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Counsellors' Corner

Information on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Can look like (not all profiles are the same)

Strengths

- Engaging personality; social; creative; energetic or low energy.

Distracted/inability to regulate focus

- Inability to regulate focus - if topic/activity is not an area of interest, the student is unable to regulate; if topic/activity is of interest; student is hyper-focused. Both extremes have issues (e.g., Hyper focused on a preferred activity means they totally lose track of time, don't hear mom calling etc. and become difficult to transition).
- Unable to pay attention to details.
- Distracted; appearing not to listen; easily bored.
- Seems forgetful or low academically; this is typically due to "zoning out" and missing key pieces of information.

Impulsivity

- Impulsive in action and words (blurts out, speaks before thinking, interrupts).
- Most of us have an impulse – think about it – then engage in a behaviour.
- The ADHD brain has an impulse – then engages immediately in behaviour – then thinks about it, often resulting in remorse, regret, low self-esteem, frustration, and being labelled a "behaviour problem."
- Often engages in risky behaviour; typically, due to impulsivity (i.e., not thinking about consequences of actions or outcomes of the behaviour).

Needs to move

- Fidgety and needs to move for those with the hyperactivity component.

Learning

- Often has challenges with written output (typically due to the lack of ability to organize thoughts in advance and the need to sustain focus during the activity).
- Difficulty remembering things and following instructions (the mind can't hold onto many instructions and words).
- Disorganized.
- Unable to do homework on their own.
- Easy to start activities of interest, but seldom finish (projects, crafts, etc).
- Frequently loses or misplaces homework, books, toys.
- Low stamina for mental effort.

Emotional Regulation

- Limited tolerance for frustration, academic challenges, or moments of distress.
- Anxiety/worry (often expressed as misbehaviour).
- Difficulty keeping powerful emotions in check, resulting in impulsive outbursts.
- Wanting to do well; can be sensitive to the response of adults around them; often interprets adult intervention as anger.
- Often feels misunderstood.

What's happening for the student

- The student acts on impulses and ideas; their mind goes right to action rather than pausing and "thinking it through."
- The Prefrontal Cortex is not available to help the student plan, organize, make decisions independently (also known as executive functioning).
- The student's sense of safety (neuroception) is key to their success. Interventions involving anger and punishment don't change the behaviour.

Classroom/Home Strategies

Distracted/inability to regulate focus

- Preferential seating – close to teaching area; away from distractions (parents monitor homework activity as it happens, at the kitchen table; stay close to support and supervise).
- Co-regulate as an effective way to teach self-regulation, working with a buddy or support person who can model appropriate behaviour (Parents try to regulate volume/tone of voice, patience, problem solving as a model for your child).
- Touch desk (table); call name softly; create a system with the child to call their attention that doesn't involve embarrassment or shame (Parents provide discipline/consequences with a gentle, calm but firm voice away from siblings and friends; try to keep emotion out of it).
- Use few words when restating instructions, add pics if possible (also for home).
- Alternative work settings for seat work if needed – quieter areas (Parents don't have tv or games on during homework/reading time; encourage "mindfulness" – focusing on only the task).
- Noise cancelling headphones – make it universal – have some for other students.
- Chunk work into small pieces with a small stretch/walk/water break in between (break chores into small work tasks with simple instructions, provide fun breaks for motivation).

Impulsivity

- Teach student about impulsivity – it will get easier to manage as they get older and their frontal cortex develops more.
- Teach self-compassion; encourage and reinforce effort, not outcome.
- Reminders to put up their hand; social coaching, not interrupt when parent on phone.
- Consider "won't" vs "can't" - many children with ADHD develop low self-esteem due to the frustrations of the adults trying to help them. A child who is being oppositional "won't" clean their room independently; a child struggling with executive functioning "can't."

Needs to move

- Body breaks; hoki stool; wiggle cushion; run around the school/house; do an errand for the teacher/parent; help with dinner, be a helper in a younger class or with a neighbour (also helps with self-esteem).

Learning

- Assess what the child can do, then build on this; avoid comparisons with other learners or siblings.
- Assess Executive Functioning Skills (organization, planning, decision making) and support as needed.
- Visual Schedules in the classroom – student needs to know where to look for essential information (at home, this can look like short task lists – on the bathroom mirror, the door, etc).
- Chunk assignments/tasks into small, manageable bits with body breaks provided throughout.
- Premack assignments (non-preferred activity followed by preferred activity; also presented as "First/Then" (e.g. "First do 3 math questions, then go for a water break").
- Minimize number of instructions.
- "Get Ready, Do, Done" strategies (Model what each stage looks like)
- Reduce amount of written output expectations; copy notes for student and teach them how to highlight key points; use technology.
- Allow student to take a photo of notes/diagrams/etc. rather than copying them down. It is difficult for a person struggling with focus to listen to a teacher and take notes at the same time, it becomes particularly complex when learning a completely new topic or language.
- Post homework on the board or via email; parent may need to support.

Emotional Regulation

- Create an atmosphere of safety (i.e., it is okay to make mistakes); use humour.
- Allow for emotional breaks; encourage regular visits with school counsellor where possible
- Coach mindfulness as much as possible in class; this does not mean the "meditative moments;" rather, helping students to focus on one thing at a time and enjoy that one thing (e.g., listening to a piece of music, eating a piece of fruit, drawing a picture without any other distractions). Our brains are often trying to multi-task, and we need to help students train their brains to be mindful of/focused on what they are doing.
- Utilize school based/classroom programs to support emotional well-being (EASE lessons, mindfulness moments, Inner Explore, class wide body breaks, nutrition breaks)

Strategies for Students

Distracted/inability to regulate focus

- Sit by students that will help you, not distract.
- Clear your desk; only have needed items.
- Know what the task is.
- Put up your hand; ask for help.
- Work out a plan with your parents for technology at night. It is fun to be on our phones late at night, but screens are a "stimulant" (like having a cup of coffee before bed). They mess up your sleep, which makes you more tired the next day. Sleepiness makes it even harder for the brain to focus.

Impulsivity

- Read the Room – walk in, look, what are people doing? What am I to do?
- Put up your hand to talk.
- Create positive self-talk (work with someone you trust to create positive words).
- Put a note or sticky on your desk as a reminder to wait. 😊

Needs to move

- Body breaks!
- Chair push-ups, hand squeezes, fidgets (that do not distract).
- Use the swings, playground, basketball hoop etc. – use what makes your body feel more relaxed afterwards.

Organization

- Have a teacher or friend help you organize your desk. Take a photo of it and keep the photo on your phone or in your desk to look at whenever you clean your desk. Set a reminder in your phone to do this once a week consistently.
- Have a parent or counsellor help you make a brief list of "to-dos" for key parts of your day. Hang one on your bathroom mirror (e.g., Breakfast, brush teeth, comb hair, vitamins, get dressed, planner in backpack...ready to go). Have one in your desk for the start of the day (e.g., Two sharpened pencils, planner open, spelling out), and one for the end of the day (e.g., Check what homework is due, get books needed for homework, fill out planner, stack chair, change shoes).
- Have a parent help you to organize your room into labelled bins. This will help you remember where things go when it comes time to clean. Having an organized space around you will help you to keep your mind organized and calm.

Learning

- Know what the project or assignment is supposed to look like when finished - ask your teacher to show you a "done" example.
- Write down the steps to the task (or have someone do this with you).
- Take breaks and have some positive self-talk - remember that ADHD does not mean you aren't smart, it means you must access your brain differently to get the job done.
- Have a study buddy or friend you can call/text when you need help for homework. Ask your teacher or helper questions – don't suffer silently and assume you are the only one who is stuck!

Emotional Regulation

- Having a good sleep as well as enough food and water are important to your emotions and daily functioning.
- Check in with how your body feels – what do you think you need?
- Have a plan for when you feel frustrated. Your teacher can help you with this.
- Know we ALL experience big feelings – they will come and go. We just need to have a plan for when they show up.

Strengths

- Remind yourself of your strengths! You are amazing!
- Strengthen your strengths – what are you good at compared to other kids your age; do lots of that thing! Although screen time is fun; consider becoming an expert in something else: skateboarding, knitting, crafting, swimming, doing magic tricks, etc. This will help your self-esteem and help you socially! Kids admire and like to be around other kids who can do something they can't!

