

Effective Behavioral Strategies for Middle and High School Students

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Adapted from *Teaching Teens with ADD and ADHD*

The development of positive behavior intervention strategies is a major feature of recent revisions to IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). The purpose of these strategies is to utilize positive interventions before the student's grades plummet or misbehavior escalates. Remember that academic interventions provide a double benefit by also bringing about positive behavioral changes. Several suggestions for middle and high schoolers can help teachers develop positive intervention strategies and inspire student cooperation. An overview of effective behavioral strategies, such as using positive statements in a ratio of 3 to 1 negatives, is provided in Chapter 5.

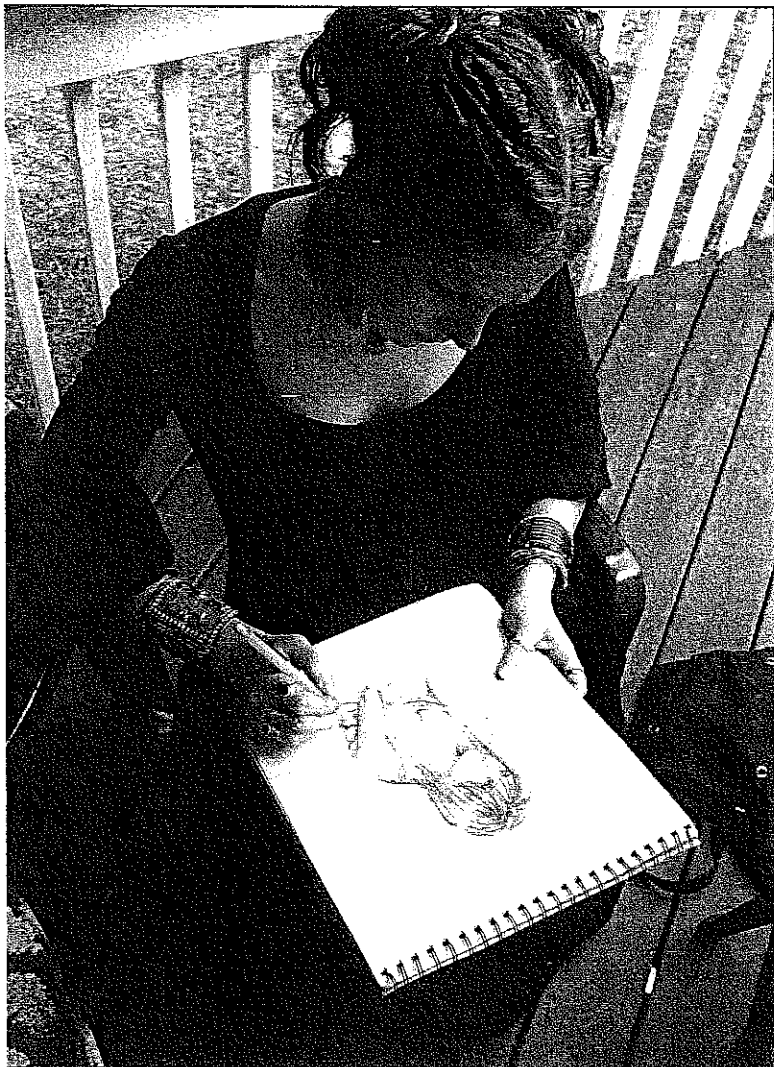
Initially, teachers can utilize some of the following behavioral strategies to address minor problems. If problems persist, however, they can implement a more advance intervention system by conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and developing a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). This process includes an assessment of the behavior, noting any antecedent events that can trigger misbehavior, and then implementing a more formal behavioral plan.

1. Utilize positive behavioral strategies

Behavioral strategies are more difficult to implement successfully with students who have AD/HD. However, there are several steps teachers can take to increase the likelihood of success.

- a. **Intensify positive interventions.** To be effective, positive interventions must be given more frequently, include stronger rewards, provide attention for appropriate behavior, and include sincere praise.
- b. **Intervene at the point of performance.** Russell A. Barkley, Ph.D., reminds us that one way to enhance the effectiveness of behavioral strategies is to intervene at the "point of performance."¹ This term refers to providing needed strategies or supports at the time when a student should actually practice the skill. Simply telling the student to remember an assignment, sending him to an organizational class, or punishing him is not an effective way to change behavior.^{2,3}

By intervening at the *point of performance*, the behavioral intervention is more likely to be



successful. So, for example, asking a student to remember to take home all the necessary books and homework assignments in a 9:00 a.m. class is not nearly as effective as having someone — a teacher, aide, or friend — meet the student at the locker at the end of the day to gather materials needed to complete homework.

- c. Provide external prompts. Because of their impaired memory functions, externalizing prompts as reminders for events or responsibilities is critical. For example, arrange for friends or aides to remind the student which books must be taken home each evening. Students can set a watch, computer, or PDA alarm to remind them of assignments. Addi-

tionally, a colorful Time Timer® clock can be placed nearby so the student has a visual cue to remind them of the passage of time and show them how long they have to complete the assignment.

- d. Consider a point system or token economy. Point systems and token economies are more difficult to manage in middle and high school. These systems may require significant time and consistency and often are not as effective with these students. Many teenagers are eagerly seeking their independence and often resent “being manipulated” by adults. In addition, students with attention deficits are not as easily motivated by rewards and punishments as their peers.

However, *token economies* can be very effective when implemented with extra supports such as that offered through a university that is able to provide adequate staff and creativity in devising the reward system. One nationally recognized model program was developed by William Pelham, Ph.D., a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Another program, Challenging Horizons (CHP), a multimodal afterschool treatment program for middle school students with AD/HD, utilizes a strong behavioral component. Challenging Horizons, which was developed by Steven Evans, Ph.D., is featured as a model program in Chapter 11.

- e. Consider a group reward system. Sometimes a less complicated *group reward* can be effective. For example, when the whole class earns enough points for completion of homework by all students, the class can earn a five-point bonus on their final exam grade, a coupon to skip one homework assignment, or a pizza party. Teacher enthusiasm and creativity can engage students in earning unusual “rewards.”⁴ For example, one teacher rewarded students with vegetables from her garden.
- f. Use peer-mediated reinforcement. Students’ misbehavior is often reinforced by peers who laugh when they act out. Ann Abramowitz, Ph.D.,

Associate Professor at Emory University, has found that peer-mediated reinforcement in the classroom is effective in teaching students to ignore misbehavior.⁵

- g. **Develop a contract.** Sometimes contracts between teenagers and teachers or parents can be effective. The student and his teachers can draw up an agreement that lists the specific things that each of them will do to correct a problem and clearly spells out expectations for all involved parties. For example, the student can agree to complete homework each night and turn it in daily, and the parents can agree to monitor homework completion each evening. Teachers must provide the supports and accommodations that will enable the student to be successful. For example, they can ask another student in the class to give a reminder about homework assignments. See Appendices C.5 and C.6 for sample contracts.
- i. *Words of caution:* signing a contract to change “AD/HD behaviors” provides no guarantee that the problem will stop. Students with attention deficits are not always able to follow through on their good intentions. The flaw in this intervention is that it is impossible to reinforce elements of the contract at the “point of performance.” Daily supervision may be necessary to ensure compliance with the contract.
 - ii. Remember that it is critical for the contract to state parent and teacher behaviors that will be necessary to support the student’s behavior change. Otherwise, the “contract” can unintentionally become another opportunity to blame the student for failure to perform.
- h. **Avoid humiliation.** Dr. Jones explains that “humiliation is not a behavior management strategy!” The “golden rule,” however, is a good reminder: If a comment is not appropriate to make to an adult, it should be avoided for a teen. Following this rule can help parents and teachers phrase corrective feedback more productively.

2. Utilize a variety of effective behavioral strategies.

- a. “If you can’t change the ‘AD/HD behavior,’ then change the environment.” Some “AD/HD behaviors,” such as disorganization, forgetfulness, and impaired sense of time, may not improve significantly even with medication. For a student with a time impairment, give them a wristwatch alarm or have another student give prompts. Changing the environment or teaching students to compensate for these challenges is critical.
- b. **Give students choices, but only two or three.** Students who are given choices produce more work and are more compliant and less aggressive. However, a student can become bogged down and unable to make a decision when too many choices are offered.
- c. **Use depersonalization. Eliminate criticism and blame.** Teachers and guidance counselors have an opportunity to educate students about the characteristics of attention deficit by discussing them in a less threatening third-party context. “Many students with AD/HD have trouble (remembering their homework). Is that true for you? There are a few things we might do to help you (a friend may be asked to remind you). What would be most helpful to you?” Offer suggestions.
- d. **Give “I” messages.** “You” messages are often negative and blaming. For example, “You really have been goofing off. You haven’t done your homework in several days.” Instead, try, “I am surprised and concerned that you didn’t finish your homework. I know you want to do well in school. What can you do (or how can I help you) to get your work finished on time?” If the student has no ideas, then offer suggestions.
- e. **Use “time-in” instead of time-out.** A school might establish a “time-in” program for students who have behaved inappropriately. Instead of sending a student to an in-school suspension, the student is sent to “time-in” where he is taught the skills he lacks and other prosocial skills.

**“Don’t judge students by their
‘best day ever.’ I’d hate that pressure
as a teacher to be judged by my
‘best day ever.’”**

- f. Use Grandma’s rule or the “Premack Principle.” First we work and then we play. “When you finish writing your paragraph, you may work on the creative cover for your report.” Assign the more difficult portion of the task first and then the easier, more interesting task to finish up.
- g. Use behavioral momentum. Although this strategy is the exact opposite of Grandma’s Rule, it can be more effective for some students with attention deficits. First, ask the student to do a couple of things they like to do; then ask them to do the less desirable activity.

3. Provide increased “developmentally appropriate” supervision.

- a. Provide increased supervision. Because of their significant developmental delay, teenagers with attention deficits need more supervision than typically provided for their peers.
- b. Consider assigning a case manager. Some teens with more complex cases of AD/HD face significant struggles in the transition to middle and high school. This has prompted some schools to assign case managers to assist with the transition. The case manager remains in close contact with students and their teachers to identify problems early.

4. Conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA).

When students are struggling, it may be a good idea to utilize information gathered via an FBA. FBAs are actually mandated by IDEA when eligible students experience continuing difficulties at school. Teachers and other school personnel can take the information

gathered from the FBA, use it to develop a theory of why the misbehavior occurred, and then guide the development of the Behavior Intervention Plan. A good Functional Behavior Assessment answers several important questions:⁶

- ✓ What is the student’s behavior of concern?
- ✓ When and where does the behavior occur?
- ✓ What is the antecedent or “trigger” for the behavior?
- ✓ Are there other contributing factors?
 - Were medications working effectively?
 - Have any unique upsetting situations occurred recently at home or school?
- ✓ What purpose or function does the behavior serve?
- ✓ What was the teacher’s response?
- ✓ What was the student’s response to the teacher?
- ✓ Why is the behavior continuing? What is maintaining it?
- ✓ What does the student view as a reward or positive reinforcement? Could this reward serve as an incentive for him to change his behavior?
- ✓ What interventions were tried previously? Which ones were effective?

5. Develop a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

Each specific behavior or issue of concern should be identified and an intervention strategy developed for the BIP. For example, what should teachers do when the student is not completing his class and homework in Language Arts, a 1:00 p.m. class, yet is completing his work in Algebra at 8:30 a.m.? More information is available on FBA and BIP at <http://www.pbis.org>.

- a. First, teachers and parents can determine whether learning problems, such as *written expression* or *slow processing speed*, are difficult for him, as they are for many of these students. If so, accommodations, such as using a computer, dictating some assignments, reducing written work, or providing some tutoring, can be helpful.
- b. Teaching strategies, such as using *graphic organizers* or *overhead projectors*, that rely on visual cues are often effective.

- c. Finally, teachers may find that for a few students misbehavior is linked to the time of day when *medication has worn off* and is no longer effective. For this student, the medication lost its effectiveness by 1:00 p.m. Parents can talk with their doctor to discuss changing the time of day the medication is administered or switching to a sustained-release medication.

6. Teach skills and compensatory strategies.

Teaching students the skills they lack or teaching them to compensate for problems that are linked to AD/HD is critical. Direct instruction is a key strategy for teaching self-management skills such as time management, organizational skills, study skills, note-taking, anger management, prosocial skills, and self-advocacy.

Students can also learn *compensatory skills* for many challenges through the use of technology, such as computers and electronic organizers. Teaching these students how to use PDAs or assignments books, create or use graphic organizers to manage more difficult assignments or projects, or use software programs such as Inspiration helps them become more independent. Furthermore, students who have been *educated about their attention deficit* and taught compensatory strategies are much more likely to have the necessary skills to take charge of their lives. Otherwise, students may come to believe they have problems in these areas because they are bad, lazy, or not trying.

Teachers should keep in mind, however, that even though needed skills are taught, the student may not always use them in the moment they are needed. These students often act before they think about the skills they learned in a class, which is why Dr. Barkley and other researchers put such an emphasis on using visual prompts as necessary reminders.

The task of teaching skills is always easier said than done. In some cases, formal curricula are available; in others, teachers have favorite strategies they have developed over the years. Some key skills and coping strategies are described in the following list. (See Appendix A for a list of resources to address these skills.)

- ✓ **Planning and problem solving:** Assigning a long-term project presents an opportunity to teach standard four-step planning like that of Steven Covey through the use of a *graphic organizer*.⁷ plan, prioritize, schedule, and do it.
- ✓ **Time management:** Teach the student how to “externalize” time reminders using a watch alarm or a PDA or having a friend remind him. Make time concrete and visible with a Time Timer[®], a special clock with a color inset that decreases in size as time passes, allowing the student to “see” time (<http://www.timetimer.com>).
- ✓ **Organizational skills:** Most students can learn how to use a school planner or a PDA to keep up with school assignments. One student who always lost his assignment book came up with a simpler solution that works well for him. Each day he writes his assignments on a 3x5 card that he carries in his pocket. Students can also be taught an efficient way to organize their lockers.
- ✓ **Anger management:** Educating students about anger, making them aware of the events that trigger their anger, and giving them alternative ways of handling anger are helpful strategies. For example, students can learn to talk about their anger in healthy ways, take deep breaths and count to ten, take a time-out to calm down, or talk to a friend. Effective medication levels can also reduce the student’s level of anger.
- ✓ **Conflict resolution:** Conflict resolution involves learning problem-solving skills, how to talk about conflict in an objective manner, and good communication skills.
- ✓ **Self-advocacy:** Educating students about their AD/HD and teaching them how to advocate for themselves is critical. Encourage students to ask for help or the accommodations that they need. Some students actually chair their IEP meetings. Students interested in doing so should read *A Student’s Guide to the IEP*,⁸ published by NICHCY (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities). Realistically, however, most students with attention deficits do not take the time to read this



document so parents or teachers can read the document and teach the student the key steps recommended by NICHCY.

Teach students to recognize their challenges and to tell teachers when they are struggling with a task or having a bad day. But keep in mind, even if you teach all these skills, students may not be able to stop and think to use them because of the very characteristics of their AD/HD.

- ✓ **Decision-making:** Use prosocial strategies that teach responsible decision-making. For example, a teacher may ask a student who is not following rules, "Is that a good choice or a bad choice?" This question gives the student an opportunity to identify the misbehavior and correct it himself.

7. Consider implementing a school-wide positive behavior program.⁹

Many schools are implementing schoolwide positive behavior intervention programs or PBIS. These programs create a schoolwide positive learning environment in which academic and test scores improve and misbehavior decreases. Consistent expectations and interventions for all students are reinforced. A description of this model program is provided in Chapter 5. Illinois has successfully implemented PBIS statewide in elementary and middle schools and has recently shifted the focus to implementation in high schools. Visit <http://www.pbis.org> for more information.