

# “Everything I Know I Learned in Kindergarten”

Eight Tips for Teachers from CHADD’s 2016 Educator of the Year

by Shari Gent, MS



## **VERY PARENT IS A BETTER PARENT WHEN THEY HAVE FRIENDS TO HELP THEM**

through the challenges of raising a child with ADHD. Mine was a kindergarten teacher, Alicia Solano, who eventually was named the 2016 CHADD Educator of the Year. In an interview, Alicia shared many words of wisdom gleaned from thirty-eight years in education, twenty-six of them as a kindergarten teacher in an economically challenged neighborhood in Northern California. Here is her advice for starting the year with students with ADHD.



Alicia Solano with two of her kindergarten students.

## 1 Channel that energy.

Use active physical response during instruction. Keep your students physically involved in instruction. Students, especially those with ADHD, can focus better if they have something to do beside just sitting still and listening to you. But what you do is limited only by your imagination—dig deep and be creative in your strategies and presentation.

Some strategies I like are:

- Give each student a whiteboard and marker to draw or write their response.
- Have students use popsicle sticks with “yes” and “no” signs to indicate a response.
- Have students use colored Unifix cubes on their fingers to show what they know.
- Use music and movement to involve students in learning new ideas and procedures.

## 2 Remember the awe and wonder.

Kindergarten is a magical place. Remember that young children live in a world filled with awe and wonder. Children with ADHD often do not filter their innocent curiosity. For example, Kaylin (not his real name) was a very bright boy who was interested in science. In kindergarten he seemed to be going through a “medical” phase. One day right in the middle of a calendar activity, Kaylin blurted out, “Mrs. Solano, do you have a bladder infection?” I paused and then began, “No...” Kaylin interrupted suddenly to explain that his mother did, and began to explain all the details, before I was able to sidestep the discussion. When he had to illustrate the number 3 in his math book, he drew three masculine body parts in all their anatomical correctness. Kaylin’s mother and I had an interesting discussion about his impulsivity and unique gifts.



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## 3 Keep them in close proximity.

Your students with ADHD need to be able to make eye contact with you and hear each and every word you say. You need to be able to reach out and gently touch them when needed and give them signals to remind them they are there to learn.

## 4 You have to stay humble.

Young children with ADHD can focus, just not always on what you want them to focus on. Sometimes they even hyperfocus. Ronnie (not her real name) had the usual ADHD problems with staying on task, overreacting, and being easily frustrated. She loved stories, but didn’t enjoy sitting still and listening without talking to her neighbors. One afternoon, after making sure she was sitting close to me, I started reading a story to the class. I used my usual techniques to keep the class’s attention, such as dramatically reading in different voices, pausing at key spots, and providing visual clues. Ronnie, however, as usual, was having trouble listening. When things went wrong, my students always got two warnings with no consequences, but after she poked her neighbor and blurted out again, I had to send Ronnie back to her seat to listen. Her desk was at the back of the room and she seemed to settle in quietly. I continued with the story and Ronnie was quiet for two to three minutes. Then all of sudden, in the middle of the story, she shouted out, “Mrs. Solano! You have a gold tooth!” Ronnie couldn’t focus on the story, but from all the way across the classroom, she could see the one gold tooth at the back of my mouth as I read. I just smiled, said “Yes,” and kept on reading. Just one more day to laugh, take it all in and just roll with it.

## 5 Be flexible. Remember it's just their ADHD.

Don’t personalize their problems. Kids with ADHD are kids like everyone else, just more so! Avoid rigid adherence to behavior rules and systems. Instead, tweak them for the child with ADHD.



have children yourself, just be a good listener. Parents are the experts about their own child. They are the only adults who are with them for the long run and who deal with them day-in and day-out. As the teacher, you only have that child for one year. Be sensitive to the struggles they may be having with the school district and teachers who may not be as sensitive as you. Not all of my students were particularly likeable, but if I could remind myself that each child had a mother who loved him, I could be empathetic and remember that this child needed to be taught, loved, and supported.

Young children with hyperactive-impulsive presentation are like other kids, but because of their ADHD, they move more. All preschoolers and kindergarteners have trouble completing work, but the child with inattentive ADHD can become lost in the fog and have a hard time completing any tasks at all. And for all young children in kindergarten, the bad news is that you have to raise your hand to talk. For the hyperactive and impulsive child, the worse news is that you have to raise your hand and wait. And the even worse news is that you have to raise your hand and wait and the teacher might not even call on you at all. The young child with ADHD will say, "But I raised my hand!" This is not a "defiant" child, but a child with a neurological condition. School behaviors, for all young students, need to be broken into steps and explicitly taught, modeled and practiced. But for the child with ADHD, this is even more critical. Typical school behaviors may not come naturally to the child with ADHD.

## **6 Make learning fun.**

Use games, art, and other hands-on activities to draw your students in and keep their attention. One math activity that my students enjoyed was designed to teach them to use money. The materials for decorating hats were laid out on a tray and labeled with prices. Students were each given a specific amount of money and used it to purchase items to decorate their hats.

## **7 Above all, listen to the parents.**

Having a daughter with ADHD, Francesca, helped to sensitize me to what parents go through. If you don't

## **8 "Kiss your brain!"**

Early childhood is a time of discovery. There is so much potential! If you can get them off to a positive start, and teach them to believe in themselves as learners, you can make an impact that can last their whole life. I want all my students to leave kindergarten trusting that they can learn and that they are loved for who they are. I use Dr. Jean Feldman's "Kiss your brain" strategy. When a student has a good idea or gives the right answer, I say, "Kiss your brain!" None of my kindergarteners left the classroom without kissing their brains. At the end of the day, I would ask, "Who's terrific?" They would respond, "I am." "Who's learning more each day?" They would respond, "I am." Finally, I would say, "Kiss your brain!" We need to let our kids remember that they are amazing people, whether they are at their best or their worst. We can help them be the ones who make a difference in our world. 🧠

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