





**F**OR THE THREE MILLION CHILDREN WITH ADHD between the ages of 12-17 and their parents, navigating adolescence and a sea of educational choices can be stressful and overwhelming. Parents have a wealth of options available when determining the type of educational environment they choose for their child. More and more parents are considering boarding school and how the built-in structure and educational support can impact their children's social and academic well-being.

Once characterized as an option for students with behavioral problems or for children from wealthy families, today's boarding schools provide a structured environment for a broad range of students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. While there are many types of boarding schools, even the structure of a traditional, boarding program can bolster academic and social confidence through class size, the structure of the academic day and emotional support from faculty, staff and peers.

### **Individualized instruction**

Most boarding schools have classes with eight to ten students, right within the "sweet spot" for optimal size. In "The Effects of Small Classes on Academic Achievement," Barbara Nye, Larry V. Hedges and Spyros Konstantopoulos analyzed a four-year, large-scale experiment and reported a correlation between academic achievement and smaller class sizes. In their report they state, "Together, all of this evidence points to the positive effects of small classes on achievement that are large enough to be educationally significant."

For adolescents with ADHD, the smaller class size offered at boarding school results in fewer distractions, more opportunities for creating relationships with other students and teachers, and allows faculty to tailor lessons and projects based on the abilities of the class. Smaller class size also provides students with more access to teachers. Due to smaller student populations overall, many boarding schools offer office hours for students, much like those on a college campus. For students with ADHD, this access leads to greater confidence in seeking out help and an increase in self-advocacy.

Ann Snyder, director of admission at Stuart Hall School in Staunton, Virginia, attributes the transformative nature of the boarding school experience to the dedication of the school's teachers and the visibility that small class sizes afford them.

"Our teachers dedicate their lives to bringing their students where they need to be academically," she says. "This is a very supportive environment. No matter the skill level, small class sizes give teachers the opportunity to work closely with students to build academic confidence and curiosity."

### **Purposeful learning environments**

Consistent scheduling and structure are hallmarks of life on a boarding school campus. Since students with ADHD have difficulty with self-regulation, the consistency afforded by boarding school is both comforting and supportive.

"For students with ADHD, it really is about reinforcing good habits. Boarding school creates an environment where students who work hard are rewarded," says Melissa Taylor, director of learning skills at Christchurch School in Christchurch, Virginia. "We know that hard work results in confidence and confidence is a huge predictor of success."

The behavioral and academic expectations of boarding school also play a vital role in student success. Daily room inspections, daily study hall, and required events and activities are expectations that necessitate organization, prior planning, and leave little room for procrastination.

Self-care is also an important life skill bolstered by boarding school structure. Consistent bed times, regular meal times, and required physical activity are added benefits of residential life at boarding school.

"Our philosophy is that you take care of your body so the body can take on the academic challenge," says Cathy Sgroi, assistant head of St. Margaret's School in Tappahannock, Virginia.

Sleep and physical activity are integral to adolescent development, but play an even bigger role in the success of students with ADHD. A 2014 study linked physical activity to a decrease in the severity of ADHD symptoms. Another study, "Promoting Positive Youth Development: Lessons from the 4-H Study," states that "participation in movement activities, and the associations between such participation and positive developmental outcomes is that development

## Boarding School Search Resources

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The Association of Boarding Schools  
[www.boardingschools.com](http://www.boardingschools.com)

Independent Educational Consultant Association  
[www.iecaonline.com](http://www.iecaonline.com)

Boarding School Review  
[www.boardingschoolreview.com](http://www.boardingschoolreview.com)

takes place within an integrated system of individual youth, the social relationships in which they are involved and the multiple environments in which participation occurs.” Team sports like those offered at boarding schools provide this type of physical and social conditioning.

Equally important is the amount and quality of sleep children require. The journal *Sleep* released a report that teenagers with ADHD had significantly more issues with insomnia, snoring, sleep terrors, and teeth grinding. For these students, a schedule in which the school day begins later, coupled with a consistent bedtime, is ideal. A 1998 study showed that later start times for teenagers resulted in less absenteeism, more sleep for students and higher grades.

Both St. Margaret's and Christchurch have adopted a later start time. Christchurch Head John E. Beyers says the change has not diminished any academic or co-curricular time, and it has created a more peaceful learning environment overall.

“We read the adolescent brain research, which is overwhelmingly in favor of later start times, and decided that we could break from convention and do the right thing,” he says. “Our students, faculty and families immediately embraced this change.”

### Creating a sense of well-being and belonging

Students with ADHD can often feel isolated. At boarding school, a small pool of peers and the presence of students with similar experiences creates a community where students with ADHD and other learning differences feel understood and accepted. Teachers and learning special-

ists fully expect students to ask for accommodations and seek out help.

“In a boarding school environment, students with ADHD are less stigmatized. They meet other kids with learning differences. They begin to understand that it is more about how they approach their responsibilities and commitments, rather than viewing it as a shortcoming. And, they are able to make real connections with their teachers and peers on a level playing field,” Sgroi says. “Every student, whether they have a learning difference or not, participates in study hall. Everyone has access to their teachers outside the classroom. All students are encouraged to seek help and it creates a culture where asking for help is expected. This connectivity is also a powerful lesson in relationship building and self-advocacy.”

### Where to start

Snyder notes that more and more parents are approaching her with questions about support and accommodation for learning differences.

She says, “As with any major academic decision, finding a boarding school is all about finding a school that matches the family's need. The right fit is very important.”

Most traditional, college preparatory, boarding schools offer additional supports, with many having separate learning centers dedicated to instilling positive study habits and organization. Schools like Stuart Hall, Christchurch, and St. Margaret's offer students with learning differences the opportunity to work, live, and study alongside students with a wide range of learning styles from across the country and around the world. For students with more significant needs, there are boarding schools dedicated solely to working with students with ADHD or other learning differences.

“Sometimes parents look at admission offices as if they are gate keepers,” Taylor says. “Truthfully, schools are looking for kids that are good matches, and many have learning centers and are willing to work with kids who struggle.”

Parents may worry that independent schools are not required to provide supports and accommodations, so it is important to ask about the school's approach to students with ADHD and learning differences. For those interested in learning more, the Association of Boarding Schools is a great place to start. For those undergoing a more intensive search, engaging an independent educational consultant is another option. **A**

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