



Left Out

How Teachers Can Help Change a Student's Negative Reputation

by Amori Yee Mikami, PhD

Many children with ADHD are socially excluded by their classmates at school. Other students are reluctant to work with them. At recess, peers say that children with ADHD can't play. These experiences can be painful and make school an unpleasant place.

For this reason, it's important to help children with ADHD to develop better relationships with their peers.

One way to help children be better accepted is to help them manage their negative behaviors. However, many parents, teachers, and clinicians have the frustrating experience of seeing a child with ADHD improve in his or her behavior, *but it is as if the peers don't even notice*.

This phenomenon is called reputational bias, and it is unfortunately real. Once children develop a negative reputation in the minds of peers, psychological research suggests that peers actually have cognitive biases that tend to preserve their original negative impressions. That

is, peers are more likely to remember the negative behaviors of a child they dislike while forgetting the positive behaviors. Any neutral or ambiguous behaviors are interpreted as negative by peers.

This means that even as children with ADHD may be working on improving their behavior, they are fighting an uphill battle in terms of getting peers to change their impressions. Think about how discouraging this must be to a child with ADHD who needs maximal support when trying new social skills for the first time.

How teachers can help

Parents often ask at this point if their only option is to change schools. Although a new school is a viable solution for some families, the good news is that teachers may be able to help improve a child's negative reputation. In partnership with Drs. Julie Owens and Steve Evans at

Tips for Approaching Your Child's Teacher

Ohio University, our team has created the *Making Socially Accepting Inclusive Classrooms (MOSAIC)* program. We tested MOSAIC in a short-term, summer camp setting where it resulted in peers' greater liking of children with ADHD. Currently, we are testing MOSAIC in regular classrooms during the school year.

In MOSAIC, we offer tips to elementary school teachers for changing peer impressions of children with ADHD.

- **Explain that everyone has different abilities, personalities, strengths and weaknesses, and this is okay.** A powerful way to do this is when the teacher gives age-appropriate examples of his or her personal strengths and weaknesses. This models for peers that the teacher truly accepts differences in everyone.
- **Take a personal interest in students with ADHD.** A teacher can start by finding out more about what the child likes to do outside of school, without directing, evaluating, or judging. When a teacher has a more positive relationship with a student with ADHD, peers get the impression that the teacher values the child with ADHD, which helps shape their own feelings about this child.
- **Help peers see commonalities with students with ADHD.** Some teachers call classmates' attention to shared interests with students with ADHD. For instance, a teacher might say, "You both play on soccer teams, by the way." Repeating these types of statements over time will lead to more peers perceiving children with ADHD to be like them, and more things for peers to talk about with children with ADHD.

- **Call attention to genuine personal strengths in children with ADHD.** Teachers can identify a genuine strength in the child with ADHD that the teacher truly values in the child, which could be unrelated to behavioral compliance or academic achievement. For instance, the child might be a fast runner or good at drawing. If teachers point out this strength in front of peers, this will help peers notice the positive aspects of a child with a negative reputation.

- **Correct behavior discreetly.** Children with ADHD require many corrections for their behavior, as this is the nature of the disorder. However, a teacher can reduce peers' negative attention to these corrections by maintaining a warm, connected tone even while telling a child with ADHD that his or her behavior is inappropriate. When

Some parents say that their child's teacher has a negative mindset about their child with ADHD, and feel at a loss to proceed. This is a difficult situation. However, research finds that when a teacher has a good working relationship with a parent, the teacher is more likely to personally like that parent's child. If you can approach the teacher in a way that gets the teacher to feel positively about you, you will naturally make it easier for the teacher to form a positive relationship with your child, which is important for helping to change your child's negative reputation with peers.

Try to start every interaction with the teacher by pointing out something positive the teacher is doing. Thank the teacher for doing that thing. Everyone likes to feel appreciated.

Ask the teacher what he or she is working on with your child and ask how you can help support this at home. You may not agree with everything the teacher says, and this is okay, but thank the teacher for the input.

Everyone can get defensive when they feel criticized. If you offer suggestions to the teacher for how to interact with your child, try to phrase it by asking "I wonder if X would work...?" "What is your opinion about X?" as opposed to implying that the teacher needs to change something.

Of course, there may be situations where you feel that the teacher is doing something very harmful for your child. In these cases, it may be important to take a stronger stance. However, these simple tips may help start a parent and teacher off on the right foot, smooth over minor disagreements, and form a collaborative relationship that will ultimately be best for the child with ADHD.

possible, if a teacher can call the child aside in order to provide this correction discreetly, this communicates to peers that the teacher respects and likes the child, despite needing to correct the child's behavior.

Changing peers' impressions may not be easy, but over time, if teachers perform these actions repeatedly, peers may slowly gain a more positive view of a child with ADHD. 🧠

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