

by Richard Lougy, LMFT, and David Rosenthal, MD

I Hate to Hear from



THE TELEPHONE RINGS and the school principal is on the other end of the line. Your heart misses a beat and, taking a deep breath, you answer, “Yes, Ms. Smith, how can I help you?” She is calling about your eight-year-old, Bobby, who has hit another child on the playground. She says he needed to be restrained and taken to the office, and he will not calm down. You are asked to pick him up.

Calls from school generally come not to tell the parent of an affected child what a great day their child had, but to report an altercation with a teacher or child. Parents usually hate to hear from their child’s school.

Some parents avoid answering the phone

School is not always a good fit for a child with ADHD. Unfortunately, you may hear more bad news than good news from your child’s school. Your child may find many aspects of school challenging: sitting still, standing in line, following directions, completing schoolwork, and holding back angry feelings and words. Schools, often limited both by ideas and staff in dealing with affected children, look to you to help solve the problem. Somehow you are expected to provide some kind of consequence to help your child be less impulsive and/or more compliant in the classroom. Unfortunately, the solution is not that easy or quick.

Some parents avoid answering the phone or screen calls during school hours. They know this is wrong and potentially dangerous, but after an unending series of calls from their child’s school, they shout, “Enough! Enough!” Frankly, they run out of ideas on how to stop their child from being disruptive or aggressive, and simply stop answering the phone until they find

the emotional strength to deal with the school.

When your child disrupts the education of other children, damages property, or hits other children purposely, the school will call you. Schools are responsible for the education and safety of children under their care. In most cases, the school is not out to get your child or take revenge on you because your child’s misbehaviors persist. Rather, they’re attempting to balance your child’s needs with the needs of other children under the school’s care. Sometimes the behaviors are so disruptive and aggressive that a child cannot stay at school; however, most of the time a disruptive child is disciplined at school.

Sending your child home or calling you is the last resort used by most principals. Most teachers and principals will talk with the child, take away a recess, or try any number of other consequences before you are called. So when you get that phone call, try to understand that you were probably at the end of a long list of attempted interventions.

What can you do that helps?

Communicate closely with your child’s school. Yes, even answer the phone when you don’t want to. Share with your child’s teacher and the school principal interventions that you are trying at

My Child's School



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home. If need be, ask your child's doctor to write a short letter outlining medical interventions being used with your child. Let people know you are not ignoring his or her problems, but have taken an active role in trying to minimize some of the disruptive and aggressive behaviors.

School personnel are often more accommodating and understanding if they see that the parent is not making excuses, but is actively trying to help the school deal with their child. By presenting a helping role, rather than an adversarial one, you can often defuse and significantly change the dynamics between your child and the school. A teacher who was seen as rigid may begin to make subtle changes and become more accepting of accommodations to help your child.

Little change can take place that will benefit your child if you and the school are not talking. The school needs your support. The staff needs you to take your child home when his or her behavior is unacceptable. View your role as a team member in your child's education.

Sometimes part of your child's education will be to learn that when they hit others or are disrespectful of a classmate's right to learn, they will be held responsible for their behavior. Affected children do have more difficulty controlling their emotions and can be impulsive; however, they still need to be held responsible for their inappropriate behaviors. Antisocial behavior cannot be tolerated by a parent or ignored.



The school's role in helping your child

The school's responsibility is to provide environmental changes that can minimize problematic behaviors. Schools have a legal obligation to make accommodations for affected children when their disability substantially limits learning. Your child has legal protections under federal legislation: IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and Section 504 (Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Sometimes state laws may provide even broader coverage of educational needs than federal laws require.

For many years, the Rehabilitation Act's main thrust had been in the area of employment; however, within the last several years, the federal Office for Civil Rights (OCR), charged with enforcement of Section 504, has become proactive in the field of education for individuals with disabilities. However, not all children with ADHD qualify for Section 504.

What's important to emphasize here is that schools have a legal responsibility to make accommodations for your child if his disorder is substantially limiting his ability to learn in school. Unfortunately, some schools may resist providing needed services and accommodations for children with ADHD. This lack of effort by some schools may stem from lack of knowledge about federal and state guidelines related to children with ADHD.

Some teachers and administrators, for example, view Section 504 as requiring additional staff support or time they don't see themselves having. Some schools sadly equate Section 504 with more work and not a benefit to the child. Some parents report that they are many times the "only advocate" for their child and find themselves "fighting" for needed accommodations.

Some closing thoughts

Classroom accommodations do not necessarily guarantee success. A school can have the best of intentions and plans, but for one reason or another, a child's behavior still can be disruptive. Many factors determine and influence behavior; school is important, but it is just one of many influences in his or her life. Children can have anger and feelings of loss from a divorce or death in a family, or deal with any number of other stressors that affect their behavior in class and at home. Some children struggle with a mood or anxiety disorders. If your child continues to misbehave, don't necessarily blame the school.

Your child and his teacher need your support. Answer the phone when called by your child's school. As painful as some of the calls can be, they are not meant to hurt you or your child. Most classroom teachers are advocates for children, but when presented with a child with ADHD, they often have limited training and support. Your child is probably difficult to handle at home, so understand the school can find equal difficulty dealing with an active and sometimes noncompliant child at school. 🗨️

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