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BASIC PRINCIPLES

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Use a Multimodal Approach

It is not uncommon for parents or teachers to focus on one issue or one approach, neglecting other options. We might, for example, focus on medication therapy but not consider parent coaching or group support as an adjunct to medication. We might put a lot of effort into a behavior management plan, without considering whether some short term counseling or group therapy or extra help at school is needed. Some parents will focus on diet or exercise as the best way to help the children. In our experience, we need to be flexible and consider how education, support, coaching, behavior modification and medication therapy work together to help ADHD children.

Develop a Team That Communicates

Helping ADHD children requires a team approach. The child, parent, teacher, clinician and physician all need to communicate to make sure that everyone is working together. It is too easy for people to work at cross purposes and the sharing of information is essential for medication therapy and teaching. This team building and communicating is easier said than done, however. Busy and conflicting schedules make it hard to meet, and lead to games such as telephone tag. We will talk later about systems for sharing information that are clear and simple to use.

Be Knowledgeable

There is no substitute for knowledge. Parents and teachers must have access to information about ADHD. There are excellent newsletters and magazines and books that offer wonderful overviews and important information. Each year there is a national ADHD conference and each region has workshops and talks on helping ADHD children. We need to learn as much as we can so that we are in the position to help support teachers and work with clinicians. Proper knowledge helps us to become an effective member of the team.

Make Sure the Idea Source is Credible

ADHD has become the hot topic. There are almost as many books about hyperactivity as there are about dieting. More and more we are hearing from people who have watched a talk show or read in a newspaper or heard from a neighbor about some new treatment of ADHD children. Parents will make a decision about medication based on something they heard from a neighbor or from a friend.

Why should we rely upon Oprah or tabloid writers for our information? Just because it is on television or in a book does not mean it is true. Clinicians and doctors are not equally knowledgeable and they are not always correct. Parents and teachers with ADHD children of their own have a valuable perspective but it does not mean that their opinions are more legitimate.

We need to consider the source of our ideas and evaluate suggestions very carefully. Is there research to back up the recommendation? Does the person have experience and a track record for success? Is there another "agenda" that affects the person's perspective? Is the advice generic advice that is offered to all the children?

Don't Stereotype the Children

A thorough evaluation process can provide important information about an ADHD child. Parents learn a great deal through readings and parent support groups and workshops. Unfortunately, the process involves a diagnosis or label that can often stereotype a child. All ADHD children are different. They have different personalities and talents and interests. We should not use generalizations to make decisions about children; we need to develop an individualized plan for each and every youngster.

Not Everything is a Function of ADHD

We should not assume that all problems are a function of a child's attention deficit or impulsivity. Some children have trouble completing work because it is too hard for them. Some have difficulty concentrating because they have auditory processing problems. ADHD children are often affected by lack of sleep, inadequate nutrition, lack of exercise, etc. Teenagers go through hormonal changes that affect their behavior. We need to consider these factors very carefully before we develop an intervention plan.

Changes in behavior do not always suggest the need to change medicine doses; sometimes there are family or seasonal stresses that affect the children. There is not always a good fit between the child's style and the approach used by the teacher or coach. We need to remember that ADHD youngsters are affected by the same variables as other children and that these factors can affect how they behave and how they learn.

Focus on Skills, Not Just Behaviors

Helping ADHD children is a teaching process. It requires the same planning and skill building and rehearsal and coaching that it does to teach children to read or ride a bike. We do not teach children these other skills by talking about them or by using sticker charts or by punishing youngsters when they don't follow the reading or bike riding rules. While discussion and rewards and consequences have their place in the behavior change process, we need to think

foremost about how to teach ADHD children to do what we ask of them.

Select Realistic Goals

When most adults work on their own self-control they know the importance of starting out with achievable, short term goals. They do not expect to lose fifty pounds or become marathon runners; they start by changing their diet and exercising modestly. Unfortunately, parents and teachers are sometimes so eager to help ADHD children that they select goals that are too ambitious. We forget that we have months and years to teach the children what they need to learn.

ADHD youngsters need to learn to break down tasks and expectations into smaller steps so that they are not overwhelmed by a task and can successfully complete smaller segments. Parents and teachers would be wise to break a task into bite-size pieces so that it is easier for the child to follow through and experience success.

Prioritize Goals

Most of us are so eager to help ADHD children that we overwhelm them with too many goals. Working on too many things at one time inevitably leads to frustration, negativity and discouragement. Some goals are simply not worth the struggle, while others are more easily and wisely achieved at some future time. By working on a few achievable goals at a time, we build confidence and motivation and set the foundation for working on the next goal.

Individualize Expectations

We would not expect a child with cerebral palsy to run the same number of laps around the track as other students in the gym class. Nor do we ask learning disabled children to learn as many spelling words or read as many pages. There is no reason why we should not modify expectations for ADHD children either. While some parents and teachers complain that this is not fair, there really is not anything unfair about trying to teach to children's strengths and adjust for their weaknesses. Fairness does not mean trying to treat all the children the same.

There are times when we need to consider the same reduction in work expectations for ADHD children. There are times when longer assignments and repetitive work actually interfere with ADHD children's learning because they lose their focus and get restless and view assignments as impossible to complete.

Be Proactive

Behavior management techniques are too often a reaction to an ADHD child's behavior. We reward positive behavior and attempt to discourage inappropriate behavior. With ADHD children we need to anticipate the problems an ADHD child might encounter. We must try and

develop a plan for dealing with those difficulties or work proactively to teach the children how to handle challenges before they develop into problems.

Build Upon Strengths

Teachers and parents are usually very supportive and want to do whatever they can to help ADHD students. Unfortunately, we sometimes spend too much time trying to improve behavior and remediate weaknesses. We do not spend enough time and energy building upon what the children already do well. We need to focus on what the children like to do and what they are good at. We need to weave those strengths and interests into what we ask of the youngsters. If we focus too much on weaknesses, there can be negative effects on self-esteem. We may miss an opportunity to expand abilities that might be important later on in life.

Absorb the Mind and Body

I cannot count the number of times I have heard parents and teachers ask ADHD students to calm down or settle down or get back under control. We have found that this is difficult for ADHD children to do unless we absorb them in something that is interesting. ADHD children stay calm and relax by doing things that keep their mind and body busily interested in an activity.

Keep It Interesting

Parents almost always tell me that their ADHD children can pay attention to things that they are interested in. They wonder how it is that ADHD children can focus so well when they are playing video games, building with legos, watching cartoons or reading a basketball magazine or comic book. I have begun to ask another question, "What is it about video games or comic books or art that helps ADHD children sustain their attention? Can we use these interests to help the youngsters pay attention better in school or complete tasks at home? If we learn more about the things that interest the children, we can modify assignments and chores and other expectations so that the youngsters are more productive.

Don't Overexcite or Over Stimulate

ADHD children have trouble putting the brakes on their actions or thoughts or emotions. Although recess, gym or extracurricular activities can be fun, they can also be over stimulating and excite the children in a way that makes it difficult for them to calm down. We need to consider whether there is sufficient structure to help them maintain self-control and ask whether there are other activities that might also be interesting but perhaps not so over stimulating. The same is true for rewards that can be so motivating that they actually overly excite the children and make it harder for them to stay focused and meet their goal.

Encourage, Don't Discourage

Asking an ADHD student who is "out of control" to stop what they are doing and calm down is like trying to regain control of a car on ice by slamming on the brakes. All that happens is that we lose even more control. Teachers and parents get frustrated when the child does not settle down and the continuous reminders may result in even more anger and misbehavior. Instead of demanding that the child stop what he or she is doing, we need to find a positive direction for the child. We need to find something that we can encourage that boy or girl to do so that they will have a better chance of regaining control of their behavior -- much like a driver regains control of the car by steering into the skid and then gently stepping on the gas in the direction he or she wishes to go.

Be Positive

Almost every book and article written about ADHD emphasizes the importance of being positive with ADHD children. ADHD youngsters receive negative and controlling feedback for "being themselves" and this negativity affects their confidence, motivation, and self-esteem. Researchers have suggested that we try and give at least 5 times as much positive feedback as negative.

This is important advice that is more easily offered than followed. Often, the children perceive the feedback as trivial or demeaning and designed by adults to control their behavior. When busy teaching a class or raising a family, it is hard to remember to be positive and difficult to find behavior to praise. On a personal level, it is hard to be positive with a child who has just wasted our time or hurt our feelings a short time before. Parents and teachers know that being positive can be easier said than done.

Be Cautious With Rewards and Consequences

Most of us are aware of how powerful a tool rewards and consequences can be. Rewards and consequences also have their limitations. Although they help us modify behavior, parents and teachers are frustrated by the fact that they work "differently" with ADHD children. Often, ADHD children grow tired of reward systems that other children are still interested in. When we try and offer a more exciting reward, they get so excited by the prospect of earning the reward that the over-stimulation interferes with their success! Since ADHD children are more often reprimanded or punished, they become desensitized to consequences that inhibit other youngsters. Parents and teachers report that rewards and consequences are not nearly as effective with impulsive and restless behavior, since the children tend not to think about these consequences. When we try and adjust consequences to meet the needs of ADHD children, classmates or siblings perceive teachers and parents as being unfair.

I have also found that an overemphasis on rewards and consequences sometimes creates a situation where the children do not think about their own behavior. They are reliant upon our feedback and look to external rewards and consequences instead of their own motivations for appropriate behavior. Some children come to expect rewards and negotiate with parents or teachers for what they want to receive for their behavior. The children do not learn the real life, natural rewards for their behavior.

Consider the Timing

Books and magazines tell us that immediate rewards and consequences are more effective than ones which are delayed. Although this is often true, I have found that delayed consequences can be of equal or greater effectiveness and that there is no reason for teachers or parents to feel badly because they have supposedly missed that magic moment for managing a child's behavior.

There are several reasons why our response need not be so immediate. Sometimes, we are simply too busy to respond to a child's behavior appropriately (we are on the phone or with another student). Often, the setting makes it impossible to really deal effectively with a problem (a restaurant or someone else's home). There are also times when we are too upset or the children are too tired or out of control.

I have learned that certain lessons and "connections" are better learned at a different moment, when we have more time and more control over the situation and when the true relationship between a child's behavior and the "natural consequences" will be better understood.

Don't be Passive, Arrange Experiences and Lessons

Logical and natural consequences help children learn about their behavior. Unfortunately, logical consequences are sometimes difficult to implement in a timely manner and natural consequences are sometimes too delayed and too abstract to be effective. We need to be more proactive and create situations that teach children about their behavior.

Practice

Athletes understand that when they play poorly they may need extra practice. Practice is equally important for ADHD children but it is rarely used as a teaching approach and behavior management strategy. Current behavior modification approaches tend to emphasize rewards and consequences, which is very much like trying to teach a person to golf by rewarding them for shooting par but not letting them practice their swing. If we punish the player for hitting the ball off the fairway or into a trap and don't give them the opportunity to practice, the beginning golfer will grow very frustrated and want to quit.

Yet, this is the very thing we do when we set up a point system with an ADHD child for lining up quietly or turning in work. Time and time again we design behavior modification systems that do not include a practice component. If we are truly going to help ADHD youngsters develop skills, we will need to spend more time practicing (through role playing or imagery or actual practice) and less time simply reacting to their behavior.

Simplify Life

"Life is too complicated" is a common adult refrain that is also important for ADHD children. By simplifying the ADHD child's schedule and environment we can help reduce stress that leads to frustration and disorganization.

Be a Teaching Role Model

The way we think and behave has an important effect on our children's behavior. We can help ADHD learn about attention and concentration, organization, anger control and other skills by thinking out loud and providing examples of how we handle different situations. Too often parents focus on what they do and not how they do it. We need to give the children the chance watch how we actually go about accomplishing a task or meeting a goal.

ADHD Children are Part of the Group

The most effective techniques are ones that can be used with an entire class or all the children in the family. All children can benefit from learning about attention and concentration. Most students need better organizational skills. They all do better when they practice lining up for gym or turning in their homework first thing in the morning. Group strategies give the children the sense that they are part of the group, working on goals and skills that are important for everyone to learn.

Establish Routines

Most successful adults have routines that they follow every day. They go about brushing their teeth and showering and eating breakfast in a patterned way. When they get in the car or tee up a golf ball or start to prepare a meal, they have a routine that they follow. Routines help us be more consistent and keep us from having to think about every little thing that we do.

We have found that the same thing is true for ADHD children; routines help the children establish habits so that they do not have to think so much about their behavior and do not really have to be paying attention to get things done. Routines also make it easier for parents and teachers to be consistent and to avoid power struggles about what needs to be done and when.

Build Habits

People do not really buckle their seat belts to be safe. While it is the safe thing to do, the truth of the matter is that we buckle our seat belt because we are in the habit of doing so. In fact, much of what we do every day is out of habit, done without thinking. We believe that by practicing the correct routines we can help ADHD children build habits that reduce impulsive behavior and improve self-control. With the right habits an ADHD child will not really have to pay attention, their bodies will do what is expected or needed automatically without thinking about it.