

SUMMER IS LONG GONE and the holiday season is upon us. As parents you've survived the first quarter and winter break will be a welcome rest from the back-to-school stress. Children with ADHD often struggle with transitions, and returning to school after any vacation is a big one for any child. Early mornings, homework, organization, chores, and mandatory bedtime—that new routine is tough. Arguments, meltdowns, and complete shutdowns are usually part of the process as they become overwhelmed with all the change.

That tough new routine presents executive functioning challenges faced daily by the ADHD brain—time management, organization, prioritizing, planning, motivation, impulsivity, and focus. If you have a high school junior or senior, you're no doubt wondering how your child will survive the first year of college, when you won't be as involved in their daily lives. The answer is this: Improve the deficits in their executive functioning by creating new habits.

You can't create new habits overnight, and it will require commitment and patience from every-

one involved in developing the solution. For our example, some proven solutions include:

- **Marking the passage of time.** Try a beeping alarm every five minutes to track the passing of time, or a traditional, non-digital clock in plain view to help “see” time passing as the minute hand moves over each five minute mark.
- **A “to-do” morning checklist.** Have your child develop the list and decide how to display it, and then work together to fine tune it. The steps should be in sequential order and have a spot to record the time for completing each step. This will help you both see where time is being wasted.

Don't expect perfection on day one, or maybe not even week one. Let your child try the new system and work through the kinks. If a checklist or clock in the kitchen isn't working, try putting it in the bedroom or bathroom. And this next piece of advice is key: Resist the urge to nudge them along. This new system is meant to replace your constant reminders, so let your child figure out where the

ENABLING vs. EMPOWERING

Creating New Habits Is Critical

by Melissa Knight

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one involved. Be prepared to step back at times and allow your child to fail. It's hard to watch failure unfold right in front of you, but when we help too much we're enabling rather than empowering. Learning from a misstep offers an opportunity for an accomplishment, and that leads to self-confidence.

The process of creating new behaviors involves a rewiring of the brain. In the areas of time management and organization, these new behaviors will be difficult to remember at first. But these new executive functioning skills will become second nature, requiring little thought.

The “how to” of new habits

Before someone can create a new habit, they must first be aware of the existing “bad” habit. As an example, let's use the common problem of getting a child with ADHD out of the house on time in the morning. Don't ask vague questions like, “What have you been doing all morning?” Your child most likely won't be able to answer that question, because the ADHD brain doesn't experience the passage of time like others. Instead, point out and highlight patterns. Ask specific questions like, “Do you realize you're spending half an hour in the bathroom each morning, and it's making you late for the bus?”

Then, have a conversation about keeping track of time, and talk together about what would be helpful. It's essential that your child

time is lost. Later in the day, review the process and how it worked.

If the new system seems to have failed, do not point out the obvious. Merely ask for your child's critique and then brainstorm solutions. Ask your child what you should do if he is getting off track. This technique is important: Ask, listen, and offer a few suggestions. And even more important, reward them for progress! When they're five minutes earlier than usual, reward and encourage them. Children with ADHD learn more from reward than from punishment. Work toward progress, not perfection.

This same process can be used to create any new habit—staying on schedule in the evenings, tracking homework, asking teachers for clarifications, keeping an organized room, checking emails, and so much more. Let your child learn to create these systems and habits on their own, where there is a safety net for failures. Experiencing failure helps children learn critical problem-solving skills that will be essential as adults. Don't enable their ADHD challenges by constantly fixing. Empower them by creating the habits that will see them through the next chapter in life. **A**

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