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# Strengthening Executive Function Development for Students With ADD

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# Strengthening Executive Function Development for Students With ADD

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What are the root causes of Attention Deficit Disorder in our children and youth, and how do we address these challenges? According to the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention, [11 percent of children in the United States age 4-17 \(6.4 million\) have been diagnosed with ADHD as of 2011.](#)

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Dr. Russell Barkley, clinical professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina and medical expert in ADD, shares that this disorder is primarily about emotional regulation and self-control. It is not just about inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Emotional regulation, which is foundational to social, emotional, and academic success, is underdeveloped in these youth. Dr. Barkley discusses five executive skills, centered on emotional control, that are deeply affected by ADD. He emphasizes that the cause of this disorder arises from within neurogenetic roots that "effective" or "ineffective" parenting do not touch. ADD is not a knowledge or intelligence disorder. When we study the inability of many children to control emotions and regulate behaviors, we begin to address the specific organic components of ADD and the social repercussions affecting many students at all hours of the day.

The brain is a social and historic organ that performs, behaves, and learns in the context of relationships. People will forgive your academic mishaps, but negative behaviors are often viewed as personal afflictions and intentional. The following strategies, designed to strengthen the five executive skills, address these negative behaviors supportively and constructively.

## 1. Pause

Young people with ADD often show an inability to create a pause, or a moment of self-restraint between stimulus and reaction while weighing the consequences of their impending reaction. To assist students in creating this pause, give their brains the opportunity to make associations with color, visuals, and concrete objects. Tangible items can be symbolic reminders for students of all ages. Here are examples of signaling an intentional pause:

- Flicking a red rubber band bracelet on our wrist or placing a red ball cap on our heads are two practices that teachers could model and repeatedly share when a pause is needed before making a hurried emotional or academic decision.
- Accompanied with the tangible item, teachers can help students identify words that are analogous to waiting and hesitating. *Stop, halt, think, rest, breathe, float, and tread* could be posted in specific areas of the room with pictures and images to add meaning.
- Students could bring in an object from home that reminds them to stop, pause, and wait. These personal objects could be placed in a "red corner," a highlighted area in the classroom where they are seen as reminders. Seeing, saying, and experiencing meaningful and personal reminders can effectively create associations and metaphors that the brain desires and needs for personalizing new responses.

## 2. The Mind's Eye

Children need to understand how past experiences and reactive decisions have resulted in a negative impact. Dr. Barkley describes ADD as a lack of hindsight -- and therefore foresight -- to visually see past experiences that did not go well! A lack of hindsight prohibits us from viewing the relevant past, which means that we are unable to see what might happen in the future.

Teachers can address this by having students create a visual or written story about a recent experience. There are a variety of options for implementing this exercise. The following questions might spur a story starter and reflection:

- Who are the characters in this story?
- What is their challenge?
- What were the rising actions, climax, and solutions?
- What were the patterns or repetitious behaviors of the characters in the story?
- How would you create or design a different ending?

## 3. The Mind's Voice

This skill is developed through childhood beginning with audible talking that moves inward. Without the voice in our head, we are left in a deep void of confusion, feeling disconnected from choices and consequences.

As an activity, identify self-talk when experiences go poorly, while developing coping strategies through class discussion and reflection. Students can write their challenges on colored cards and toss them into a container. They then draw cards and become Problem Solvers, creating Pinterest boards that display a variety of improved

strategies to select as social and emotional anchor charts for improved learning and behavior.

#### **4. The Mind's Heart**

Through this executive skill, youth feel the connection between their emotional responses and ability to self-motivate. This is profoundly lacking in students with deficiencies in emotional regulation and self-control. Here are two approaches to try:

- Noticing is a form of feedback that is not evaluation or praise, but rather purely informative, indirectly saying to the student, "I am present and understand." Noticing assists students with frequent feedback and is a validating mirror for small motivational steps. When we begin to *notice* everything -- new shoes, a smile, a haircut, following a procedure or direction -- we affirm the process.
- Motivational documentaries are powerful stories that promote emotional connection by igniting mirror neurons in our brains to promote perseverance and motivation. They spur great conversations, questions, and discussions that students can apply within their own lives. The emotional lessons from these documentaries could inspire student-designed Snapchats and shared Vines for discussions, increased positive emotion, and modeling.

#### **5. The Mind's Playground**

The fifth executive function embraces problem solving, cognitive flexibility, and empathy. To visualize a problem from a different perspective, we need to empathize, see possibilities, and talk through a challenge, which can motivate us to discover a new way of learning and relating to others. The Mind's Playground incorporates Pause, the Mind's Voice, Mind's Heart, and Mind's Eye. Combining these skills gives us an incredible opportunity to be a part of our students' brain development.

Have you used these or similar practices for teaching students with ADD? Please share your experiences in the comments section below.