

The 20 Best Principles of Managing a Child with ADHD

RUSSELL A. BARKLEY, PH.D.
CLINICAL PROFESSOR OF PSYCHIATRY
MEDICAL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH
CAROLINA

1. Parents are Shepherds, Not Engineers

- ADHD is a disorder of brain development and functioning
 - It is not a choice or the result of willful misbehavior
- ADHD is a strongly genetically influenced disorder in 65-75% of all cases
 - It is not the result of poor parenting or social learning and so it cannot be unlearned just by changing the social environment
- ADHD cannot be trained out of the child
 - Parents must accept and adapt to the child's ADHD
- Parents must create a supportive environment (pastures) around the child with ADHD to reduce conflicts and impairments and promote the child's adjustment and positive psychological development as much as possible

2. Externalize, Reduce, or Eliminate Time

- Children with ADHD have an impaired ability to sense time and especially to use the internal sense of time to guide their behavior
 - They are often late, lost, and unprepared; time escapes them
- They cannot anticipate deadlines, appointments, or the future generally as well as others
- Make time external or physical by using timers or other devices that show the passage of time. Place them in their workspace when ever time intervals are important for the task at hand
- Reduce the gaps in time between when an assignment is given, when it is due, and when the consequences for doing it are to occur

2. More on Dealing with Time

- The child with ADHD cannot self-organize to accomplish projects that occur across long spans of time
- Break the larger project into smaller pieces; then do a piece each day so that when the deadline arrives, the project has been done
- Bring the events (E) or tasks, the response they require (R), and the consequences or outcomes (O) to be earned close together in time.
- Keep this E – R – O sequence close together
- For instance, for a book report:
 - Read 3-5 pages with me today
 - Write 3-5 sentences about what was read immediately after reading
 - Give the child tokens, points, or a privilege immediately afterward

3. Externalize Important Information at the "Point of Performance"

- The child with ADHD has very poor working memory (remembering so as to do things)
 - They are not able to remember what it is they are to do, what is necessary to getting it done, and when it may be due
- Place key reminders, rules, or other cues in the setting or situation where it needs to be recalled so that they are visible to the child
 - Use sticky notes, cards, charts, signs, notes, or other reminders of the important pieces of information or rules that need to be used in that situation
- Have the child read or otherwise restate this information as they are about to begin that task or enter that new situation
- Have them talk to themselves out loud about what they are to be doing to help them to better guide their behavior while working

4. Swift Justice is Essential: Use More Immediate Consequences

- The longer you wait after a behavior has occurred to provide consequences for it, the less effective you will be in managing that behavior
- Consequences must occur within 3-5 seconds after a behavior you are trying to change for those rewards or punishments to have their maximum effectiveness at changing a child's behavior
- Act swiftly to approve, praise, reward, correct, reprimand, or punish behavior

5. Make Consequences More Frequent

- Occasional consequences are not enough to sustain the good or on-task behavior of a child with ADHD
- The child with ADHD needs these consequences to occur much more frequently than do other children in order to better manage their behavior
- Expect to have to interact with, praise, reward, or discipline the child with ADHD much more often than would be necessary for another child
- If you see good behavior, don't wait to reward it and don't be stingy with your rewards.

6. Externalize Motivation: Add Consequences into the Situation

- ADHD causes a serious deficit in self-motivation
 - The child's will-power, self-discipline, or internal source of self-motivation is very weak
- When tasks have no immediate natural consequences, you must inject artificial consequences into the task or situation.
 - Use tokens, points, privileges, toys, treats, money, or other rewards in that situation to boost the child's motivation
- Explain what these consequences are to be before starting the task or entering that new situation
- Ask the child to visualize these rewards or other consequences before they start the task or situation
- Reward the child with these consequences frequently throughout the task and at the end of its completion
- Think Win/Win – getting work done is not a reward to a child with ADHD. You must add something into the work situation to make it more appealing and motivating to them

7. Increase Accountability to Others

- Children with ADHD do not monitor their own behavior as well as others so they don't always know when they are getting off-task or drifting into misbehavior
- They also do not anticipate time and consequences as well as other children
- Supervise them more often; check up on what they are to be doing more frequently
- If working independently, have the child report to someone else frequently after doing smaller amounts of work

8. Make Consequences More Salient (Powerful)

- Praise, "being good," grades, certificates or other soft or symbolic rewards are often not enough to change the behavior of the child with ADHD or to motivate them to behavior better
- You will have to rely on more powerful consequences that have more value or meaning to the child in order to get them to persist at tasks or follow rules
- Tokens, points, privileges, toys, treats, money, or other more potent rewards often have to be used to motivate the child to behave well.

9. Make Problem-Solving Manual

- ADHD disrupts a child's ability to plan, problem-solve, or otherwise mentally manipulate information in their mind as well as other children
- Try to make the pieces of the problems or the steps to solving it manual or physical in their form
- For math problems, use marbles, a number line, an abacus, or other devices to allow them to manually manipulate the parts of the problem
- For word problems, use index cards, notes on paper, simple drawings, or other means of getting information down in some physical form. Then they can add to it, re-arrange it, and otherwise edit and further develop the report or the answer to the problem.

10. Keep the Reward Program Interesting and Motivating: Change Rewards Often

- Token or point systems are some of the best ways to help improve your child's behavior and motivate them to work harder and longer with less hassle.
- Be sure to change the kinds of rewards and other privileges they can purchase with their tokens every few weeks so that they do not become bored with the menu and lose interest in continuing to behave well.
- Like a restaurant, have some "daily specials" on the reward menu.
- Rotate off rewards that have lost their appeal to the child while adding new rewards or privileges to keep their interest in earning those rewards high.

11. Touch More, Talk Less

- ADHD is not “information deficit disorder” so there is no need to talk or explain things in detail or to natter, nag, lecture, or moralize about a task or situation
- After listening to so much nagging, all the child is really hearing from you is “blah, blah, blah, blah”
- If you want to say something to the child and have it matter or be effective, then:
 - Go to the child
 - Put your arm around their shoulder or your hand on their hand or arm
 - Make eye contact with them
 - Then BRIEFLY say what you have to say, whether it is an instruction, praise, or reprimand
 - Keep the comment short, sweet, & direct; the less said the better

12. Act, Don't Yack!

- Giving long winded explanations, reprimands, instructions, or other verbal information to a child with ADHD is of little value and just delays your implementing the real consequences
- So follow rule #11 and touch more, talk less
- Then after you have given the instruction, explanation, or reprimand, **BACK IT UP!!!!**
- Do what you said you would do, and implement the consequences you promised or threatened to use as quickly as possible after the good or bad behavior has occurred.
- Bottom line – shut up (!) and Just Do It!

13. Keep Your Sense of Humor

- Children provide us with lots of unexpected yet humorous moments and this is just as true for children with ADHD
- So don't take ADHD too seriously. It is not the end of the world or a terminal illness. And other disorders are far more severe than this one (autism, schizophrenia, severe mental retardation).
- So be grateful that your child only has ADHD, learn to accept it, and watch for the funny or ironic things that happen when you are around them and learn to laugh together with them about life's unexpected and silly circumstances
- And when something with your ADHD child seems to have gone all wrong, ask yourself:
 - Just how bad was this situation, really?
 - Did any one die or were they seriously injured?
 - Was any significant harm actually done by what happened?
 - Is anyone being arrested or going to jail?
 - If not then don't sweat the small stuff!

14. Always Use Rewards Before Punishments When Trying to Change a Child's Behavior

- Children with ADHD are punished 2 to 6 times more often than are typical children in the normal course of the day
- A key ingredient to the success of discipline is the amount of incentives or rewards that exist in that situation for doing the right or good behavior
- If you want to improve their behavior, then plan to start with a reward program, not with punishment for the misbehavior
- Explain the appropriate, positive, or pro-social behavior you expect in that situation
- Remind them of it just before they enter that situation
- When that good behavior happens, reward it: Catch 'em being good!
- Once you have done this for a week or two, then you can use mild forms of discipline whenever that misbehavior occurs
- But remember when disciplining – Swift Justice!
 - The key to effective punishment is not the amount of pain or duration of the punishment but how quickly you instituted it after a misbehavior

15. Anticipate Problem Situations: Then Have A Plan!

- The child with ADHD is far less able to anticipate the future, to prepare for it, or to be thinking of what they should be doing just ahead of what is about to happen – they are reactive more than proactive
- You must compensate for their disability by anticipating situations for them and with them
- Then when that situation is about to occur:
 - Stop!
 - Go over the 2-3 rules you want them to follow
 - Have them repeat those rules back to you
 - Explain the reward you plan to give them in this situation
 - Explain the discipline that will happen if they break the rules
 - Then start the task or situation, follow the plan, reward them frequently through the situation, and act swiftly with your discipline

16. Keep a Sense of Priorities

- Many times, the tasks we assign to children or the rules we give them to follow are not very important in the larger scheme of life and their development
- Review the commands or tasks you often give to your child and see which of them could be eliminated for awhile
 - Some chores like making a bed each morning don't matter
 - Don't sweat the small stuff; let it go for awhile
- Focus instead on just a few rules or tasks that are very important (getting along with others, doing homework, not lying, not stealing, inhibiting aggression, staying safe, etc.)

17. Keep a “Disability Perspective”

- Unlike other disorders, ADHD is a hidden disability. It doesn't show up in your child's physical appearance and it is not bizarre or obvious.
- This can deceive you into thinking that there is nothing wrong with your child or their development
- But ADHD is a neuro-genetic disability nonetheless
- Remind yourself of this often (daily at least)
- We accept, try to understand, accommodate to, and show compassion for people with disabilities
- These are the same things you have to do for the child who has ADHD

18. Be a “Scientific” Parent

- **Learn as much as you can about ADHD; become an expert parent**
 - Read Books – check out the addwarehouse.com
 - Use internet sites: Chadd.org, Caddec.org, ADD.org, others
- **Read widely; use multiple sources**
 - Truth is an assembled thing
- Be *very* skeptical of what you see on TV and in the trade media, like newspapers and magazines
 - Hear anything worrisome? Check with an expert
- **Experiment with different treatment options; what's right for someone else's child is not necessarily right for your child**

19. Be a “Principle-Centered” Parent

- **To manage from the gut or the head – your choice**
 - Management by emotion or by principle (reason & intellect)
- Follow Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Parents)
- Be proactive (take charge of your life and problems)
- Begin with the end in mind (what is your goal?)
- Put first things first (Focus on priorities)
- First seek to understand, then to be understood
- Think Win – Win (Make it a success for both people)
- Synergize – work together; not against each other
- Sharpen the Saw - Find your sources of renewal

20. Practice Forgiveness

- **Your child is not perfect, you are not perfect, other people are not perfect, and the world is not perfect**
- **Get used to your child, yourself, and others making mistakes in the day-to-day life of the child with ADHD**
- **So practice getting good at forgiveness**
 - Of your child for their mistakes
 - Of yourself for your own periodic errors as a parent
 - Of other people for their ignorance of ADHD and your child
- **Practice letting the hard feelings go**
 - Have a periodic ritual of “behavioral exorcism”
 - Post of nice picture of your child on the refrigerator; refer to it often
 - Watch your child while they are sleeping
 - Find your own special means of rebalancing your feelings to find peace with your child and their ADHD