



by Fereshteh Shahrokhi, LCSW, and Maureen Gill, LCSW

Identifying Your

Parents and schools must work

Maureen Gill, LCSW, the mother of two sons with ADHD, tells her story

I REMEMBER THE DIFFICULTIES I faced while raising a child with major school issues back in 1989. I was out there alone and seemed unable to control my child's behaviors. Others were judging me. No one seemed to know what was wrong; they just wanted it to go away.

The mother of a child with ADHD frequently finds herself in such sad dilemmas. She feels very alone because others judge her child to be bad—that is, not controlled

properly. "Just make him behave," people would say. "You are not doing it right." But I knew that I was disciplining him—in fact, I was disciplining him all the time. I was trying to get his homework done, but I could not get him to sit still long enough or get him to listen to me as I was trying to finish my own sentence. I was discouraged because so little that I did seemed to work.

One day, his kindergarten teacher had

an intern write down everything he did wrong in her morning class. She sent me a list of fourteen things that I was supposed to talk to him about and then make disappear in her class. How was a mother to have any control in *her* classroom? I could hardly control my own tears.

They asked for a child study team to meet and evaluate him. They wanted to put him in a class for the emotionally disturbed. They thought he was mentally ill. I had

Fereshteh Shahrokhi, LCSW, a school social worker, and Maureen Gill, LCSW, parent of two young adults affected by ADHD, are a part of the Northern Virginia ADHD Partnership. The group's workshops can be downloaded from adhdpartnership.com for use in your own school.



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School Advocates

together for success. Here's how...

problems with him at home, but nothing like what they described in the classroom. Would I have a mentally ill son forever? The team agreed that this was the diagnosis. Except for one member, who said: "I think he has ADHD." My thought at the time was that it sounded better than mental illness. I had previously wondered, after reading a very short article, whether ADHD was what I was seeing. But surely, I had thought, the school would recognize this before me.

A competent developmental pediatrician very quickly diagnosed my son's ADHD. Why did the majority of school staff not recognize it? Why had this one staff member known? Her knowledge changed my son's

school life. Thus began my first contact with one of many school staff members who would become my son's saviors.

My son's success and my sanity were dependent over the years on school staff who were knowledgeable about ADHD. There were not many in 1989. Along the way, some teachers unknowingly created an atmosphere that would only make my son worse. They mistakenly thought that being overly strict would make him cooperate, but this only increased his anxiety, making school even more difficult for him (and for the teacher). I realized that the difference was based on one large factor—school training in ADHD. I became

an advocate for better training in ADHD. I joined with the developmental pediatrician who originally diagnosed my son and several other CHADD members and school experts in developing a grassroots (totally volunteer) training program for our school system. We started in one school at a time.

Did life become perfect? Absolutely not. *Each school year was a new beginning.* An early sign for a successful school year is a positive relationship between the parent and teacher. I became astute at sensing how the school year was going to go within the first five minutes of meeting the new teacher. I was rarely proved wrong. Once I thought a male

teacher would bond well with my son. However, he treated me as if he knew all that there was to know about ADHD and thought it was unnecessary for me to communicate with him. He was a good teacher, but my son progressed little in his class. Fortunately, the school counselor filled in for me with that particular teacher. She helped my son for many years afterward. Both the principal and I were surprised when my son received the most awards at his sixth-grade graduation. The principal had been through a lot with my son, and I am grateful to her for her enduring kindness to him. Support from the principal is a necessity for students with ADHD, as is the principal's willingness to obtain training for school staff on ADHD. This support is not always found, unfortunately.

Secondary school brings bigger problems for students with ADHD. My son's first middle-school counselor told me that the school had many students with ADHD. She was happy to say that *all* of them did well. *Life could not be better for my son*, I thought. Alas, her naivete about the problems that were occurring gave me false hope. What



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a terrible year that was, as I had no school advocate for my son or for myself. I had no one to turn to and felt like I was in a strange land. Fortunately, during his second year there, he had just the opposite experience. His new counselor had a child with learning disabilities, and she guided both of us with

supreme expertise. She trained the teachers and picked the teaching teams that would work best for him. By the time he entered high school, my own expertise had increased to the point that I worked jointly with the school staff. Not only did I help my own son, I also began to help organize training sessions with school and community experts.

I have learned over the years that the most important thing a student with ADHD needs is one school staff member who believes in him or her and is not afraid to share helpful strategies for working with the student with other staff. I found such advocates at the high-school level as well. I hope other parents will seek out and find these school advocates—whether a teacher, a social worker, or other interested school staff.

School knowledge and training about ADHD, a positive attitude toward the student, and finding school advocate(s) go a long way toward enabling the student with ADHD to graduate from high school, complete college, and start his or her own business. I am the mother of a businessman who is living proof of this. 🗣️

School social worker *Fereshteh Shahrokhi, LCSW*, shares her experience

I AM NOT SURPRISED THAT IN 1989 there were so few school staff members trained in ADHD. Parents usually were getting training before the teachers. This is no longer true, thanks to the volunteer school/community training program Maureen Gill helped coordinate in 1992. I am currently a trainer for this program. I have been involved since the mid-1980s in educating myself about ADHD and the many comorbidities that can result when the disorder is untreated. I also try to keep up with the latest research. I work daily with the parents of students with ADHD. I know parents may feel very alone and judged for the behavior problems of their children or lack of progress in school. Increased training in schools and more public knowledge about ADHD will hopefully decrease this, though I still see it occur. Parents are judged not only

by school personnel but also by other parents and even their own family members. I try to advocate for these parents and support them, and I try to educate my school peers.

Reading about the kindergarten teacher who assigned an intern the duty of recording everything Maureen's son did wrong in class over the course of a morning saddened me. With better staff training, something like that would never occur. We must ask parents for help in ways that they are able to provide. Teachers are responsible for their classrooms, and it is the teacher's job to help a student who has behavior issues by using the behavior management techniques that all teachers are taught. Parents can also learn to use these techniques at home. Parents need to support teachers but are limited in how much control they can have in a classroom.

I agree a hundred percent with Maureen that her son's success in school depended on school staff who were knowledgeable about ADHD. My school system has been a strong advocate for staff training in ADHD. Many community experts in the area have also offered to work with and provide free training for school staff members. Many who receive training later train staff members in their own schools.

Parents must also be knowledgeable about ADHD and school strategies that help their children. I have met many parents who have not done their research. Parents cannot advocate fully for their children if they do not understand these issues. Both the school and the parents must have expertise for a child to be successful. Maureen is leaving out the part that her son's success was also dependent on

her knowledge, support, and work with school staff to get the right help. She also sought outside professionals to help her with the medical issues as well as how to deal with his behavior issues at home. Parent education is equally important as the training of the educators if the child is to have success in school and in life.

I cannot emphasize enough that the relationship between a teacher and student is crucial. Teachers of students with ADHD must be flexible, knowledgeable, caring, supportive, firm, and structured. A teacher who is too strict can increase a child's anxiety—and these students are already very anxious in their school performance. Our schools have great teachers, but some teachers are not a good fit for some students.

Early diagnosis is crucial in helping a child with ADHD. We are fortunate in our area that we have knowledgeable physicians,

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psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers who can help parents assess the child. If qualified, the school can also aid in this. CHADD chapters across the United States can help parents find knowledgeable community professionals to help them.

Maureen wrote that parents must identify who are the advocates for their children in their schools. I see a variety of school staff members who have filled this role. Students can improve greatly if they have someone in their school with whom they have a good rela-

tionship, someone they trust and are comfortable with. As a school social worker, I try to help these children every day. Parents often try to rely only on themselves to help their children. But there are supportive people in their school if parents will look for them. I find that parents of children with ADHD find it helpful to talk to other parents, and as a result I have run several parent support programs.

For years, CHADD of Northern Virginia has presented certificates of appreciation to school staff members who have helped a child with ADHD. My colleagues have highly valued this recognition—I sure did! Parents request a certificate for someone they consider a special advocate in their child's school. The advocates are invited to the CHADD chapter's last meeting during the school year. I highly recommend this practice as a positive gesture for goodwill between parents and schools. 📍