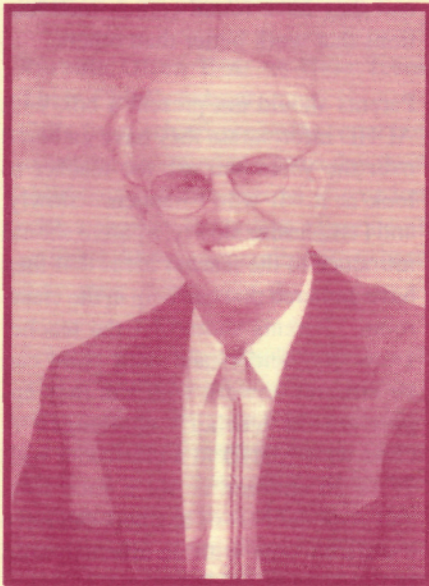


# The ADHD CHALLENGE

Promoting a Better Understanding of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Through Quality Information

## How Parents and Teachers Interact Makes a Difference

by Richard A. Lougy, MFT



**Editor's Note:** *Richard Lougy, MFT, coauthored a recently published book, ADHD: A Survival Guide for Parents and Teachers, along with David Rosenthal, M.D. In this article, Lougy addresses some of the essential topics covered in the book. In particular, he provides some innovative advice and strategies for improving the all-important interaction between parents and teachers.*

Children spend a large percentage of their waking day in school. How the parent of an ADHD child interacts with school personnel and understands the educational challenges presented to their child can make an important difference in their child's school experience.

Children who need to move around and get bored easily with routine activities are not good candidates for success in the average American classroom.

Many of them are bright and energetic, but are failing and not reaching their potential in school. The affected child's pattern of over- or underfocusing leads to many incomplete assignments, missed lecture material, and poor test-taking skills. Because of difficulty with sustained attention, organization, time management, and impulsivity, these children can get in trouble at school and fall behind in their education.

Parents, in trying to explain or understand their child's inconsistent performance and disruptive behaviors in the classroom, will go to more conferences with school staff than parents of unaffected children. Unrelenting frustration led one mother in therapy to say, "My child's in school – can I tell you some stories!" Like many parents of children with ADHD, the mother felt misunderstood by her child's teachers and principal. She had met resistance from the school and came to the therapist hoping to find better ways to communicate with the school.

No one person is more important in an ADHD child's day-to-day progress in school than the classroom teacher. The teacher can and does make a big difference in a child's attitude towards school. How the child's parent communicates with the teacher and other school personnel can encourage or discourage supportive interventions for their ADHD child.

I have found the following topics to be important contributors to furthering better communication between parents and schools.

### It's Important That Parents Tell the Teacher Their Child Has ADHD

A parent should tell their child's teacher he/she has ADHD. Why? Affected children often present problem behaviors throughout their education to one degree or another. Research shows that they generally don't outgrow the disorder, but they present symptoms differently or to different degrees as they move through school. If the teacher knows the child has ADHD, the teacher will be better prepared for some of the disruptive behavior and educational challenges the child presents. The affected child may have difficulty with paper-and-pencil tasks, copying from the board, listening and taking notes at the same time, remembering to turn in assignments, and following directions. Most teachers are caring and sensitive people, and when informed about the special needs of an ADHD child, will try to make accommodations.

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Many ADHD children take medication, and a teacher's feedback is important so that the doctor can evaluate the appropriateness of the child's medication and change the dosage as needed. Some parents want to give their child medication and not tell the teacher. I generally discourage this for two reasons. First, some medications have side effects, and the teacher can report to the parent or doctor any negative changes in the child's behavior. Secondly, teachers must be team members in the child's treatment. Teachers who dispense medication may feel anxious and unsure about their role; however, most teachers feel more positive about the administration of the medication when they are informed and feel they have the confidence of the doctor and parent.

Sometimes parents may want to keep the medication a secret from school staff out of personal embarrassment or to test "its" effectiveness. The parent may think the teacher will see improvement in the child just because he/she hears the child is on medication, and not because the pill is doing what it was meant to do: stimulate underactive areas of the brain. It is true that a child will sometimes show improved behavior when given positive attention by the teacher, but this improvement generally lasts for only a short period of time. Over time, the affected child's inattentive and impulsive behaviors will again present themselves. Not telling the teacher the ADHD child is on medication is usually a waste of time. Medications, such as stimulants, are fast acting and the effects are usually noted quickly by the teacher. Frankly, teachers will guess a child is on medication when they observe a sudden change in the child's behavior.

The majority of teachers will work with parents if properly informed about the child's disorder. It's important that honesty and openness be established so the affected child can be provided the best opportunity for success in the classroom.

### **Parents Are an Important Resource on ADHD for the Teacher**

A child with ADHD is a teacher's enigma – puzzlement, a child who is difficult to teach and can disrupt the learning of other children in the classroom. Consequently, a parent, by sharing information on ADHD, can help the teacher find more success. Parents of affected children probably know more about ADHD than the vast majority of educators. Parents of ADHD children shouldn't sell themselves short. Raising an ADHD child is not easy, and to have survived with some level of emotional well-being, the parent will have learned ways to work with their child. Most parents of affected children have collected information that can be helpful to the teacher. Most parents make a personal goal to become an expert on this disorder. Many families have a library comparable to most therapists' on ADHD. The self-help section in the local library or bookstore becomes as familiar as the produce section in the local grocery store.

The question asked by parents, and often the major problem presented to parents, is "How do I best share this knowledge with the teacher without offending anyone?" This is an important question. Parents want to be a support to the teacher, not a pest. Parents, however, won't be successful with all teachers. Some are more open and accepting of parental help than others. Frankly, some of them will never be open to the suggestions of parents or others. They see change as threatening and something that requires too much effort on their part. However, teachers don't have a monopoly on this attitude. Many people simply don't appreciate someone questioning their behavior, and when encouraged to look at other approaches, they can be close-minded. If an affected child has a teacher who is close-minded, the parent may have to put their child in another classroom or ask the school principal to provide accommodations for their child. However, the majority of teachers are open to new information and anxious to find effective ways to work with ADHD students.

Parents can give important information about their child to those teachers who are open to suggestions. A parent can share interventions that work and do not work. Some children are more anxious and moody than others, and this information is important to a teacher. Early in the school year, a parent can ask for a conference with their child's teacher to share information about their child. The parent should tell the teacher at this time that their child has ADHD and they have found certain interventions that work better than others.

Parents should not present a box with ADHD information they have gathered over the years and ask the teacher to look at it. It won't happen. Slowly, and I emphasize slowly, a parent should introduce to the teacher ideas that they have gathered that can help in the classroom. Parents should let the teacher know they understand their child can be difficult to work with and they appreciate the teacher's challenge. A child with ADHD in a classroom with 25 to 36 children is not a good mix, and even the best of teachers can have a difficult time with an affected child in this kind of environment.

Parents need to remember that their child is not the only one in the classroom. Parents can sometimes be insensitive to the teacher's difficulty in dealing with their child while still meeting the needs of the rest of the class. To the affected child's parent, he/she is the most important child in the classroom; however, that doesn't negate that the teacher is also responsible for educating other children who are equally important to their parents.

Parents should put together a small booklet on ADHD for their child's teacher. The booklet should be no more than five pages and should contain a one-page summary of the behavior interventions the ADHD child responds to best and interventions that can escalate the child's behavior. Pages two and three can include recommended teaching methods reported to work with affected children in general. Page four should include information on the



child's medication and any possible side effects. Page five can list reading materials the parent has found helpful.

In summary, a parent should not expect their child's teacher to know as much as they do about the disorder – the parent has a driving need to understand. The teacher may care and is willing to listen, but may not be self-directed to find alternative ways to work with the affected child.

### Parents Often Hate to Hear from Their Child's School

Calls from school generally come not to tell the parent what a great day their child had, but to report an altercation with a teacher or student. Parents of affected children generally hate to hear from their child's school.

Schools, often limited both by ideas and staff in dealing with affected children, often look to the parent to help solve the problem. Somehow, the parent is expected to provide some kind of consequence to help their child be less impulsive and more compliant in the classroom. Unfortunately, the solution is not that easy or quick.

Some parents avoid answering the phone or screen calls during school hours. They know this is wrong and potentially dangerous, but after an unending series of calls from their child's school, they shout, "Enough! Enough!" Frankly, they run out of ideas on how to stop Johnny from being disruptive or aggressive, and simply stop answering the phone until they find the emotional strength to deal with the school.

When an ADHD child disrupts the education of other children or damages property or hits other children, the school will call the parent. Schools are responsible for the education and safety of all other children under their care, and they cannot let any child hurt or disrupt a classroom to the extent that other children are being denied their education. ADHD is not the "Get Out of Jail Free" card from Monopoly. Children with ADHD are expected to

follow rules, and when they break them, society doesn't give out free passes. All children need to learn to follow rules that are necessary for living cooperatively with others. Schools will not tolerate aggressive, disruptive, or noncompliant behavior in children, neither should parents. In most cases, schools are not out to get the ADHD child or take revenge on the parent because of their child's behavior. Rather, schools are attempting to balance the affected child's needs with the needs of other children under their care. Sending the ADHD child home or calling the parent is the last resort used by most principals. Most teachers and principals will talk with the child, take away a recess, or try any number of other consequences before the parent is called.

It is important that parents communicate closely with their child's school. Yes, even answer the telephone when they don't want to. Parents should share with the teacher and the school principal interventions that they are trying at home. Parents should let school personnel know they are not ignoring their child's problems, but have taken an active role in trying to minimize some of their child's disruptive and aggressive behaviors. By presenting a helping role, rather than an adversarial one, parents can often diffuse and significantly change the dynamics between their child and the school.

Little change can take place that will benefit the affected child if the parent and the school are not talking. The school needs a parent's support. Schools need a parent to take their child home when his/her behavior is unacceptable. Parents should view their role as a team member in their child's education. Sometimes part of their child's education will be to learn that when hitting others or being disrespectful of their classmates' right to learn, the affected child will be held responsible for his/her behavior.

The school's responsibility is to provide environmental changes that can

minimize problematic behaviors. Schools have a legal obligation to make accommodations for affected children when their disability substantially limits learning. Accommodations do not, however, necessarily guarantee success. A school can have the best of intentions and plans, but for one reason or another, a child's behavior still can be disruptive. Many factors determine and influence behavior; school is important, but it is just one of many influences in a child's life.

I want to emphasize, parents should see their role as a team member in their child's education. An affected child needs to know the parent will support him/her when treated unfairly, but also that the parent will not accept aggressive or disruptive behaviors at school. Schools have an obligation to set up a fair and reasonable program to deal with an affected child's inappropriate behaviors, and equally, the parent needs to support the school when their child needs to go home.

### Angry Feelings Seldom Contribute to Positive Communication

Angry feelings seldom contribute to positive communication between par-

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## RENEWALS

Please look at the address label on the outer cover of the newsletter (pg. 12). If the expiration date above your name states **December 2002**, this will be the last issue of The ADHD Challenge you receive, unless you **RENEW NOW!** If the label indicates the expiration date as **February 2003**, then the next issue will be your last one. In order to avoid missing an issue of the newsletter you must renew at least two months before the expiration date. **RENEW NOW** and avoid missing any issues!



## How Parents and Teachers Interact Makes a Difference

(Continued from Page 3)

ents and school staff. Parents and teachers should try not to hold grudges, and especially not keep score. Raising an ADHD child can be frustrating, heartbreaking, and, at times, all consuming for both parent and teacher. When the parent and teacher are not talking, little change can take place that will benefit the child.

Both parent and teacher have important information to help the affected child in school. When a parent feels unheard and, not validated, personal frustration can often lead to feelings of anger. Parents will often express in therapy angry feelings toward the teacher or school. However, this anger generally is masking underlying feelings of hurt and fear for their child. Unfortunately, the teacher does not hear the pain, but only the anger. School staff often will portray the angry parent as demanding, unfair, hostile, and enabling. The consequence is that both parent and teacher find it more difficult to address problem behaviors manifested by the affected child.

A parent cannot predict or control a

teacher's reactions; but the parent can help minimize angry feelings by following the below suggestions.

First, the parent needs to listen to the teacher's frustrations and concerns. The teacher often is not angry at the child or parent, but is upset with the situation. The teacher may feel powerless in helping the affected child, and is looking to the parent to help resolve the problem. Parents need to remember that ADHD students demand more time from teachers than seems reasonable, and more often than not, the teacher is expected to address the affected child's educational and behavioral needs with limited support.

Second, a parent can provide the teacher with materials on ADHD that are age appropriate and found to be successful with his/her child. When information is shared in a collaborative and nonthreatening manner, teachers often feel supported.

Third, a parent should meet with their child's teacher regularly to brainstorm ways to deal with the affected child. Regular contacts that are supportive for both parent and teacher can promote effective interventions.

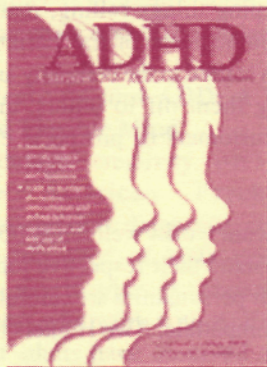
In summary, the dilemma for many affected children is that schools are often not ready for them and they are not ready for school. Options are gen-

erally limited for affected children when it comes to classroom accommodations; consequently, positive communication between the school and parent is especially important. A parent and teacher need to convey compassion, understanding, respect, and interest in each other's needs and challenges. Both parent and teacher should expect the best from the affected child, both behaviorally and academically. However, to maximize the child's success in school, both parent and teacher need to work together.

**Richard A. Lougy, MFT** is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and credentialed school psychologist. For the past thirty years he has been living and working in Sacramento, California, where he began his career as a middle school teacher. He counseled elementary school age children for fourteen years, and is now a school psychologist in a large suburban public school district. He has a private practice specializing in ADHD children and related disorders. He has treated and worked with thousands of ADHD children and their families throughout his career. He recently co-authored *ADHD: A Survival Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Hope Press/Duarte, CA, July 2002; [www.hopepress.com](http://www.hopepress.com)).

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### **ADHD: A Survival Guide for Parents and Teachers** by Richard A. Lougy, MFT and David K. Rosenthal, M.D.



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### **Attention Readers!**

We are pleased to introduce a new column in *The ADHD Challenge* entitled 'Ask The Coach: Answers for ADD Adults'. Bonnie Mincu is a trained ADD coach with many years of coaching experience, who specializes in adult ADD issues. If you have any questions related to adult ADD that you would like Ms. Mincu to address, please send them to:

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