

Psychoeducational treatment is a term used to describe an integrated approach to managing difficulties with concentration, attention, and distractibility in children and adolescents with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Children and adolescents respond best to multiple approaches, including medication, skill building, and changes in the environment.

Basic Assumptions About Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

ADHD Is a Biologically Based Disorder

Parents should recognize that ADHD involves the central nervous system (in particular, specific regions of the brain). Because of this biological imbalance, children with ADHD will have specific weaknesses in self-control, attention and concentration, and the ability to respond to directions.

Parents Do not Cause ADHD

ADHD is not caused by parental inconsistency, divorce, or a past history of emotional trauma. Although there certainly are skills you can acquire to manage the symptoms of ADHD more effectively, these children have a biologically based weakness that has been present since birth. About 70% of these children will continue to have symptoms in adolescence, and about half will continue to have some form of ADHD in adulthood.

There Are Varying Degrees of ADHD

There are two primary subtypes of the disorder—the hyperactive type and the inattentive type. Whereas hyperactive children are usually detected more easily, the inattentive type (more common in girls) often is not detected by teachers or adults because the child is not overly disruptive. Children with the inattentive type sometimes “space out” and have difficulty focusing but usually are not impulsive or disruptive. It is also important to recognize that some children have very pronounced forms of the disorder and others have relatively mild forms. In the milder forms, adults might not notice the inattention and distractibility until the child is older or has entered adolescence. At this later stage, the demands for greater independence in schoolwork can make ADHD symptoms more evident.

Medications Are Helpful

Medications, particularly stimulants, improve attention and concentration and sometimes help decrease aggression and improve social interaction. The majority of children do benefit from regular ongoing medication, and medication needs to be a part of their treatment. Although skills are certainly important, most studies suggest that medication is necessary to improve concentration so that children can benefit from specific skill training.

Attention and Concentration Vary

Because of children's vulnerability in the areas of attention and concentration, their weaknesses will be more or less evident depending on the situation. Tasks that are repetitive and tedious (such as trying to memorize the multiplication tables) will make inattention and poor concentration much more obvious. Tasks that are novel and unique (playing video games) often will make the ADHD child appear “normal.”

Help Your Child Develop Skills to Compensate for Weaknesses

Children with ADHD struggle with inattention and distractibility. Unfortunately, many parents use logical consequences as a form of punishment for children with ADHD. For example, if a child doesn't complete assignments, the child will have to experience the consequences of a poor grade and the teacher's displeasure. Or, if the child does not have the room picked up and organized by a particular time, he or she will not be allowed to go to a movie with a friend.

Barkley (1990) notes very correctly that this approach only courts disaster for children with ADHD. Unless there is enough structure and assistance from the parents, such children will rarely, if ever, receive the reward. In attempting to organize school work without parental help, lists, schedules, or other time-management tools, the child with ADHD rapidly will become caught in a vicious cycle of frustration and academic failure. Nagging the child about this lack of responsibility to follow through is equally unhelpful. Again, it is important to remember that these children have a biologically based weakness.

You can help your child build skills to deal with these problems. You also might need to modify the type of discipline you use. You will want to find out what strengths your child has, then begin encouraging these areas. An academic therapist or diagnostic specialist can help identify special strengths.

Specific Skills for Structuring the Environment

Changes in the environment can help children with ADHD. This section describes several specific strategies for helping your child.

Help Your Child Organize

Children with ADHD often struggle with personal organizational skills. You can encourage such skills by helping your child establish a routine for the major tasks he or she must accomplish. For example, the child should have a routine in which he or she tidies the room, ideally every evening before going to bed. Additionally, the child should have school clothes and other material (back pack, homework) packed and set up the night before to avoid a mad, hectic scramble during the morning. Other strategies such as color-coded laundry baskets (dirty socks in the pink basket, gym clothes in the blue basket) will help the child with ADHD stay organized.

Use Visual Prompts or Cues to Remind the Child to Stay on Task

Visual reminders posted around the house can help your child remember and carry out specific activities. For example, a typical morning routine before school might include taking a shower, brushing teeth and hair, getting dressed, and eating breakfast. You could work with your child to create a series of drawings in a comic-strip format and place it in a central area of the house (e.g., kitchen). These drawings can help your child remember the routine, and if he or she seems to be off task, you can prompt the child to go look at the pictures to get back on track with the next step.

Break Down Tasks

Be very specific in defining the amount of work to be done when you are assigning your child specific homework or chores to complete ("I want this half of your floor picked up"). You also need to specify the time by which the child is to complete the task ("It needs to be done by 10:30. I'll set the timer"). Setting a timer for the specific length of time helps keep the child on task. In addition, it might be helpful to write down a schedule of the child's activities for weekends and after school.

Be Sure to See the Positive

It is important to praise children for desirable behavior. It is easy to focus on behavioral weaknesses with children who have ADHD, and many parents fail to reinforce children when they do perform tasks correctly. For example, a parent forgets to praise the child who has a coat on and is ready to leave the house at a specified time. The parent might be thinking that the child should know that he or she is supposed to be ready on time and should not have to be praised for it.

To ensure positive exchanges instead of these negative, nagging ones, it is helpful to set aside special time—perhaps 15 minutes a day—during which the child chooses an activity to do with the parent, such as playing catch, reading a story, or building a model airplane (Barkley, 1990). Because so much parent-child interaction often centers around task completion (homework or household chores), there sometimes is little positive interaction between the parent and the child with ADHD, and parents can become locked into a negative or critical pattern with the child. Allocating special time guarantees that you will have the opportunity to share enjoyable and positive exchanges with your child.

Repetition and Making Lists Will Help Memory

Make sure that your child understands rules and instructions. Encourage the child to restate the rules you have just described. This helps the child remember what you've said and gives you the chance to correct any misunderstanding. To help your child stay on task, write out instructions and have the child read them aloud. Using lists and written instructions helps the child with ADHD stay focused, and it is a skill that will be even more helpful as the child gets older. As your child enters the teen years, encourage him or her to begin making lists independently. Schedule books and planners also help teens develop these skills.

Parental Consistency Is Important

Consistency usually requires ongoing, constant communication. If you think you are being too lax on your child's misbehavior, or think you might be overresponding by being too harsh, check out the intended consequence with your spouse. It is also important to remember that if one parent assigns a consequence or task to the child, that parent (rather than the other parent) should be the one to determine if the child has completed the task or served the consequence.

For married couples, parenting children with ADHD requires a solid marital relationship with effective communication skills. If communication is a problem, consider seeking marriage counseling to be sure that you have this basic foundation. A strong marital relationship greatly increases the likelihood of successfully parenting the child with ADHD. It is important to schedule activities for yourselves so that you have adequate time and energy to devote to your marriage. A strong marriage will filter down to good parenting.

References and Resources

Barkley, R. A. (1990). *Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: A handbook for diagnosis and treatment*. New York: Guilford.

H. Russell Searight, Ph.D., is the director of behavioral sciences for the Residency Program of Family Medicine of St. Louis. He is the author of several textbooks and an adjunct associate professor in the department of psychology and Community and Family Medicine at St. Louis University.