- Limited success as a team player.
- Misinterpreting social cues.
- Emotionally overreacting.
- Difficulty with anger management.

## Critical Success Factors in Helping Students with AD/HD

A critical success factor in helping students with AD/HD is family and school understanding of this disorder. The following principles are key to success for AD/HD students:

- Label the behaviour not the child.
- Provide an outlet for energy (encourage activity).
- Set students up for success and provide recognition.
- Be consistent.
- Build self-advocacy skills.
- Provide structure and organization – predictable routines, lists, reminders, repetition, and clear expectations.

People with AD/HD can achieve great things once they learn to channel their energy in positive ways.

## Strategies

### Assess the Behaviour:

Look for the underlying issue. Is it:

- Decoding or word recognition skills?
- Working memory skills?
- Processing skills?

- Lack of awareness of expectations?
- Impulsivity?
- Organizational skills?
- Missing details?

Supports will differ depending on the underlying issue.

### PROVIDE AN OUTLET FOR ENERGY

- Incorporate movement into lessons.
- Have students chart information on white boards, chalkboards, etc.
- Have the student hand out papers.
- Incorporate short discussion breaks where students discuss an aspect of the lesson with a partner.
- 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.
- Set up a system where a student uses a card to signal when they need a break from classroom activity. Prearrange a routine where they take a note to the office or the library that says, “Lee needs a five minute break”.
- Organize frequent short breaks that are focused.

## SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

- **Connect new information to prior knowledge.** Pause during the presentation of new information and ask students how the new information relates to previously learned material or a personal experience.
- **Break tasks into smaller steps.** Help students focus on important information by “chunking” assignments into smaller, more manageable segments. For example, have students highlight the symbol (+, -) in a math problem before calculating the answer.
- **Structure time limits to monitor students' processing.** Have students take notes on a reading passage for at least five minutes but no more than ten minutes. Experiment using time limits for students who are overactive processors; require them to stop or redirect them, even if they are in the middle of a task.
- **Cue students to upcoming transitions.** Let students know when a task is about to change and their focus will need to be adjusted. Say, for example, "In five minutes it will be time to put your social studies work away and get out your math books." Keep a schedule of activities on the board for the students to refer to.
- **Use memory strategies.** Teach students to use strategies like imagery and elaboration to strengthen the depth of information processing. Attaching a mental image to an important piece of information, stating the reasons for its importance, and connecting the information to some prior knowledge or area of interest are all examples of memory strategies.
- **Teach students to prioritize.** Have students complete the most difficult parts of a task when they are able to focus. Then allow them to take a break before beginning again.

## For Further Learning

Alberta Learning. (2006). *Focusing on success: teaching students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder*. Alberta Learning. Retrieved February 12, 2013, from [education.alberta.ca/media/511987/focus.pdf](http://education.alberta.ca/media/511987/focus.pdf)

CHADD Live | Home Page. (n.d.). *CHADD Home Page*. Retrieved February 13, 2013, from <http://www.chadd.org>

Teach ADHD Home Page. (n.d.). *Teach ADHD*. Retrieved February 13, 2013, from <http://www.teachadhd.ca/Pages/default.aspx>

LearningLinks Resource Centre. (n.d.). *LearningLinks Resource Centre*. Retrieved February 12, 2013, from <http://www.learninglinkslibrary.ca>