



Mountain Biking and Holistic Personal Development

The Focused Riding Program

CAN VIGOROUS MOUNTAIN BIKING HELP middle and high school students with ADHD improve their ability to focus in class? David Mendlewski, director of academic support at the Storm King School in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, believes it can. And he says he developed a program that can prove it.

Known as Focused Riding, the program involves a two-week vigorous mountain biking experience held during the summer months. During the course of their aerobic experience, the students who participate also practice yoga and mindfulness techniques. They learn about healthy eating habits and how physical and other activities can serve as fun alternatives to computer games and other electronic devices. Mendlewski, who actually coaches mountain biking during the school year, draws upon the work of John Ratey, PhD, who for years has extolled the many benefits individuals with ADHD can derive from aerobic exercise.

A typical Focused Riding day

Mendlewski's students begin their day with a 45-minute warm-up ride around campus and in an adjoining forest area. An academic work period follows, focused on reading comprehension skills, writing skills, and other subject areas. After lunch, students engage in their afternoon bike rides, traveling to picturesque locations across the Hudson Valley.

As part of the experience, students learn to traverse various obstacles, such as logs, bridges, roots, and rocks. At the end of the two-week program, the students deliver a PowerPoint presentation of their experience to parents and staff.

While the program has only been in operation since 2018, some students have returned every summer. Mendlewski hopes to have returning students assume the role of counselors-in-training.

Mendlewski's model is a second example of an innovative cycling program designed to help students with ADHD perform more successfully. The original example was the Riding for Focus school cycling program (covered in the Winter 2017-18 edition of Attention). Sponsored by the Specialized Foundation, that cycling program, quite a bit larger in scope, intended to achieve three goals:

- measurable improvements in academic performance, fitness and behavior
- long-term social and health outcomes
- reduction in core symptoms associated with ADHD (learn more at www.specializedfoundation.org).

A strong believer in the Riding for Focus program, Mendlewski is quick to point out some of the features unique to his own personal model. Among those features are the special skills required when mountain biking. Unlike more conventional forms of cycling, mountain bikers have to be aware of every turn in order to stay safe. Mountain biking involves greater focus and concentration than does conventional cycling.

Mendlewski's homegrown model has not had the benefit of controlled studies exploring its effectiveness. He has nonetheless

tried to learn from a number of recent studies that examined how aerobic exercise can help improve outcomes for students with ADHD. He is considering how best to translate the benefits of a two-week intensive summer experience into a successful year-long experience. Mendlewski is also exploring how educators and others across the United States might benefit from having his Focused Riding program in their communities.

Mendlewski's model was accepted as one of several programs highlighted during the Innovative Programs session at the 2020 Virtual International Conference on ADHD. Additional information regarding the model is thus available to all who attended the conference and at <https://sks.org/focused-riding>. Readers wishing to learn more about Mendlewski's ideas, or about the Focused Riding program in general, can contact him via email at dmendlewski@sks.org or by phone at 716-535-0541. 📞

A clinical and consulting psychologist, Mark Katz, PhD, is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center in San Diego, California. As a contributing editor to Attention magazine, he writes the Promising Practices column and serves on the editorial advisory board. He is also a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.

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