

Effective Strategies To Use With Your ADHD Child

Strategies are adapted from Russell Barkley (2000)

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1. Have clear expectations

Children with ADHD are not very good at thinking through the consequences of their actions; therefore, increasing the child's awareness of the connection between his/her behavior and the consequences that follow is important. This can be accomplished by having

- clear expectations about the child's behavior
- clear rules for what will happen when the child doesn't meet those expectations

2. Use incentives before punishment

Be clear about what behavior you want to see in your child (not just what you *don't* want to see), and give them a good reason (incentive) to perform that behavior. We know that punishment for inappropriate behavior is not very effective in helping the child behave better because it only teaches the child what *not* to do. Offering incentives for good behavior motivates the child to repeat the good behavior more often.

3. Give more frequent feedback

Especially for things that the child is doing *right*. As a rule of thumb for how frequently you should provide feedback, consider making 8 positive comments for every one negative comment you make to your child.

4. Give more immediate feedback and immediate consequences

Be sure to give immediate positive feedback (praise, thumbs-up, smile, hug, etc.) when the child is doing what s/he is supposed to do; negative feedback and consequences also need to be immediate; the longer you wait to deliver the consequence, the less effective the consequence will be.

5. Use more powerful consequences

Find out what *really* matters to your child (physical affection, praise, snacks, material rewards, videogames, etc.); ask him/her, don't assume that they like something just because other children do; weak consequences are less effective than powerful ones. Make a list of 5-10 rewards and let the child pick from the list each time you want to provide him or her with a powerful, positive consequence.

6. Be consistent with your positive and negative consequences

Your child may argue with you or throw tantrums to see if you are really serious about the rules you set up; don't let your child wear you down during this "testing phase;" also, it is absolutely essential that both parents work as a team and agree on consequences so that the child cannot play one parent against the other.

7. Act – don't yak!

After the rules have been made clear, *act* on them! Resist the temptation to repeat yourself incessantly, or to lecture/yell at your child when s/he fails to comply with your requests. Instead of talking/yelling, just implement the consequence you had planned – this is NOT the time to discuss the rules again!

8. Put information in physical form at the point of performance

Because children with ADHD have poor working memory (the ability to keep important information in mind long enough to complete a task), it is helpful to put the important information that is needed to do a task (e.g., rules, reminders) in writing, or in a picture. Then make sure your child has that information in front of them *while they are performing the task* (this is called the "point of performance"). For example, when your child sits down to do homework, put a colorful sign in front of them that says

something like, “read directions carefully, finish every problem on the page, then go back and double-check your answers.” Reminders should be clear and brief.

9. Provide artificial motivation for boring and difficult tasks

Children with ADHD have particular difficulty generating their own internal motivation for tasks that are tedious, boring, or require a lot of effort. Your job as a parent will be to provide external (artificial) motivation to help your child complete the boring task. Offering incentives and rewards (e.g., special snacks or treats, extra TV time or time on video games, playing a game together, etc.) for getting the work done, or for following rules, or for controlling their behavior, is helpful in overcoming the child’s lack of internal motivation. This creates a “Win-Win” situation where the child feels good about following the rules, and the parent is less stressed because the child is doing what they are supposed to do. Just remember that as soon as you take the rewards away, the child will go back to their old behavior

10. Plan ahead for problem situations

Many conflicts between you and your child are highly predictable (e.g., trouble with transitions from one activity to the next, conflicts over homework, misbehavior in public, etc.). Therefore, it is a good strategy to plan *in advance* how to handle these situations. Without such planning, parents often react based on their emotions in the heat of the moment, rather than in a calm, controlled manner which is always more effective with children than angry outbursts. Let your child know beforehand what the consequences will be for appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the problem situation.

11. Keep a disability perspective

Remember that ADHD is a neurobiologically based disability. This may help you to not overreact with anger when your child makes mistakes. It’s important to understand the difference between things that the child *can’t do* due to his/her disability (e.g., paying attention for long, following through on complicated tasks without reminders, controlling his/her impulses and emotions at all times, sitting still for long, etc.) and things that your child *won’t do* but can control (e.g., comply with your requests, be non-aggressive with others, tell the truth, etc.)

12. Don’t personalize the child’s problems

The fact that your child has problems doesn’t mean you are a “bad parent” or have done the wrong things to cause your child’s problems. Parents don’t cause ADHD – but they can do a lot to help a child with ADHD! Because you have a challenging child, you will learn a lot about effective parenting, and will in turn become a better parent.

13. Be patient

Both with yourself for the mistakes you will inevitably make raising your child or trying out new ways of responding to your child (all parents make mistakes!), and be patient with your child as well. With ADHD children, progress usually happens by taking 2 steps forward and 1 step back. That’s natural – expect it!

Resources for Parents:

Russell Barkley: *Taking Charge of ADHD* (Paperback, 2000)

Thomas Phelan: *All About Attention-Deficit Disorder* (Paperback, 2000)

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