

Tipping the balance for the ADD student. *The second in a series of articles for parents on helping the bright, underachieving student succeed.*

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An estimated 17 million people in the United States, including roughly 2.5 million children, struggle with learning and behavioral challenges due to serious attention inconsistencies, which range in severity, type, and degree—from distractibility, inattentiveness, procrastination, disorganization, tardiness, restlessness, aversion to details, forgetfulness, daydreaming, boredom, sluggishness, to hyperactivity, fidgetiness, impulsivity, argumentativeness, negativity, irritability, over-excitability, chronic low self-esteem, to pessimism, dark thoughts, depression, inflexibility, unpredictability, and frequent anxiety—to name a sampling of symptoms. Many parents of school-aged children fight a never-ending battle with a bright child (or children) who find school boring and are unmotivated to perform, as we discussed in the first article of this series. Different manifestations of these behaviors, which may appear at home or in school, are generally worse in situations requiring sustained attention. As a result, academic underachievement is frequently the first area in which the problem surfaces, as school requirements center on the ability to consolidate information quickly, build on this information, reproduce it, and perform consistently. As discussed earlier, some students have minimal or borderline inattentiveness, while others are significantly blocked by their mind's inability to concentrate reliably on habitual or mundane tasks. These individuals suffer from some form of attention deficit disorder (ADD), which is a neurobiological condition that needs appropriate treatment.

ADD, in its various types, has been around for centuries, and yet, in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, we have seen a sharp rise in the number of individuals who appear to suffer from ADD. These students often believe they cannot overcome their inability to focus and master the increasingly difficult demands of school. Frustrated parents sometimes assume that ADD is a catchall label for laziness, willfulness, and poor motivation, as problems show up primarily in concentration tasks. Uneven and/or inconsistent performance leaves the impression that the child is simply not trying hard enough. However, brain-imaging studies show that the harder someone with ADD tries to concentrate, the part of the brain involved with focus actually shuts down. Sustaining attention and effort, attending to details, and following through on tasks or instructions are challenging areas for such individuals, but there is hope. Awareness of external factors, understanding the nuanced complexities of ADD, and utilizing compensating strategies can help children manage their mind and their behavior and succeed exceptionally in school and in life.

One of the environmental factors that contributes to the ADD dilemma is the fact that kids' minds today are often programmed by excessive "no brain" activities such as TV, and their brains require increasing amounts of stimulation in order to trigger the adrenaline needed to pay attention on mind-work. Often, they struggle with poor internal energy controls and insatiability. ADD individuals need adrenaline in order to function and counteract the cognitive understimulation produced by routine or uninteresting activities.

Recent studies and my experience reveal that a comprehensive, holistic, and practical approach—including management of the learning process with the application of specific strategies, emotional support, exercise, and nutrition—can successfully treat ADD. Medication is often the first line of defense to stabilize its effects, and the positive effects should not be minimized. However, the concentration "tipping point" for ADD students or even someone who has minor attention inconsistencies is often in their lifestyle, i.e., a regular exercise regime, regulated sleep

patterns, and supplementation and nutrition that increase the intake of amino acids in the blood stream. The ADD sufferer, and in fact the typical child today, benefit from reduced consumption of simple sugars and “fast foods” as well as the addition of complex carbohydrates and lean protein to their diet. Complex carbs, such as vegetables and multigrain breads, provide energy over extended periods of time, while simple carbs—like refined sugars found in sodas, most cereals, white bread, and many processed foods—provide a quick rush of adrenaline followed by lethargy, thus robbing the body of much-needed energy for sustained attention and focus on academic work. Furthermore, continuous exposure to over-stimulating visual stimuli—excessive use of video games, television, web-surfing—works like a drug to fuel the attention centers in the brain and results in withdrawal symptoms—edginess, boredom, and fatigue—that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to focus on chores and mind-work.

Educational strategies and learning techniques that enhance brain functions, rather than focusing on weaknesses, are necessary first steps to build self-confidence and improve performance. Many intelligent children with ADD can manage with minimal effort in lower grades by doing assignments at the last minute, which provides a certain adrenaline rush. However, when the academic demands increase and require more time and thoughtfulness, they often flounder and procrastinate, because they are overwhelmed with the organization and orchestration of complex ideas. ADD individuals have the ability to hyperfocus on areas of high interest, yet struggle with consistency, organization, sequential ordering, marshaling intention into movement, and concentration in routine tasks. When they are accused of laziness and inflexibility, they may literally tune out, losing all interest in learning.

Research on the right and left hemispheres of the brain underlines the fact that, on the right-left brain continuum, ADD individuals, for the most part, are more right-brain thinkers and, thus, highly visual-spatial, concrete learners. They are generally inquisitive and creative individuals who are more attuned to concepts than abstract details and organization; they need to see the “big picture” first. As primarily visual processors, verbal instructions, step-by-step logic, and lengthy lectures frustrate them, as they may miss important details. They deal in the world of pictures and association, rather than symbolic representations. Individuals with left-hemisphere dominance tend to do well in school, since they are more sequential, abstract thinkers, but they often fail to develop their creative capacities, while those who are right-hemisphere dominant often feel guilty for the way they think and are often labeled as “learning disabled,” when in fact they just learn differently; and, in fact, they may have certain long-term advantages over left-brain thinkers. While right-dominant learners often struggle with the logical-sequential-comprehensive nature of most schoolwork, there are many positive and exciting applications for their kind of mind as adults. Right-hemispheric minds have unique abilities to use intuitive, holistic approaches to solving problems and often make significant contributions to the advancement of ideas in a variety of fields—music, science, mathematics, politics, business, etc. Individuals who struggle with “their” kind of mind in school often become trailblazers in society—think of Einstein, van Gogh, Mozart, Edison, Churchill, Patton, Disney, Gates, to name but a few.

Changing attitudes and “habits of mind” are vital components of managing the learning process and succeeding. The next article in this series will focus on how the ADD mind can develop mindful practices to leap over “the procrastination trap.”

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Resources for Parents:

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