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ADHD: GUIDING YOUR CHILDREN WITH ADHD TO BECOME SELF-DIRECTING, RESPONSIBLE CHOICE-MAKERS WHO LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES

“My daughter has ADHD. She gets me so exasperated. She makes the same dumb mistakes over and over, no matter how many times I yell at her about it.”

“My teenage son has ADHD. He blows off all of my good advice, acts like Mr. Bigshot, and gets negative blowback from his teachers and peers constantly.”

Parents complain that their children don't listen to their cautions, warnings and advice and make the same or similar mistakes over and over. Here is what I advise:

SKILLS RELATED TO GUIDING YOUR CHILDREN WITH ADHD TO BECOME SELF-DIRECTING, RESPONSIBLE CHOICE-MAKERS WHO LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES

1. Help your children learn from their mistakes:

Once you have gotten better at accepting and communicating with your child and also gotten better at setting and enforcing standards, norms, rules, and limits with them, focus more on **helping your child make choices from which they learn**. Kids with ADHD make far

more dysfunctional choices than average kids. By a lot. They drive parents crazy. The natural temptation for the parent is to express exasperation and to frustratedly order their child never to do it again. Parents then give their child specific directives about what they should do instead. Although this is really understandable and even predictable, giving these orders and injunctions rarely works.

As an alternative, help your child evaluate the consequences of their choices, first weighing the positive and negative outcomes in the short and long term, and then deciding whether their choice was a good one which led to what they wanted or whether their choice would be amended if they were to choose again. You are the guide and facilitator of self-reflection. You also are a collaborator with your child, but only at the point in the self-evaluation process when your child signals they are open to your perspective.

Anytime your child is not ready to talk about themselves, it is usually best to step back and respect their right to choose the time, place and manner of sharing.

Of course, there are situations where a discussion with your child is not optional at all. In that case, you may decide to suspend certain privileges until your child agrees to speak with you. Try to do so without anger. *“This needs to be discussed, not avoided. I am suspending your computer gaming time until we have addressed this issue.”*

However, if your child shuts down all discussion with you constantly, it may be a signal that you need to return to your focus on positivity and communicating acceptance.

2. Help your children ANTICIPATE the negative consequences of their negative actions and patterns:

I discourage parents from forbidding behaviors with words like: *“Don’t you dare.”* Or *“You can’t do that.”* Children who exhibit dysfunctional or negative behavior patterns don’t discontinue their misguided actions because their parents order them to stop or threaten to punish them if they don’t change. These misbehaving ADHD kids will typically lie, sneakily do whatever they intended to do in the first place, or angrily scream that the parent can’t control him.

As an alternative to these useless patterns, I encourage you to start by identifying for your child the likely consequence of their choice, whether the consequence will be delivered by the school, by their peers, or by you. *“If you do that, the teacher is likely to respond by doing X.”* Or *“Your friend is likely to respond with Y.”* Or, *“I am certainly going to Z if you do that.”* *“It’s your choice.”*

Then offer collaborative help in problem-solving alternatives: *“If you want an alternative that is likely to get you better results, I will gladly brainstorm ideas with you.”*

3. Learn to intervene at the “back-end” of your child’s choices as much or more than you work at the “front-end”:

Parents routinely engage in front end interventions such as: *“You have to stop being late for school. You are going to get a detention and a bad reputation with the teacher.”* Or, *“You are going to get a bad grade if you don’t study more.”*

Front-end interventions are ok when the parent reminds the child of something they are not focused on. But after one reminder, the impact goes from helpful to useless, then to annoying and ultimately induces anger and becomes quite counter-productive.

Instead, step back, let your child make mistakes within your parameters of non-life threatening, tolerable mistakes, and then make **“back-end interventions.”**

Back-end interventions involve guiding your child through a process of **“Helping Your Child Self-Evaluate”** already-made choices and **“Problem-Solve”** if unhappy with the results of their choice. We are even more happy when a parent can help their child learn from a mistake than when a parent can preemptively prevent mistakes, as learning from mistakes prepares a child to be a lifelong learner.

4. Help your child to Self-Evaluate:

Guiding your child through self-evaluation begins when you notice your child is upset by the results of something they did. You wait for a quiet moment and ask something like: *“It seems like you’re a bit upset. What happened.”* Your child may respond to you with silence. That is not uncommon. But with a little luck you may get a brief description of whatever happened. With gentle clarifying questions, you may get a few details about what led up to your child’s choice of action. If you do get these few details, focus on the specifics of the antecedent conditions affecting your child before they chose and acted. This can include anything they are willing to share -- their feelings, thoughts, relevant earlier experiences, intentions and even their decision-making process, whether thoughtful or impulsive. Then ask your child about the consequences of their choice. *“After you acted, what happened? What did you feel and what did other people do?”*

The evaluation comes next. You ask: *“Well, in light of the consequences you got, what do you think? Would you do it the same way again, or would you hope to find a different way?”*

Your child might have felt better in the short-term after shoving another kid or shouting at the teacher, or they may have gotten a few laughs for a particularly insulting remark in the classroom, but then the longer-term consequences which kicked in might have been particularly onerous. Your job is to help them consider all consequences, short and long, internal and external. If your child concludes that the net consequences were lousy, you then move on to helping them problem-solve.

5. Help your child to Problem-Solve Mistakes:

If your child regrets a decision or realizes an action they hastily chose led to lousy, predominately negative results, they are ready to problem solve. You can help them.

The first step is to build on self-evaluation by making sure your child has described the mistake fully and identified all of the “**ABC factors**” affecting their mistake.

“**A**” is antecedent conditions.

“**B**” is the mistaken behavior.

“**C**” is the consequences of the mistaken behavior.

Your job is to help your child by using active listening and clarifying questions, which I have described in earlier articles, available on my website: www.dr-richard-formica.com. Using active listening and clarifying questions, help your child describe and analyze their experience.

Then ask them to step back and reflect on their experience, using a simple question like: “*Well, how would you now make sense of what*

happened?” Hopefully they will conclude that their choice was a mistaken one.

If that happens, ask *“If you had it all to do over, what could you do differently?”* Most kids mumble something like: *“I have no clue.”*

At that point, simply ask: *“Would you like to brainstorm some ideas with me?”* If the child agrees, join in a collaborative back and forth about ideas you each brainstorm, putting ideas on the table without criticism or judgment.

After ideas are on the table, let the child pick one. If their choice of a new behavior is fraught with difficulty or doomed to fail, just mention the problem you see with their choice and let them decide to discard their choice and pick a new one or keep their choice. Either way, you help them learn from this new choice later on by repeating the process of guiding your child through self-evaluation and problem-solving. In this way your child learns to make decisions that work out better and better. He or she learns to be willing to self-reflect and learn from a mistake. This is most difficult for all kids, but is particularly difficult for ADHD kids whose executive function capacities and skills are developmentally behind and often compromised.

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