

Is Your Child's School ADHD-Friendly? Positive suggestions for how to get there

A chat with Maureen Gill, LCSW



MAUREEN GILL DOESN'T HESITATE WHEN ASKED what distinguishes a school as ADHD-friendly. "One, that the school has trained their teachers," she responds. "Two, that the principal is in favor of ADHD services; and three, that the schools work closely with the parents as partners in helping the students."

A pediatric and adult medical social worker, Gill is the mother of two adults with ADHD. She chairs the ADHD Partnership and a social worker with a private practice specializing in helping parents of children with ADHD. She is also a past member of the CHADD national board of directors and has served as a chapter coordinator in Northern Virginia. A certified Teacher to Teacher trainer, Gill is a presenter for national and regional workshops on ADHD.

How can you handle teachers who are certified in special education but do not believe ADHD exists?

This was often the case in the late 1980s, when many special education teachers were not trained or certified or didn't believe in ADHD. My first experience with one of my sons involved a special ed teacher who told me she had no idea what to do for a child with ADHD, and that made me worry.

My suggestion is to find out who in the school does believe in ADHD and work closely with them, hoping they can influence the teachers. I doubt you can truly turn someone around, but you can work at creating a friendlier atmosphere by finding allies in the school system who believe in the disorder and joining with them. If this group can get trainings started, it will help influence staff members who don't believe in ADHD.

My eight-year-old son's teacher calls me every day to complain about his behavior. How do I explain that he has ADHD?

Calling you to complain about his behavior every day is counterproductive. I might sound like I'm being "smart," but what I'd like to say to the teacher is that what happens at the school is your responsibility, and my responsibility is the home. If the teacher is having a problem with the behavior, then the problem is that the school doesn't know how to handle the behavior. Sometimes the school wants the parents to make everything well, but that's not realistic. The parent can't be there all day. The school needs to set up a behavior plan for in school.

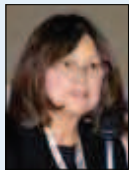
I do think it's important to be honest when your child has ADHD, because in the long run if you're not honest, everyone suffers. The parent also needs to become an expert on ADHD and be sure to know what s/he is talking about. If the teacher doesn't know how to handle the



About CHADD's Teacher to Teacher Training

CHADD's *Teacher to Teacher: Classroom Interventions for the Student with ADHD* is usually presented as a day-long workshop that identifies common ADHD-related learning problems plus practical classroom techniques, interventions, and the latest research to enhance school success for students with ADHD. Designed for mainstream classroom teachers, the training provides best-practice strategies in an interactive, hands-on format. Attendees have the opportunity to discuss solutions to common academic and behavioral problems in a "case-based" format. From theory to practice, attendees learn evidence-based interventions to manage every aspect of ADHD in the classroom.

Teacher to Teacher was created by Chris Ziegler Dendy, Anne Teeter Ellison, and Joan Helbing.



Chris Ziegler Dendy, MS, has over forty years of professional experience as a teacher, school psychologist, mental health counselor, and administrator. She is also the mother of three children with ADHD. A prolific author and producer of three videos on ADHD, Dendy served on CHADD's board of directors and was inducted into the CHADD Hall of Fame in 2006. Dendy is the editor of the highly acclaimed *CHADD Educator's Manual on ADHD: An In-Depth Look from an Educational Perspective*.



Anne Teeter Ellison, EdD, professor emeritus of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is the former training director of UWM's school psychology doctoral program and the author or coauthor of several books on ADHD. A former member of CHADD's board of directors, she served as its president from 2005-08 and was inducted into the CHADD Hall of Fame in 2010. Ellison is a contributing editor to the *CHADD Educator's Manual on ADHD*.



Joan Helbing, MS, has over thirty-five years of professional experience as a teacher, diagnostician, and regional ADD consultant with the Appleton Area School District in Wisconsin. She is the mother of two daughters who have ADHD. A former member of CHADD's board of directors, Helbing is a contributing author to the *CHADD Educator's Manual on ADHD*.

Learn more at chadd.org

child, then perhaps a meeting with the teacher and a behavior specialist in the school can be helpful in setting up a brief behavioral plan.

This problem is largely the teacher's. When my son was in half-day kindergarten, the ambitious teacher had a very large agenda that looked like something for high school or college. I knew my son would disrupt this, and he did. The cruelest thing the teacher did was to assign an intern to document every little thing he did wrong, and she sent this list home every day with a note saying, *Mrs. Gill, please speak to him about this*. One day it had fourteen things on it!

I cried that day. I felt helpless because I could not be in her class changing everything. If I had to do the same thing today, I would do it very differently. This is her problem to solve. The parents can't be there to

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solve it, nor can they talk to a child who has ADHD about not doing something—especially fourteen different things that happened earlier that day.

My daughter is in eleventh grade and has a 504 plan. There are many ADHD resources available to the teachers (books, videos, workshops), but during the 504 meeting in September, I asked if the teachers had had any training in ADHD and none had, and none appeared interested. I was sadly surprised, since so many kids have ADHD. What can be done to encourage schools to train their teachers about ADHD?

Before I answer this, I want to clarify what I said above—you want *allies in the school*. And also, I always encourage parents to take CHADD's Parent to Parent training program, which is available online. If you aren't knowledgeable yourself, you're not going to get anywhere. First train yourself!

High schools nationally have not trained their teachers. This is a universal problem and this is one of the reasons that the ADHD Partnership did the teen ADHD video training tape and designed the workshop. We've been crusading for the high school level for the last eight years and trying to get

this training out to as many schools as possible. Our training is only the beginning; there is also a sensitivity piece, with the purpose of showing high school and middle school teachers the broad spectrum of problems that students have.

Most high school teachers are not aware that students with ADHD might have memory or handwriting problems, or that they can't put large projects together. One of the best books on this topic is *Teaching Teens with ADD and ADHD* by Chris Dendy (Woodbine, 2011). This book is a bible for what to do right at the secondary level and can actually be used as the text for training at the elementary level. The other book is the revised *CHADD Educator's Manual on ADHD*, which has a special section on teenagers. These two books can serve as texts for training in the high school setting, as well as middle school.

How do you get the high schools to be willing to do the training? Approaching high schools is harder than approaching elementary or middle schools. I would not recommend that a parent go alone to the principal and ask for training. I would use a group approach. Six or seven parents, along with professionals, can go as a group and should offer to help the principal set up the training. We initially thought that high school teachers were not interested, but we found that sixty to seventy percent were interested.

Are there resources that schools can use to train the teachers? The principal at the charter school my son attends seems pretty open to training and services for disabilities.

I would direct them to CHADD's Teacher to Teacher program [see sidebar on page 11 and chadd.org]. Its founders, Ann Teeter Ellison, Chris Ziegler Dendy, and Joan Helbing, took a long time designing this program and they are probably the top experts in the field in the United States. The principles and strategies really do work, and teachers really do want to teach other teachers so they will succeed.

One way to get training started is to look for the professionals in your area that truly know ADHD or the person in your school system who knows ADHD and join the two together. This is what the ADHD Partnership did; we used a team concept, with parents, community professionals, and school staff working together to do the training.

Who do you approach first to discuss teacher training on ADHD—the principal or the superintendent?

Find the staff person or persons in the school system who would be interested in the training, and talk to them. You could ask, "Do you think we can set up some training?" Let them know you'd be willing to help. Discuss what kind of training might be needed, when to do it, and so forth. It's always more helpful in these partner-

ship discussions to have an "inside" person in the school, because you can accomplish more.

I've also approached principals directly, but what I've found is that it's better to have someone in-house to promote the idea, because the principal may have fifty things to attend to. If it's not possible to find someone on the inside, then going to the principal might be necessary.

It might be a little difficult even to get an appointment with the superintendent, but if you do, it's better to approach the superintendent as a group. I don't find that individuals are as effective as a group.

When we formed the ADHD Partnership back in 1992, there was a new mandate to provide services for children with ADHD, and so we approached the superintendent as a group. The superintendent was especially pleased that the group included a pediatrician and other professionals along with parents. We also had a number of professionals in the area who offered to do free training. We worked as a group and we offered to help; that's very important. That's how the ADHD Partnership and systemwide training began in our county's schools.

I'm studying to become a teacher. Since it's not in the curriculum, I'm wondering what I can do to make my secondary education classroom more ADHD-friendly.

CHADD's annual conference is probably the number one place to go to get the best information, but I would take advantage of any classes regarding ADHD that you see advertised. As far as making your classroom more ADHD-friendly, I want to refer you to the ADHD Partnership website, adhdpartnership.com, where we have a short video you can order. It features teens and experienced teachers talking about how to make the classroom ADHD-friendly—which will also make the classroom friendlier for other students.

We asked the teens to tell their teachers about what would help them the most. We also did the same with the teachers. This was done at the high school level for secondary schools, but we're finding that even elementary schools are showing it because the teens face the same problems elementary students face, but the teens are more articulate about it.

We also designed a PowerPoint introduction to the video that goes over the basics of ADHD. Because these teens look so "normal," we wanted those watching the video to be aware of just what their difficulties are, and that these difficulties go beyond inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, and this video does that. The introduction can be used for a workshop in your school. All the ADHD Partnership training programs are downloadable so that people can take them to their schools and use them. Again, visit adhdpartnership.com to view the training programs and to order a training video used by the ADHD Partnership.

How do you assess whether or not a principal supports ADHD services? I've lived through a runaround with my child's elementary school and now face the same in middle school.

“Actions speak louder than words” when it comes to whether a principal supports ADHD services or not. Over the years I’ve found that within the first few minutes of meeting someone I can guess what the year is going to be like. Teachers also know if the principal is ADHD-friendly.

If the principal is not ADHD-friendly, it filters down and it becomes much more difficult to get trainings and so forth. I’ve not found that most principals are like this, but some are. You’ll especially see this in meetings with the principal, parents, and staff.

With middle school, there’s a whole new set of problems. It’s a good idea to go before to meet the counselor before school starts to try to help with the transition. Selection of teachers is extremely important, as a teacher can make or break a year. And when dealing with a team of teachers, you need to



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make sure you’re on the right team. Our local middle school has six or eight teachers who work as a team. I’ve found that some teams work well and some don’t, and the school knows this too.

Sometimes a student works better with one team than another. If you can get the middle school team on your side, you have it made. This is what you’re looking for. If the principal is not in favor of giving accommodations for ADHD, then you need to find allies in the school system to help you.

You mention that professionals should be involved in approaching the school. What is the best way to approach professionals and what type of professionals would be most beneficial? I have been in a case conference where they argued with my clinical psychologist.

You have to be very careful about which professionals you choose to go with you. For example, when we first started, we had some very feisty professionals; people who were educational advocates or psychologists who advocated for children. But because they had fought with the school system for so long, we found that they agitated the meeting.

When we formed the partnership, we would get together with school staff—administrators, counselors, teachers—and with CHADD community parents and outside professionals, such as clinical psychologists, pediatricians, behavioral specialists, etc. We would get together once a month and start to design training programs. I found out early on that

those professionals who were contentious with the school system were counterproductive.

I chaired the meeting and I was criticized because I told them to tone down. At our school system with our partnership, we've tried to work together and not be defensive or highly critical. We have found that this approach has worked best and it has been more productive. Some have said to me "you would have accomplished more and faster," and that might be true, but we moved steadily and slowly and were able to have a partnership that has lasted more than eighteen years. And the schools are very respectful of us.

We have learned to work together. The professionals I would recommend are, number one, a pediatrician, because they are highly regarded. I would recommend counselors from the community who are working. They all need to be knowledgeable or else they're no help. I also recommend educational advocates or those who run outside or after-school programs. I would not recommend any professionals who are going to fight with the school staff at the meeting.

How do you know when you are asking too much of an elementary school teacher? The psychiatrist wants the teacher to complete a questionnaire before and after changing medication and we are on the third medication change of the school year. The teacher has met with me and emails me weekly updates. She has twenty-five other students in the class, many of whom have their own set of issues. I don't want to be the parent that teachers avoid because I am always in their faces. How do you find a balance between advocate and helicopter parent?

The form used for changing the medication must be simple to fill out; something that won't take too long. Some of the forms have a morning part and an afternoon part, because sometimes there's a difference. For teachers, if it's easy to fill out and they see that it's helpful, they probably won't mind doing it. I don't think an email once a week is too much, at least until things improve. I would be honest with the teacher and say you don't want to burden her too much, but say the doctor needs this.

The behavior at home may be very different from the behavior at school, so the teacher's input is very valuable. It wouldn't hurt to show the teacher appreciation in some way, such as a small gift or a letter to the principal. Adjusting medication can be one of the most difficult parts of helping a child. This can be very difficult for the parent, too.

Let me say one more thing about ADHD-friendly schools. Every year, CHADD of Northern Virginia gives certificate awards to any teacher recommended by a CHADD member as being helpful to students with ADHD. We invited the teachers to our last meeting of the school year to receive the award in person. We gave out hundreds of these certificates over the course of many years. Teachers loved these awards and this was a huge success. We also gave an award to the school staff member of the year at our last meeting. Word about these awards spread throughout the school system. ●