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STAYING ON TASK: UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

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Although ADHD children do better completing activities of their own interest and choosing, they have a genuinely harder time completing daily responsibilities or finishing work. While it is viewed by many as noncompliance (see the next handout), the problem is much broader. If we are going to help ADHD youngsters learn to finish tasks, we need to understand why the children have so much trouble.

Distractibility. Some ADHD children are literally drawn off tasks by ideas or opportunities that catch their interest and sidetrack them from their task.

Difficulty Shifting Attention. Some ADHD youngsters have a hard time returning their attention to the task. If the teacher makes a comment or a child asks them a question it is harder for the children to return back to work.

Relatively Short Attention Span. ADD children (not necessarily hyperactive youngsters) may find it harder to focus their attention for longer periods of time, particularly if the tasks are somewhat repetitive or uninteresting or if the work environment is distracting.

Boredom. There is a growing literature to suggest that ADHD children grow bored more easily with tasks that they are not passionately interested in.

Over-excitability and Negative Perception. Hyperactive children often overreact to adult requests and task expectations in a way that makes the work harder for them. A chore is not just difficult, it is **impossible**. It is not going to take awhile, it will take **forever**. It is not annoying, it is **horrible**. Other children might see the job as not much fun; ADHD children perceive the work as **horrible**.

Failure to Develop Good Habits. For many, the behavioral challenges have interfered with the development of good habits. Most parents of ADHD children have relied upon reminders or punishment/reinforcement systems that don't really build the habits and routines that help most of us to get things done.

Excessive Feedback. ADHD children get so much feedback about their behavior and their performance that they begin to resent it. Even when the feedback is helpful or warranted, the youngsters react negatively to the burden of being told, reminded, corrected, etc. As a result, their attitude is negative and their follow through less than it could be.

Completing Tasks: Teaching Approach

Keep It Short. An ADHD child will do much better if the task is relatively brief (under a few minutes). There is nothing wrong with reducing a writing assignment or cutting the number of math problems that need to be done. Usually, the children work carelessly to complete a longer task or simply drift from their work if they don't believe they can finish it all. The same is true at home, where the job of cleaning up a room can be overwhelming, but the task of putting shoes in a closet appears much more manageable.

Bite Size Pieces. While not all tasks are brief, many can be divided up into manageable pieces that make it easier for a child to complete them. It's better to just put out the plates and glasses independently, than to have mom or dad hassle a child to set silverware, napkins, drinks and condiments.

Be Clear. Please make sure that you are clear about what you want to get done. Keep your directions brief and use gestures where possible. It is very important that you explain how the child will know when they are finished (e.g., "You can stop raking the leaves when this trash bag is full.").

Establish Time Lines. For some tasks, a clear time line is needed. This helps a child see how much time you think it should take to complete the task (e.g., "this should take only a minute or two").

Less Time, Not More. When children take an inordinate amount of time to get things done, we usually respond by giving more time the next day. Often, the more time we leave to get something done, the more time it takes. Try using short time lines; sometimes this establishes a sense of priority and excitement that helps an ADHD child get the work done quicker.

First Things First. Children almost always complete tasks better if they know that the job comes before fun. ("You need to be finished with this before you watch 'Rugrats' or play with Michael.") For this reason, it is usually better to develop a routine where specific chores come before the usual fun (e.g., pick up in TV. room before watching the show or get trash out of the car before going swimming).

Don't Get Louder, Get Closer. Despite the AT&T commercials, long- distance communication between parents and children is not particularly effective or gratifying. Instead of repeating a request or saying it louder, take a moment to get closer (within arms' length). It only takes a moment and burns some extra calories. It also reduces parental frustration.

Routines and Habits. It is important to build habits by following the same daily routines. The more you can develop routines for the key parts of the day (getting ready for school, completing homework, getting ready for bed), the better.

Don't Think, Don't Remember, Just Do It. Asking many ADD children to pay attention and remember what they need to do is much like asking them to grow taller. It will happen over time, but it is not a matter of trying harder. It is better to develop good habits and routines so that the children complete responsibilities without having to think about it.

Day In/Day Out. Children complete tasks much better if they are ones that they do on a daily basis. It is actually better to take out the trash every day than to do it once a week.

Let the Routine Be the Reminder. It is much easier to develop a habit, if it is part of a daily routine. Children will set the table more readily, for example, if they "always" do so following their afternoon cartoon. If feeding the dog is done after dinner, but before dessert, it is much easier to "remember."

Use Motor Memory. Our bodies will remember to put our dirty clothes in the hamper if we put them there as we are undressing. We will hang up a towel if we put it on the hook just as we are drying off after showering. We will automatically take our plates to the sink if we do it just as we get up from the table. We will put our names at the top of our papers if we do so just when the papers are given to us.

Provide Cues in the Environment. Some ADHD children do better when there is a list or some other visual reminder of what needs to be done. While charts work well for some, other children prefer posters or pictures or some other type of cue. Some youngsters do well with a calendar watch that reminds them about certain tasks, others learn to use daytimers and other forms of electronic calendars.

Avoid Reminders. Although an occasional reminder is necessary, it does not teach a child how to complete a task or remember what needs to be done.

Adult Presence. Most ADD and ADHD children do better when there is an adult in proximity also working on a task.

Do It Together. There are some situations where it is better for everyone concerned if a parent and child complete tasks together. While we would like our children to be more independent, some of us work better as a team. Instead of being distracted on the way out to get wood, a child can bring in some wood with mom or dad. A youngster can help dad cook dinner or get teeth brushed and hair combed while their mom is shaving (just kidding). One of the most common problems is that parents do not do enough of the family chores together (their own and their children's).

Help and Supervise. A good coach begins by walking players through the game plan. The children will learn to complete tasks if we work with them to initially build the right habit or routine. By being with the children as they learn to work independently, we can coach and

encourage in a way that builds habits. Although this takes time initially, it saves valuable hours in the long run.

Consider the Timing. Telling a child what they should have done or how they should have done a task is not as helpful as being right there to cue the youngster at a more teachable moment. It is usually better to overlook the problem today and prepare yourself to "supervise" tomorrow.

Don't Interrupt. ADHD children often have trouble doing what they are asked because the request interrupts their own fun or their internal agenda. If you establish routines where tasks and responsibilities are done at clear points in time (e.g., when your child first comes into the house or when dinner is done), the children should have a better attitude.

Utilize Talent. Children will complete tasks more readily if they see themselves using a talent. A child who is good at math will more willingly help mom or dad to pay the bills. Children who like gadgets can add grocery items on a calculator or tape videos for the family. An artistic child will generally work at making Christmas cards. A youngster who likes tools will work with mom or dad to clean them or sharpen them.

Make It Fun. Children need not see tasks as boring or annoying. One of the keys in life is to enjoy what you are doing. It is quite possible to make a relatively tedious chore more fun: We can listen to music while we vacuum or mow the lawn. We can bake or prepare a smoothie for dinner. We can toss dirty laundry through a hoop over a basket or look for the best buy when we go grocery shopping. Musical children are more than happy to select the music for dinner time or make tapes for the family trip. Some youngsters love keeping track of shopping coupons.

Make It More Interesting. ADHD children pay attention better to things that they are interested in. A child interested in baseball will read about the Negro Leagues but not show much interest in learning about other elements of desegregation. A child interested in computers will search for hours learning about galaxies on the Internet. A youngster who loves Legos will build bridges for a school project and do math projects using his favorite Lego plans. The more interesting you or your child can make a task, the better.

Arrange Contributions. Children will feel much better about completing tasks if they feel they are making a contribution. If you can create some circumstances where their help is truly important, your child will feel better about the work and about themselves. If you've pulled a muscle and need their help putting items in the car, your youngster will feel much better about going to the store with you. If you can't find your glasses, they are much more willing to look through the newspaper for you. Most children want to feel like they are really helping out.

Talk About Your Own Task Completion. It helps for children to see what you mean by "the job is done." If you make reference to the tasks that you have completed, and how you decided that they were finished or that it was time to stop, you will be modeling an important skill for your child.

Be Positive. It is better for you to point out when your child has completed a task, or talk about what portion of the task they have finished, than it is to focus on what they did not get done.

"Finished Jar." One of the most powerful reinforcement approaches involves crediting children for anything they finish. Each time they finish something, put a marble or some other type of token in a container. Don't just give them credit for when they finish a chore; it is equally important to focus on when they finish a sandwich or a drawing or a TV. show. Talk about how they know that they are truly finished (this can generate some interesting discussion). Double the credit if they point out to you that they have finished something before you remember to credit them. When the jar is full, celebrate with all the time, money and energy that has been saved.

Teach A Positive Perspective. ADHD children often make work harder for themselves by exaggerating the nature of the task. We need to role model and teach a more positive perspective. Some jobs don't take as long as we think ("It will only take 5 or 10 minutes to finish picking up the newspapers") and most are not as difficult as our children make them out to be ("the trash is not that heavy and the can is just outside of the door"). Many children react as if the task is going to ruin their chances for fun, so it helps if they learn that they can get things done and enjoy time with their friends or on the computer ("there is plenty of time to get this done and watch your show").

It's the Right Thing To Do. Children follow through better when they understand and accept the importance of what they are doing. They should not do homework or complete a task just because they are told to; there should be other important reasons that the children understand and agree upon. If we can make connections that are important to our youngsters (see below), they will follow through more readily.

Making the Connection: Time. ADHD children don't really understand how cooperation and task completion saves time. When your child cooperates and finishes work without needing your reminding or supervision, point out the time it saves you and how much else you have been able to get done. Some parents will use a watch to actually keep track of the time that is saved or wasted by their children's cooperation/noncompliance. That time can be used to do fun things or to actually help the ADHD youngster do some chores. When your child behaves responsibly and saves you time, help clean their room or do one of their chores. They will really appreciate it and understand the importance of family members helping out each other.

Making the Connection: Mood. We are almost always happier when children complete a task independently, without reminders or supervision. Let your children know how much this boosts your spirits and make sure that the improved family mood results in more family fun (e.g., special dessert, family game, allowing your children a special privilege).

Making the Connection: Money. Children who don't cooperate or follow through waste time and money. Many parents have found it helpful to "charge" their children for reminders and supervision time that they don't believe their youngsters really need (make sure that your expectations are realistic). You would be amazed at how much better children can do on their own if they know that their parents help will "cost them."

Making the Connection: Opportunity. When children complete tasks they are demonstrating responsibility. Help them see that responsibility is not a burden, it leads to greater opportunity. A youngster who can do a good job picking up Legos will have the opportunity to bring Legos on vacation or will be allowed to buy more at the store. Children who are good about putting dirty clothes in the laundry basket, have more involvement in the clothes that they wear. A child responsible about their homework should have more latitude in planning their weekend or time after school. The more children can complete tasks and behave responsibly, the more opportunities they should be given.

Making the Connection: Practice. Instead of getting angry when your child does not finish a task, or charging them for your help, talk about some practice. If your youngster is having trouble remembering to feed the fish after breakfast or struggles to pick up wet towels after showering, consider having them practice doing these things. Spending 15 minutes walking in and hanging up a coat 10 different times can be a very powerful consequence.