



# Time Management AND Task Completion

How do you teach these skills to children with ADHD?  
Are they “friends” or “foes”?

**PRACTICAL STRATEGIES** to help children with ADHD develop time-management skills include maintaining consistent daily routines, modeling the use of calendars and daily schedules, and providing opportunities to learn how to accurately estimate time. Peg Dawson, EdD, and Richard Guare, EdD, offered valuable tips for helping children with weaknesses in this executive function in their excellent article, “Instilling Time Management,” which appeared in the October 2009 issue of *Attention*.

There is a critical obstacle to the teaching of time management to children affected by ADHD, however, one that is commonly overlooked. The tendency to measure the use of time by its outcome creates problems in teaching such skills to children with ADHD. This article will spotlight this potential roadblock so that parents and educators might avoid its trappings as they teach time management skills.

## Process versus output

*Time management* can be defined as the efficient use of time to perform some task or goal. In this definition, the key word is “efficient,” as it implies that the task or goal must be accomplished within some reasonable amount of time. For example, when parents ask their children to get ready for school, complete their homework, or clean their bedrooms, they usually have some time frame in mind. Similarly, when teachers give a student a class assignment, they expect it to be completed promptly and within a certain time expectation.

The bottom line here is often overlooked: Time management demands that the child do something reasonably quickly and within some defined time frame. Few circumstances permit the child to take as long as he or she wants to complete a task. After all, I bet it’s been quite a while since you told your child, “Honey, it’s time to get up and get ready for school, but take as long as you want. There’s

by Terry J. Illes, PhD

no rush.” And as a school psychologist, I certainly don’t recall walking into a classroom and hearing a teacher announce, “Your math assignment today is to complete problems 1-20 on page 42. Work as slowly as you like and take as much time as you need to finish the problems.” That would be a comforting world in which to live, but it certainly is not the world we expect our children to inhabit.

So, are time management and task completion necessarily adversaries? To better understand this potential conflict, we will need to take a closer look at both of these concepts. As Dawson and Guare point out, time management is the set of skills we use to manage time. Thus, time management is a *process*. It is the way in which we organize this valuable and limited resource as we perform some action. As with all learned processes, children need time and support to develop its skills.

*Task completion* is a horse of an entirely different color. Whereas time management is a *process*, task completion is the *outcome* of that process. We rely on the results of the child’s efforts—the outcome—to measure how efficiently time has been managed. Although several factors other than time management influence the outcome (such as persistence, age, or intelligence), outcome is a convenient shorthand we often use to assess time management.

If your child is ready for school *on time*, time was well-spent. However, if your child was unready, time was wasted. Within the classroom setting, a student who completes an assignment *on time* is assumed to have displayed good time management in contrast to the student who has failed to do so. Indeed, this assumption often occurs in spite of the obvious differences between children and students regarding important other considerations such as developmental level, skill level and intelligence.

It is this tendency to measure the use of time by its outcome that creates problems in the teaching of time management to children with ADHD. Indeed, it creates a very different and conflicting bottom line than do the demands of time management.

## The problem

Let me summarize what I have discussed so far:

- ▶ Time management is a process or set of skills that takes time for children to learn. This is particularly true of children with ADHD, who often have many deficits in executive function that compromise their ability to manage time.
- ▶ Effective time management requires that the child or student learns to complete a particular action within some designated amount of time.
- ▶ Task completion is the outcome of time management, and we commonly use this measure to evaluate the efficiency of time management.

There may be nothing in what I have outlined above that appears immediately threatening to teaching the skill of time management. However, the problem arises with the confusion and emphasis of *outcome over process*.

In our high-pressured society, we tend to focus on the bottom line. It is the completion of the task that we are most invested in rather than the learning of the skill. As adults, we merely care whether the task was completed or not, and we rarely pay much attention to how the outcome was accomplished. Without question, outcome trumps process. Unfortunately, our hyperfocus on outcome leads us to manage task completion in ways that ironically and inadvertently undermine the skill of time management. Let’s look at two common examples that illustrate this conflict.

A school psychologist with the Jordan School District in Utah for over twenty years, **Terry Illes, PhD**, served on CHADD’s board of directors and *Attention* magazine’s editorial advisory board. He passed away on June 21, 2010.

## 1. Schoolwork completion

Jordan is a nine-year-old student with ADHD. Although bright and academically capable, he rarely completes his daily math work. His teacher, Ms. Hansen, tries to encourage Jordan to finish his math, but her efforts fail to produce immediate benefits. As a result, Ms. Hansen decides to keep Jordan in class during lunch recess to complete his work. Nevertheless, at the end of the school day the work remains incomplete, and Jordan is required to finish it as homework. Although Jordan's mother closely monitors his homework session, it takes Jordan another forty-five minutes to complete the assignment. The work is turned in, and Jordan is given credit for completing the assignment.

## 2. Chore completion

Hailey is a twelve-year-old child with ADHD. Her parents expect her to clean her bedroom on each Saturday morning. This chore includes making her bed, vacuuming the carpet, dusting the dresser, and hanging up her clean clothes. Although this morning task has been part of Hailey's weekly routine for almost a year, she resists each week. Her parents respond to this resistance by telling Hailey that she cannot leave her bedroom until she has completed cleaning it. On many such Saturday mornings, it takes Hailey as long as one-and-a-half to two hours to complete the task. Nevertheless, her parents are pleased that Hailey is learning to be responsible and to finish her weekly chore.

## The paradox

I hope that these two examples immediately underscore the problem of concern. In each case, the focus on task completion has paradoxically undermined the development of the skill needed to complete the task—time management. In each case, the student or child has been given extended time to complete a task that should have required much less time. That is, the child has been provided more time to waste or mismanage in the service of task completion. Ironically, the child is practicing the inefficient use of time as long as the task is eventually completed. Poor time management is learned, which undermines task completion. Thus, the focus on outcome prevents the child from learning the skill of time management that is essential to task completion!

If this dilemma is still unclear, imagine this scenario. Each Saturday, you provide your teenager with a weekly allowance

of ten dollars. On Sunday morning, your teenaged financial wizard approaches you and requests an additional ten dollars. When asked about the whereabouts of the previous ten dollars, your teen confesses that the money was spent on fast food. Would you reimburse your teen with another ten dollars? Hopefully, not. You would understand that if your teen had wasted this resource, then it would be wrong to provide more of that resource. That is, if your teen can't manage ten dollars efficiently, you sure as heck aren't going to provide more of that resource to be mismanaged. You would intuitively understand that you don't give more money to a teen who hasn't learned to manage less money. However, when it comes to time, that's exactly what we do. We extend more time to children who have not yet learned how to manage even less time.

## The solution

There is no easy solution to the conflict between time management and task completion. The following suggestions may help:

- › **Be aware of the conflict.** In a given situation, determine what is most important to you: time management or task completion. Remember, you may not be able to accomplish both in some circumstances.
- › **Redefine what it means to accomplish a task.** That is, rather than focusing on the entire task, focus on completion of part of that task within a specified amount of time. Again, think of the money example. Give your child less money (time) to manage, and teach to spend it wisely. When a

small amount of money (time) is managed well, you can then provide more money to buy more things (more time to do more work).

- › **To do this, break tasks down into small parts and set firm time limits.** Do not permit more time to complete such tasks.

How might these suggestions work in the scenarios described earlier? In the classroom example, Jordan might be assigned three five-minute sessions to complete a small amount of math work. If the assigned work is completed within each of the three sessions, the math assignment is considered finished even if Jordan has completed far less work than the rest of the class. If Jordan does not complete the assigned work within one of the five-minute sessions, he is required to repeat the timings until he has done so. In this manner, he practices working efficiently for a short period of time until he has learned to do so.

In the home-chores example, Hailey's parents might choose two of the bedroom chores for her to complete with a certain time limit. She might be given five minutes to make her bed and five minutes to dust her dresser. If she completes these tasks within these time limits, she is done. If not, she must repeat the trials until she does so within the time limit. With success, the other tasks might be added. 🕒



# Terry Illes, PhD

by Linda P. Smith

**IN 1994, WHEN I READ** "Promising Practice for Teaching Students with ADHD," an article submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, I knew I needed to contact its author—Terry Illes, PhD, of Sandy, Utah. As a Utah resident myself, an educator, the mother of a child with ADHD, and a CHADD volunteer, I was interested in helping families and educators who were struggling with issues surrounding ADHD. Terry appeared to have the same mission.

That was the beginning of a long ADHD-centered relationship. Terry taught me about all things ADHD. We worked together on many local and national projects, such as the Intermountain Healthcare Care Process Model for the Management of ADHD and CHADD's Parent to Parent: Family Training on ADHD. Terry understood the ADHD experience because he lived it. This enhanced his qualifications as a highly respected school psychologist and made him a leading parenting expert.

As I attended his standing-room-only funeral, I was reminded that he had lived as a positive role model for everything he had taught me. The following quotations from a few of his friends, professional colleagues, and students illustrate his tireless dedication to the ADHD community:

- Once in a career, if you are lucky, one gets to work with one as talented and dedicated as Terry Illes. As a pediatrician I greatly valued the opportunity to have Terry as a ready resource whenever I needed help getting evaluations, resources and help for my patients in the school system. Over the past twenty years we often worked together with students in his school that were my patients. It was the "perfect dream" situation. We collaborated on several projects. He was caring, passionate, smart and practical. Oh, how we will miss him.

**Jeff Schmidt, MD, Past President, Utah Chapter American Academy of Pediatrics**

- Terry Illes was a man with a heart who cared deeply about all children. He worked tirelessly to help parents, youth, school psychologists, and educators learn about ADHD. His goal was to help children with this disorder be more resilient and experience success.

**Fulvia Franco, PhD, Coordinator, Jordan Family Education Center**

- One of our sons, Harry, was literally flunking out of school. He hated going to school. Terry's parenting classes taught us how to parent a child with ADHD and how not to try to make a child with ADHD conform to "regular parenting methods." It rescued us from so much frustration!

**Mark and Lisa VanLeeuwen, Parents, Salt Lake City**

- If it weren't for Dr. Illes, I would probably still be sitting in Ollie's anger management class.

**Christian, Age 14, Student, Jordan School District**

- People who have known Terry know that they are better people for having known him. He taught everyone at our school to "Be kind, smile and have fun on the journey." He wanted to make sure that every child

**Linda P. Smith** is a cofounder of Parent to Parent, a former member of CHADD's board of directors, and director of education for CHADD of Utah.

at our school had the opportunity to be the best person he could be.  
**Steve Giles, Principal, Riverton Elementary School**

- Terry's loss will be felt deeply not only in our Parent to Parent program, but throughout CHADD. Terry donated enormous amounts of time and talent to CHADD as one of our Parent to Parent trainers for our teacher certification program. Terry's easy wit, laid-back style, and commitment to getting our information right will be deeply missed. He was an exceptional trainer, making even the most difficult topics easy to understand and infused with stories of his own ADHD, his wife and children, and his students.

**Ruth Hughes, Chief Program Officer, CHADD**

- Terry Illes was my friend and mentor, but he felt like a brother to me. I have learned so many things from him. He is a light for me and many, many, many families! He taught me resiliency and how to understand my son with ADHD.

**Beth Kaplanek, Cofounder, Parent to Parent**

- As tears flow, none of us have the words to truly express what Terry meant to everyone and the contributions he made to his field.

**Mary Durham, Former CHADD President, Cofounder, Parent to Parent**

A frequent contributor to *Attention*, Terry's articles were particularly useful to parents and educators. He served on the magazine's editorial advisory board as well as on CHADD's board of directors. His presentations at CHADD conferences were always standing-room-only and the same was true for his last workshop as he was exiting this mortal stage of life. That workshop, in February 2010, was covered by an article in the *Salt Lake City Tribune* and this photograph. The reporter quoted Terry:

We're trying to teach parents and educators that even though children have a disability, they still have the right to feel good about themselves; they still have a right to feel confident. It's those feelings in the long term that determine whether the child is successful or not. This is damage control. We're trying to prevent the disorder from becoming a lifelong chronic millstone around the child's neck.

We offer our condolences to Terry's wife and children, and thank them for sharing him with the ADHD community for so many years. Everyone concerned about ADHD has lost a true champion. ▲



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