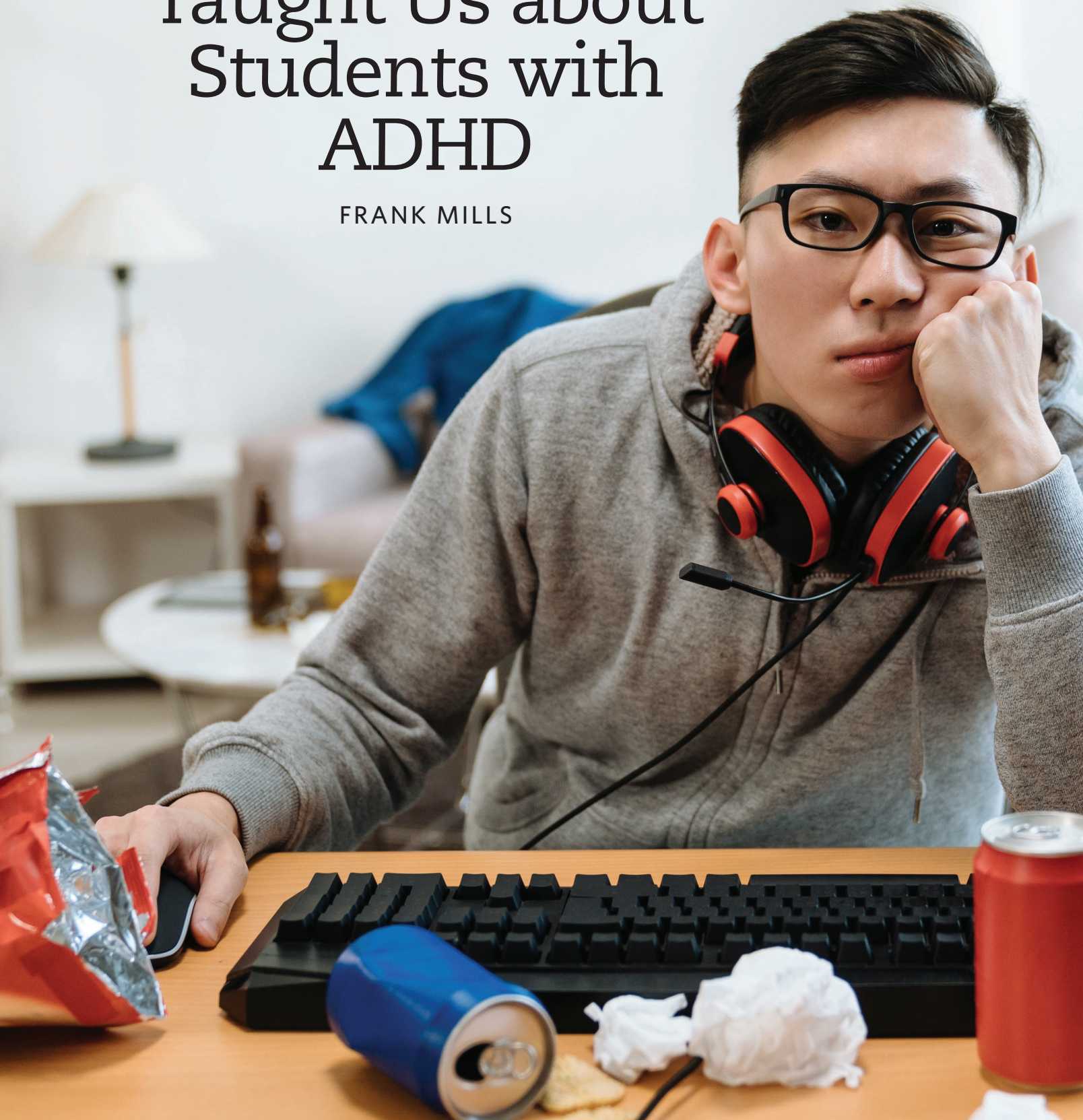


What the Pandemic Taught Us about Students with ADHD

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A NUMBER OF PARENTS have remarked to me that as a result of being stuck in the same space as their school-aged children for several months, they have come to the conclusion that their kids have ADHD. My first reaction is to grin as I think to myself, “*Not so easy, is it?*” But then I usually recommend that they not rush to too quick a judgement given the specific circumstances that came about as result of school closures in the spring of 2020.

All students, regardless of their level of attention or inattention, executive functioning, and brain chemistry were put in a challenging and quickly evolving learning environment. They were forced to adapt to a completely new way of receiving instruction and demonstrating knowledge. Parents were suddenly thrust into the role of instructional facilitators and executive functioning coaches, thus the many amateur diagnoses of all sorts of cognitive, emotional, and learning disorders.

For children with ADHD (and I mean who have really been diagnosed by a licensed professional), the pandemic, like school in general, was twice as hard. Many parents saw for the first time just how frustrating academic challenges could be for their children, especially when not given the right tools to be successful. For educators who work with students with ADHD, the pandemic proved to be useful in assessing how students would fare in such a challenging situation.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, the top problems reported by students with ADHD and their parents during the pandemic were social isolation, difficulties engaging in online learning, and motivational problems. These issues may have been present prior to the pandemic, but were highly exacerbated when students were forced to attend school from home.

LESSON ONE:

Kids need other kids.

It's no surprise that social isolation and lack of social interaction was detrimental to children with ADHD during the pandemic. As much as schools tried to recreate a social environment through video meetings and other platforms, the lack of face-to-face contact with peers impacted students on a number of levels. For one thing, kids need other kids to help show them how to behave. Reading social cues and responding to the way peers act in specific circumstances is very important to a child's development. For students with ADHD, these opportunities to observe appropriate social behaviors are extremely important.

Without the input of social cues from peers, children had difficulty adapting their behaviors when learning at home. Self-care and hygiene suffered mightily, and feelings of loneliness, sadness, and lack of motivation were prevalent. Parents found themselves frustrated by these behaviors, which often led to negative dynamics in the home.

LESSON TWO:

Technology does not solve all problems.

During the pandemic lockdown, many parents became experts in navigating platforms such as Google Classrooms, Zoom, Meets, Reading A to Z, IXL, and a thousand other instructional spaces. All students faced a learning curve mastering these new formats, but for students with ADHD, the lack of direct instruction in using these new instructional technologies proved to be particularly challenging. Students were handed Chromebooks and then were expected to be able to navigate to specific platforms, join video lessons at specific times, and submit assignments in new ways. Without direct instruction, tailored to each child's learning style, students were unable to absorb these new skills "on the fly" without significant frustration and parental oversight.

For students with ADHD attending live synchronous classes via video meet platforms, the temptation to get off task and the lack of supportive cues from an in-person teacher made instruction very difficult to absorb. A teacher's proximity, facial cues, hand signals, and occasional taps on the shoulder, all of which help students with ADHD attend to instruction, could not be replicated. Although many teachers attempted to make their lessons as engaging as possible with interactive displays, rich visual content, and multimedia presentations, the lack of physical engagement and tactile participation in the lessons hurt the students' ability to absorb the content.

LESSON THREE:

School success is based on relationships and a sense of belonging.

For children with ADHD, the experience of going to school, conforming to unnatural-feeling norms, and navigating social and academic pitfalls, can be a great challenge. How a student feels

about their school environment, and whether they feel nurtured, supported, and understood, are contributors to their engagement and motivation to be a part of a school community. When schools closed in March 2020, many students with ADHD experienced very little desire to reconnect with their school community, because no such bonds had ever been formed. This made re-engaging with a virtual school community even more of a challenge.

From my perspective, small and specialized schools had a much better chance of engaging these students. Students who felt connected to individual teachers and staff, and who felt like they were a positive part of a learning community, seemed to have the best chance of engaging with the virtual version of their school. They seemed to be more adaptable to virtual learning, as well as more likely to take advantage of virtual counseling and virtual mentoring, as their trust in the facilitators was firm. They also seemed better equipped to maintain their grades, attend classes regularly, and take part in virtual school events.

Schools that felt a shared sense of responsibility for their students' emotional well-being during the pandemic were also more likely to introduce programming and scheduling that was friendly to the student with ADHD. Schools added required movement activities, screen-time breaks, extracurricular clubs and events, and creative scheduling to try to maximize student energy, attentiveness, and enthusiasm.

LESSON 4:

We don't know the full impact.

As students returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2021, many of their teachers didn't recognize them as they walked into their classrooms. Many of them were much taller, deeper-voiced, and more mature than the students they remembered from before the pandemic. While the world locked down, children continued to experience maturity, growth, and development, albeit under unique circumstances. For many students, these critical months of development occurred without normal peer interactions in an environment touched by fear, uncertainty, and confusion. Many children took on the worries of their parents, whether concerning their health, their livelihoods, or food availability.

Upon their return to in-person instruction, school districts began to try to calculate the amount of academic loss students received as a result of the pandemic. Even the best schools couldn't prevent their students from academic stasis or even regression. The full impact of these losses will be measured over the coming months, as a full picture of the academic impact of the pandemic is revealed. **A**

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