

ADHD treatment explained

By Dr. Linda Reinstein

When thinking of treatment for ADHD, it is important to remember that behaviour change, like most forms of skill development, is often slow and gradual. Children require patience, support, and guidance in order to learn new things.

The goal is not to treat the ADHD out of your child, nor does it need to be. Remember your child is creative, thinks outside the box, and is still developing perspectives on the world. These are the things that make them unique, loveable, and interesting people. Symptoms will be managed. Skills will be learned. Symptoms will also wax, wane, and change through developmental stages.

The main difficulty of ADHD is not one of knowing *what* to do but *how* and *when* to do it. Parents need to be available to help, coach, and teach in the moment. Simply talking to your child about what they should have done or about how wrong their behaviour choices were is not only unhelpful but also comes with potentially negative side effects – shame, erosion of your relationship, lying, or stopping to come to you with their problems. There is a better way.

The principal goals underlying positive behaviour change fall into 3 categories: **prepare**, **teach**, and **motivate**.

Prepare strategies set your child up for success. These are things that adults in the child's world do that help the child "do the next right thing" to borrow a quote from *Frozen*.

- Some prepare strategies include: *Foster strong positive relationships by providing uninterrupted, child-led time with a parent.* This quality time is one of the most powerful prepare strategies. This time does not have to be long (about 10 minutes) but does have to be consistent and planned. An ideal time to provide this quality time is immediately after school and before the evening routine begins. It serves as a metaphoric hazmat chamber where your child can rid themselves of the (mis)happenings of the day and start their evening at home afresh.
- *Discuss behaviour expectations prior to times when unwanted/negative behaviour is likely to occur.* Come up with a plan together. When in the situation make sure that your child is well-prepared and well-supervised.
- *Set them up physically for success.* Good nutrition, sleep hygiene, and boundaries around screentime are key for a child to be prepared to learn new skills.
- *Medication is often a key prepare strategy.* While not within the scope of a psychologist's practice (only medical doctors can prescribe medications), I recommend that parents have a medical follow-up to discuss a trial of medication. Try to find a doctor with specific experience treating ADHD. It may take a few tries to figure out which medication and how much would be optimal for your child. Research indicates that ADHD medications promote brain development and increase the likelihood for positive outcomes. They can provide that needed time between action and reaction so that your child can learn new ways of coping and behaving.

Teach strategies target skills that your child is lacking.

- *Set SMART goals. Specific, Measurable/Observable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-limited.* Prioritize a specific behaviour/skill to work on. Define it clearly. Teach the desired behaviour that you want to see as a replacement for an undesired behaviour. For example, rather than admonishing your child for interrupting, teach them how to wait their turn so that they learn

to engage in meaningful conversation with you.

- *Prompting, modelling, and practice.* It may be that your child needs direct guidance, modelling, and practice to learn a new skill. Remember that helping/coaching your child before they start misbehaving is teaching, not coddling.
- *Use visual schedules/checklists to teach new skills (e.g., setting the table) and new routines (e.g., bedtime) that map out each discrete task/step.* Make sure they can actually do each step independently (e.g., show them how to set the table). With younger children use pictures to represent the steps, with older children use words. These need not be fancy nor require special programs to create pictures. Use whatever you have – sticky notes, scrap paper, pictures from magazines.
- *Tutoring or coaching.* Older children may benefit from additional supports for the development of executing functioning. Coaching on time management, task completion, task persistence, and self-monitoring may be useful goals.

Motivate your child to do the best that they can.

- *Catch your child being good (vs. pointing out their every misdeed).* Try to provide 4 positive feedback statements for every instance of corrective feedback.
- *Provide attention.* You want to emphasize when your child behaves well and tries hard. You want to provide minimal attention or consequences for challenging behaviours that occur. Be sure to use a lot of energy and enthusiasm when providing positive feedback and as little as possible when providing corrective feedback.
- *Use rewards.* Learning new skills is hard. None of us works for free. Reinforcement/rewards can be used effectively to motivate learning. Rewards can be tangible (e.g., screen-time, smarties) or attention-based (e.g., praise, time spent together, playing outside with you). Used effectively, your child will not become a reward junkie, demanding a reward for everything they do. Once a skill is learned, systematically fade out how much or how frequently you provide rewards.
- *Choosing rewards with your child is also key.* It really does not matter what you think will be a good reward. Ask your child frequently what they may want as a reward because what they may find motivating may change and shift depending on the day, activity, people involved, and tasks to be completed. Remember there is nothing about a sticker that is universally rewarding.
- *Difference between rewards and bribery.* Rewards are established before a misbehaviour occurs and are a contract or deal for learning a new skill. Bribery happens when you start to beg, barter, and negotiate with your child to stop a misbehaviour after it has begun.

These are the broad brushstrokes of prepare, teach, and motivate. To be clear, this is hard work for both parents and children. To help parents teach specific skills there are specialized behaviour consultants and psychologists in the community who can help you and your child move toward positive behaviour change.

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