

PREVENTING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS : Six Proactive Strategies

by Terry Illes, PhD



EVER FELT CHALLENGED BY YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR? Exasperated by the tenth reminder you've given about picking up toys? Wondered whether you could learn to manage behavior problems before they occur? You can—with six strategies that anticipate the types of conduct problems often found in children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Most of the behavior challenges of children with AD/HD are linked to poor impulse control. As children mature, they learn to rely on higher-order thinking skills, called executive functions, to regulate their behavior. These sophisticated thinking skills encourage the child to carefully consider the consequences of actions and to act in ways that maximize long-term benefits. But children with AD/HD are so impulsive that they often do not take the time to utilize the executive functions to regulate their behavior. They often fail to consider the consequences of their actions, and act in ways that maximize short-term benefits. These deficits in executive functioning produce a wide array of behavioral problems.

One of the most important forms of treatment for a child with AD/HD is to create a supportive home environment, one that uses proactive strategies to manage problem behaviors prior to their actual onset. Rather than wait until a problem emerges, proactive strategies anticipate the type of behavior problems that children with AD/HD are likely to exhibit. Proactive strategies help to reduce many of the environmental obstacles that trigger inappropriate behaviors such as noncompliance, arguing, aggression, and tantrums. Parents who take the time and make the effort to use proactive strategies will encounter fewer behavior problems within the home, and less need to use reinforcement and punishment procedures to change problem behaviors.

1 STRATEGY #1: Maintain a Disability Perspective

Forming and maintaining a disability perspective provides the foundation on which all other interventions are constructed. A disability perspective is an understanding of AD/HD that promotes acceptance, support, and empathy for the child. A disability perspective accepts the following:

- › Children with AD/HD have a legitimate medical condition that undermines their level of self-control.
- › Children with AD/HD have the same need as other children to please and gain acceptance and reassurance from adults.
- › Children with AD/HD can improve their self-control with the support of effective parenting strategies and treatment interventions.
- › Children with AD/HD should be expected to make gradual, rather than rapid, behavioral progress.
- › Children with AD/HD will respond more favorably to supportive and positive discipline strategies than to rejecting and punitive discipline strategies.

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2 STRATEGY #2: Establish a Parental Division of Labor

In a two-parent home, it's essential to decide "who is going to do what" with regard to the child with AD/HD. Parents who carefully consider the division of labor will be less overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting a child with the disorder. Coordinated effort by the two caretakers will make it easier to work toward mutually identified behavioral goals, and the increased supervision and monitoring will allow the child with AD/HD less opportunity to avoid daily responsibilities and unpleasant tasks. In developing the division of parental tasks, consider the following:

- › Is each parent aware of his/her role expectations? Is each satisfied with the division of labor?
- › What practical concerns must be taken into consideration when determining responsibilities? *Is one parent unavailable to monitor homework completion?*
- › Do differences in skill or temperament make one parent a better candidate to fulfill certain responsibilities than the other? *An even-tempered parent may be more suited to handling discipline issues. The parent with better communication skills may be more adept at dealing with conflict.*
- › How does the child's response to each parent influence the determination of each partner's parenting roles? *Which parent will monitor the completion of daily chores? Who will deal with school-related issues and concerns?*

3 STRATEGY #3: Establish Daily Routines

Children with AD/HD have difficulty with change and unpredictability. Parents who establish consistent daily routines provide the situational cues that support and encourage appropriate behavior. Routines provide the child with a sense of calm by offering the child a more manageable and secure environment. Tips for establishing daily routines include:

- › Make routines as enjoyable as possible.
- › Use routines to reassure your child that he/she will have the opportunity to enjoy a highly-valued activity or incentive.
- › Make a daily schedule and put it in writing. Schedule times for homework, chores, meals, practice time, free time, and bedtime—and be sure to set limits on screen time. Review the next day's schedule each night, and forewarn about any deviations from the usual schedule.
- › Cue transitions from one activity to the next activity in the routine. This helps reduce a child's frustration level when switching from a rewarding activity to a less pleasant one (for example, turning off the TV to get ready for bedtime).
- › If the daily schedule is too complicated, simplify it. This might indicate that your expectations are unreasonable for your child.
- › If the daily schedule is too inconsistent, simplify your life. This is probably an indication that your expectations for yourself are unreasonable.

4 STRATEGY #4: Make Your Home AD/HD-Friendly

Children with AD/HD are often at odds with their surroundings. Parents may reduce potential conflict by

providing a physical environment compatible with the child's physical and developmental needs. Some tips include:

- › Furnish your home with your child carefully in mind. Buy inexpensive furniture until your child recognizes the difference between a leather couch and a trampoline. Equip your child's play space with beanbag chairs and futons.
- › Designate a space and time in your home for roughhousing. You'll be more successful containing and regulating such play than trying to outlaw it.
- › Provide your child with an outlet for their curiosity and need for hands-on exploration. Keep a "fix-it" box in which you put broken household items with which your child can safely play. Better to have them take apart an old vacuum cleaner than a new blender.
- › Allow for some disarray in your home. Although a cluttered and disorganized environment is not helpful to children with AD/HD, neither is a home ready for a Good Housekeeping photo shoot. Both you and your child will be frequently frustrated if you create a home in which everything has to be clean, tidy, and always in its place.

5 STRATEGY #5: Teach Organizational Skills

The physical world of a child with AD/HD is often one of clutter and chaos. Prized possessions, school materials, and clothes tend to mysteriously disappear and re-

Losing Perspective?

Adhering to a disability perspective is a challenging commitment in real-life situations. Here are some warning signs that you might be losing perspective:

- › You ask your child "why" he/she acted in a particular way and expect to receive an answer that demonstrates insight and self-awareness.
- › You get frustrated because your child did not act differently today because of something that you did yesterday. Remember, change is gradual.
- › You take your child's misbehavior personally and react with anger to inappropriate behavior.
- › You waste a lot of time and energy trying to determine which inappropriate behaviors are due to AD/HD, and which are due to other causes.
- › You believe that your child just needs a firmer hand and that it is wrong to offer your child reinforcement for something that he/she should be doing anyway.



An Effective Routine

When my two sons were in their early years of elementary school, I quickly learned to dread the trick question they asked of me each morning: “Dad, what’s for breakfast?” If my answer to this seemingly simple question did not include some chocolate-flavored sugar fest, a blow-up was sure to follow. I decided that establishing a consistent breakfast schedule might be the answer to this dilemma. My sons and I discussed the possibilities and decided upon the following schedule:

Monday—frozen waffles

Tuesday—instant oatmeal

Wednesday—sugar cereal

Thursday—frozen waffles

Friday—instant oatmeal

Saturday—sugar cereal

Sunday—choice of scrambled eggs/French toast

The breakfast routine immediately solved the problem. My sons were reassured that they would have their favorite cereal twice per week and stopped asking for it on other days. Amazingly, the schedule became so entrenched in their lives that they willingly adhered to it throughout their high school years. It simply became so much a part of their way of life that they never thought to challenge it.



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appear. A cluttered physical world further undermines the child's sense of self-control and behavioral consistency. Parents who help their child organize their environment at an early age also help their child manage his/her conduct. A few tips:

- › Schedule a brief organizational time each night as part of the bedtime routine. *The goal is not to have a spic and span bedroom, but simply to maintain order and avoid excessive clutter.*
- › Provide storage cases for your child's possessions and label them.
- › Regularly inspect your child's closets and chest of drawers. Throw out assorted junk and unused items.
- › Have a box, basket, or bin near the front door in which your child can place items needed for the following school day.

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STRATEGY #6:

Communicate Clear Behavioral Expectations

Children with AD/HD tend to be unaware of the behavioral expectations and rules in a given situa-

tion. Parents who anticipate the problem and use strategies that clearly communicate family rules will have fewer problems with rule noncompliance. The following steps will help create clear behavioral expectations:

- › Hold a family meeting to brainstorm a list of potential rules.
- › Select three to five rules to be the House Rules. The rules will have more meaning if children have input into the selection, but parents determine the final list.
- › State the rules in objective and specific terms.
- › Establish consequences for compliance/noncompliance.
- › Post the rules and consequences on a chart that is displayed in a place where it will be easily and frequently viewed.
- › Target one House Rule for emphasis each week.
- › Consistently monitor and provide the consequences for compliance or noncompliance.
- › Each night, review examples of times when the rules were obeyed or violated. 🗣️