

A Versatile Strategy for Addressing Executive Skill Weaknesses

by Peg Dawson, EdD

Coach

Sam is a ten-year old boy with ADHD whose impulsivity and activity level not only make school challenging but also have a profound effect on his ability to make and keep friends. At recess, he invades other people's space, engages in annoying behavior to gain the attention of his peers, and is quick to anger if he feels he's been treated unfairly. He has an infectious laugh and a great sense of humor, but his behavior is unpredictable enough that his classmates avoid him on the playground whenever they can. They try to exclude him from group games and turn away when they see him approaching. Most recesses end with Sam feeling worse than when they began.

Andrea is a junior in high school, and her attention disorder presents quite differently. She is neither impulsive nor overactive, but she is disorganized, distracted, and delays starting her homework as long as she can. As with many teenagers with ADHD, she believes her memory is better than it is. "I don't need to write down my homework assignments," she tells herself, "I'm sure I'll remember." She is bright enough to be a straight-A student, but she loses her homework so frequently and passes in so many long term assignments late that her grades hover in the low to mid-C range. She'd like to do better, but she has trouble committing herself to any plan to improve her skills or academic performance.

SETTING UP A PEER COACHING PROGRAM

Before coaching begins, the coach supervisor (teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist):

- Identifies potential coach from the class of the student with ADHD and invites the child to be a coach.
- Contacts parents of both the coach and the student with ADHD to obtain permission to participate in the intervention.
- Checks with the child with ADHD to see if he/she feels the nominated coach is a child he/she can work with.
- Meet with the coach and student to explain how coaching will work. For example, the coach supervisor might explain that "everybody has something they need help with" and this is a way to help the student who has ADHD get along better with his/her classmates. Coaching is described as a "partnership," with the coach serving as an "extra pair of eyes and ears" to see when the student is being successful.

- Explain to the coach and the student with ADHD what goal-setting is, with an emphasis on reachable goals. It tends to work best when the coach supervisor creates a menu of possible goals that the student might choose to work on.
- With the coach and the student with ADHD, create a list of reinforcers with different values. One way to do this is to put together a reward basket with small toys that might be attractive to the child with ADHD as well as activity reinforcers such as extra computer time.
- Explain how the daily coaching sessions will work, including the record keeping component (goal sheets).

The daily coaching process has three steps:

- Each morning at the beginning of school the coach meets with the student who has ADHD to select a goal for the day, choosing from the prepared menu.

ALTHOUGH THEY SHARE AN ADHD DIAGNOSIS, these two students have very little in common. They differ markedly in age and symptomatology—one is struggling with social acceptance, the other with academic success. And although they both have executive skill weaknesses, that profile differs as well. Sam struggles with response inhibition and emotional control, while Andrea has evident difficulties with organization, working memory, task initiation, and goal-directed persistence.

They both, however, would benefit from coaching—and there's good research to suggest that this intervention would be effective for both of them (see, for example, Merriman & Coddling, 2008; Plumer & Stoner, 2005).

ing

Succinctly, coaching is a process in which a coach works with a student to set goals designed to enhance executive skills and lead to improved self-regulation. The coach may be either an adult or a peer, and the goals set could be daily, short-term, or long-term, depending on the age of the child and the nature of the problem.

There are a number of different coaching models, including peer coaching, reciprocal coaching (where students coach each other), one-on-one coaching employing peers, older students, or adults as coaches, and group coaching in which one adult coaches several students in small groups. Let's

look at two approaches that may be successful with students like Sam—elementary-aged students whose ADHD and executive skill weaknesses are causing social problems—and high school students like Andrea, whose ADHD and executive skill weaknesses are impeding academic success.

What the two approaches have in common are goal-setting and daily check-ins to provide performance monitoring and feedback. One other critical element they share is that they are voluntary processes, in which students with ADHD are invited to participate and have the option of opting in or out. They are also collaborative processes in which the student and coach have a “side-by-side” relationship rather than a hierarchical one. At bottom, coaching empowers students to take control of whatever issues are standing in the way of their success, however that success is defined.

Peer coaching with elementary school students

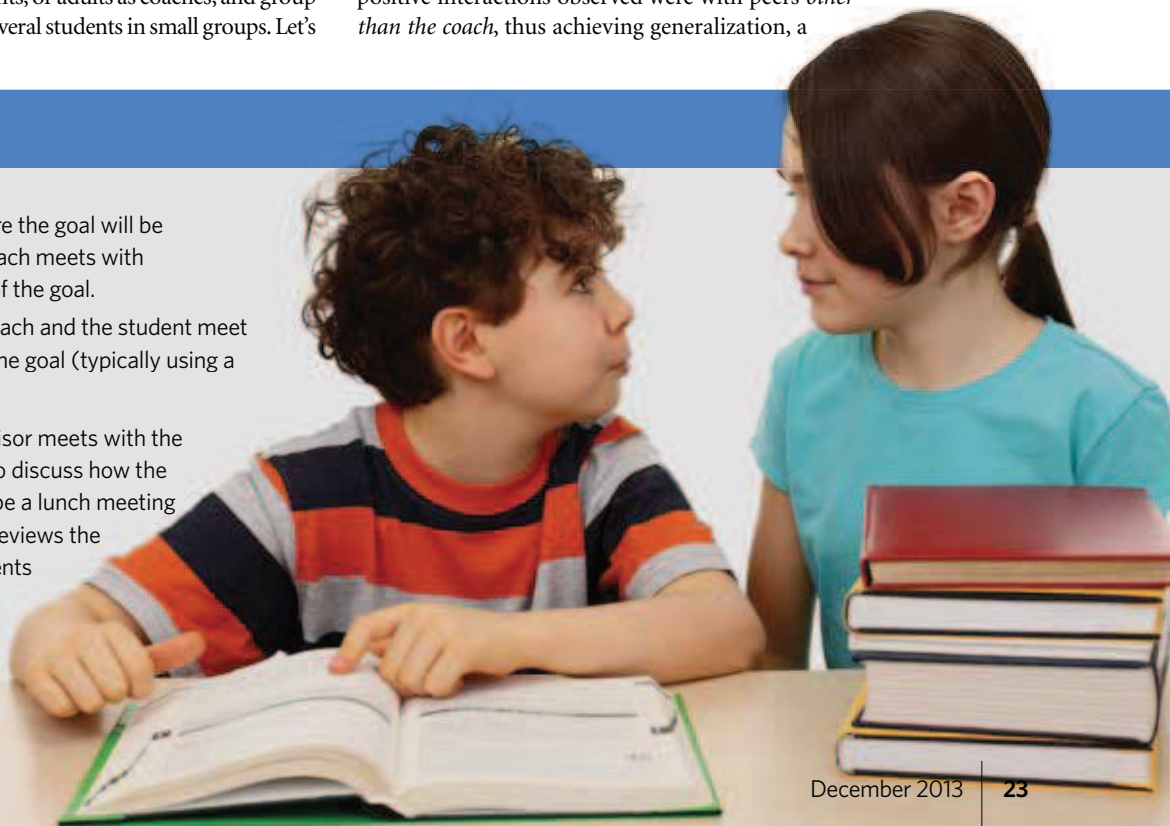
Peer coaching has a number of advantages over more traditional approaches to addressing social skills deficits in children with ADHD. Both contingency management approaches, such as creating daily report cards in which children earn rewards for engaging in target behaviors, and social skills groups, where adult group leaders employ direct instruction to teach explicitly positive social behaviors such as how to join a conversation or how to share in play situations, require considerable time commitment on the part of adults.

Peer coaching is much less labor intensive. The adult (teacher, guidance counselor, or school psychologist) acts as a supervisor for the process, but the daily coaching activities are carried out primarily by the coach and the student with ADHD. Furthermore, even with children as young as elementary school-aged, learning social skills from peers is both preferable and more effective than being taught these same skills by adults. As developed by Plumer, the steps involved in setting up a peer coaching program are outlined in the sidebar below.

Does peer coaching work? Plumer and Stoner found that positive social interactions with peers increased both during academic times and during lunch and recess as a result of peer coaching. Furthermore, most of the positive interactions observed were with peers *other than the coach*, thus achieving generalization, a

- Just before the target activity where the goal will be implemented (e.g., recess), the coach meets with the student to remind him or her of the goal.
- Just after the target activity, the coach and the student meet to rate how well the student met the goal (typically using a 5-point scale).

On a weekly basis, the coach supervisor meets with the coach and the student with ADHD to discuss how the coaching went that week. This may be a lunch meeting at which time the coach supervisor reviews the goal sheets, debriefs with both students about what went well or what didn't go well, and helps the student with ADHD to select the appropriate reward.



THE COACHING PROCESS

PHASE ONE: Long-term goal-setting

Long-term goal-setting with secondary level students includes setting goals with respect both to high school graduation and to post-high school plans. The steps in this session are as follows:

1. Ask the student to describe his or her long-term goals. These goals may be vague at first and need refining through clarifying questions from the coach (for example, Do you plan to graduate from high school? Are you taking college, general or vocational track classes?). Help the student to be as specific as possible.
2. Working with one goal at a time, determine what steps the student needs to take in order to achieve that goal. It helps to ask the question, what do you need to do differently than you're doing now to achieve this goal? If students become too ambitious in their goal-setting, the coach may encourage them to focus on one goal at a time, or to set short-term goals that will help them get to the larger goal they desire.
3. Discuss what obstacles will need to be overcome in order to achieve that goal. Examples of these might be choosing to do more interesting things than homework, leaving assignments to the last minute with a resulting loss in quality, skipping classes, forgetting to hand in homework, etc.

4. Discuss how the student can work to overcome the obstacles he/she has identified. For instance, if leaving things until the last minute is an obstacle, the student might decide to make and follow a time line for long-term projects might help.
5. Identify what environmental supports or modifications need to be put in place in order to enhance the likelihood of success. These might include test-taking modifications such as extended time limits or taking tests in a quiet room, access to tutorial services,



critical aspect of social skills development that more traditional social skills groups often do not achieve.

Coaching teenagers for academic success

Working with teenagers with ADHD who are underperforming academically is initially a more complicated process, but once coaching is up and running, it often requires no more contact time between coach and student than coaching at the elementary level. With high school students, coaching has two phases. In phase one, the coach works with the student to develop a realistic set of long-range goals and a plan for meeting those goals. In the second phase, the coach works with students on a regular basis to help them plan their time, organize assignments, break down tasks, develop effective study skills, and, above all, to act as a supporter and cheerleader. A brief description of this process can be found in the sidebar ABOVE.

Particularly in the early stages of the coaching process, the emphasis by the coach is on support or encouragement. If the student frequently fails to follow the plans he/she has devised, the student is helped to evaluate where the plans are breaking down, but the coach may also want to help the student revise his/her plan or long-term goal to make it more realistic. As times goes on, and the student and coach become comfortable with each other, the coach may be able to be more direct in challenging the student to accomplish his daily tasks. Some coaches we have worked with report that for students who also receive special education services (such as an organizational studies class), they find it helpful to bring in the special education teacher so that the coach can continue to play a

predominantly supportive role while the teacher can provide a realistic picture of how the student is performing and can make recommendations for what might need to change.

Does this kind of coaching work? Merriman and Coddling (2008) used this model to help three students improve math homework completion and accuracy and found that all three students improved on both measures, and two were able to meet both short- and long-term goals—and continued to maintain high performance levels after coaching was gradually faded.

In a pilot study conducted at a New Hampshire high school to test the efficacy of the coaching process as it was developed, five students, sophomores and juniors, participated in coaching for two marking periods. Report card grades during the year prior to coaching and during the two marking periods during which coaching took place were compiled. The results are reported below.

% Grades Earned:	B or better	C	D
Before coaching	19	61	19
During coaching	63	32	5

Supporting students with ADHD

ADHD researcher Russ Barkley has commented on “the curious dissociation between knowing and doing” that characterizes youngsters with ADHD. These students often know what they need to do to achieve better

assistance with time management or organizational skills, etc.

6. Finally, check with the student to ensure that the plan being developed is realistic and within the capabilities of the student to achieve. Plans can be revised as the coaching continues, but every effort should be made to develop a plan at the outset that has a reasonable chance of success

PHASE TWO: Daily coaching sessions

The purpose of the daily coaching session is to help the student plan what tasks he or she has to accomplish before the next coaching session and to identify when the task will be completed. Each session follows the same format using the acronym REAP (Review, Evaluate, Anticipate, Plan):

- **Review:** go over the plans made at the previous coaching session to determine if the plans were carried out as intended.
- **Evaluate:** how well did it go? Did the student do what he said he would do? If not, why not?
- **Anticipate:** Talk about what tasks the student plans to accomplish today—be sure to review upcoming tests, long-term assignments. List each task on a planning sheet.
- **Plan:** Have the student identify when he plans to do each task, and, when appropriate, *how* he plans to do each task.

self-control or get their work done and handed in on time, but they have trouble with follow-through. Coaches are a vehicle to support that. In an ideal world, all students with ADHD would have access to coaching support. If advocates for students with attention disorders can spread the word about coaching and the evidence base that supports it, the sooner it may become a reality. 🗣️


Peg Dawson, EdD, is a staff psychologist at the Center for Learning and Attention Disorders at Seacoast Mental Health Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where she specializes in the assessment of children and adults with learning and attention disorders. She is a past president of the New Hampshire Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the International School Psychology Association. Dr. Dawson is a recipient of the National Association of School Psychologists' Lifetime Achievement Award.

FURTHER READING

Dawson, P. & Guare, R. (2013). *Coaching Students with Executive Skills Deficits*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Merriman, D. & Coddling, R. (2008). The effects of coaching on mathematics homework completion and accuracy of high school students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 17, 339-355.

Plumer, P. J., & Stoner, G. (2005). The relative effects of classwide peer tutoring and peer coaching on the positive social behaviors of children with ADHD. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 9, 290-300.



Charis Hills



Summer Camp

For Children With Learning Differences


ADD/HD • LD • Asperger's

Charis Hills is a Christian recreational and educational summer camp for children with learning and social difficulties. Our campers discover a highly personalized, fun-filled and nurturing environment while filling their heart's desire to be accepted and succeed in new activities.

www.charishills.org
Toll-Free (888) 681-2173

ACCREDITED  Christian Camp and Conference Association 


CARING & SHARING CHRIST WITH HIS KIDS



ATTENTION TALK VIDEO

www.attentiontalkvideo.com

Your ADHD TALK SHOW Station!



Watch Attention Talk Video!

Catch Us On You Tube
Search: Attention Talk Video