

A woman with brown hair, wearing a teal blazer over a white collared shirt, is shown in a thoughtful pose, resting her chin on her hand. The background is a dark grey chalkboard. Two thought bubbles are drawn with white dotted lines. The top bubble contains the text "Maybe My Student Has ADHD"... and the bottom bubble contains the text "What's a Teacher to Do?".

"Maybe
My Student
Has ADHD"...

What's a
Teacher
to Do?

by Katherine McGavern

LET'S SAY YOU ARE A FIFTH GRADE TEACHER WITH YEARS OF EXPERIENCE. You enjoy your work, and you honestly feel you have a gift for getting through to your students and helping them do, and be, their best.

Then let's say you are still puzzled by, and sometimes unnerved—even unstrung—by a certain type of student you see in your classroom almost every year.

Maybe it's Ben, clearly a bright kid with a lot of energy and enthusiasm, who is always fiddling and fidgeting or drawing on everything, and just can't stay in his seat. His cubby and his desk are a disorganized mess, he routinely forgets to hand in homework, he doesn't seem to listen in class, and he blurts out answers (because he can't remember or he's too impatient to raise his hand). He engages with any student near him while you're trying to teach a lesson, yet always seems surprised if you call him on it. Waiting quietly in the lunch line or on the way to recess is utterly impossible for this little bundle of energy.

Or maybe it's Claire, smart, sweet, and quiet, a daydreamer. Whenever you call on her, it's clear her mind is miles, if not light years, away from the classroom, and you're concerned about the consistent gap between the low-quality work she turns in (when she remembers to) and the work she's capable of. Affable and respectful, she's no problem in your classroom, but you just can't seem to catch or hold her attention with any subject.

If you have students like these in your classroom, it's reasonable to suspect they may be on the ADHD spectrum. But how do you go about helping them—and their families—begin to assess the situation?

Here are some steps you can take to help these students start to get the help they need to be better learners in your classroom, and in future classrooms as well.

1. DO YOUR HOMEWORK!

- **Begin by keeping a record of behaviors that stand out.** These behaviors may be interfering with the child's learning, disrupting the classroom, or causing social problems with other students and other teachers (at gym, in music class, etc.). Include relevant work samples, and any interventions you have tried, noting their outcomes. Keep your notes specific and neutral in tone, and date each entry. Also, keep notes of any relevant observations from other teachers, and of conversations with the child's parents.
- **Ask last year's teachers** if they noticed any of these problems, and if so, do they have any successful strategies to suggest?
- **Check the protocol at your school.** Ask appropriate personnel (the principal, guidance counselor, school psychologist, special ed teacher, etc.) about the process in place for this contingency, and ask about the guidelines for initiating a conversation with parents. When you're ready for that conversation, ask at least one other school professional to join you.

2. MEET THE PARENTS!

- **Always start with the positives!** Be ready to cite examples of the child's positive characteristics and behaviors, to assure the parents that you are their child's advocate, not his or her adversary.
- **Explain that you have some concerns about certain behaviors that are affecting the child's learning (and/or school performance and social adjustment).** Share examples from your notes, such as problems with self-control, the ability to pay attention, to stay seated, to follow directions, to remain on task, etc. You may want to point out that the student's constant restlessness makes it hard for him to focus on classroom lessons, and sometimes causes problems with peers, who find it distracting.

- **Ask if the parents have observed any of these behaviors at home** (which is highly likely). This may help them more readily accept your concerns and frustrations.
- **Explain that sometimes there is a physiological explanation for these behaviors, and that an evaluation would be a very useful next step** to better understanding the child's actions.
- **Suggest that they share all this information with their doctor.**
- **Review with the parents your school's resources for helping their child**, emphasizing the school's commitment to doing what's best for both their child and his or her learning environment.

Parents, often already overloaded with the work of raising and supporting a family, may be resistant to your input. Here are some very important watchwords for you to remember during this conversation:

TO LEARN MORE

WEBSITES AND BLOGS

- CHADD.org or help4adhd.org
- adhdteacher.wordpress.com
- drthomasebrown.com
- russellbarkley.org
- ADDitude.com
- addconsults.com

BOOKS

- *CHADD Educators Manual*
- *Delivered From Distraction* - Dr. Ned Hallowell
- *Fidget to Focus* - Rotz & Wright
- *1-2-3 Magic* - T.W. Phelan

DO:

- **Emphasize repeatedly that your main concern is their child's well-being, and his or her right to succeed in your classroom.** Make it clear that that is the sole basis for the conversation, and that you hope you and the parents can collaborate to do whatever is best for the student.

- **Emphasize problems the student is having—never the problems his or her behaviors are causing you.**
- **Help the parents understand the importance of a comprehensive evaluation, and the specific steps they can take toward a school-based or clinically-based evaluation.**
- **Assure them that you will support any actions they take, and that you are committed to providing all the support (interventions, learning and behavioral strategies) you can to help their student succeed.**

DO NOT:

- **NEVER mention the term ADHD!** Stick to your observations and your concerns, and your desire to help your student succeed. In addition to your not being qualified to diagnose ADHD, liabilities may be incurred if this subject is not handled correctly.
- **NEVER discuss medication.** If parents ask for your advice on the subject, refer them to medical professionals.
- **NEVER discuss your personal thoughts about, or experience with, ADHD.**

Above all, as you contemplate taking on the challenge of trying to help Ben or Claire, remember this: You have the unique opportunity to profoundly change a child's life for the better. Undiagnosed and untreated ADHD leads statistically to a long and dreary list of failures: substance abuse, school drop-outs, unplanned pregnancies, arrests, inability to hold jobs, financial failure, divorce, jail time.

Ned Hallowell tells us, "There is genius embedded in these brains," but these brains need understanding and informed collaboration along the way. Keep learning all you can about this fascinating, maddening, amazing brain, and be a change agent for the students who need you. You will literally be saving their lives! 🧠

Katherine McGavern coaches adults with ADHD and is a certified Parent to Parent teacher. She gives presentations on ADHD to teachers (K-12), community organizations, and parent groups; provides training on ADHD to student teachers at The College of New Jersey; and is a member of the editorial advisory board of Attention. McGavern is a cofounding member of CHADD Mercer County, and facilitates at their monthly meetings in Princeton, New Jersey.