

School and the ADHD Student

How to L.O.V.E.

ADHD is often misunderstood by the general public. This misunderstanding can have a serious impact on children living with ADHD. They are not lazy, stupid, slow or bad... ADHD is NOT a result of poor parenting. ADHD, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is a NEUROBIOLOGICAL brain difference. The name is somewhat deceiving. People with ADHD really do not have a *deficit* of attention, they seem to have an *abundance* of attention, with the ability to focus on things that interest them for extended periods of time – called *hyperfocus*.

Hyperactivity is also misleading, because some people who have ADHD may have the inattentive type. And even the word “disorder” can be troubling. The word “difference” is so much more helpful.

I’m sure if I asked you what ADHD is, like most teachers, you would be able to identify the key components of ADHD. It is quite common for teachers to be the first ones to notice when a child may have ADHD because many of the symptoms are school-related. Teachers may notice that these students:

- often fidget
- have a hard time staying seated
- blurt out and interrupt others
- struggle to remain on task and have many incomplete or late assignments
- are disorganised and lose things often
- are quick to anger

A teacher’s role in helping to identify ADHD in students is important, but having a clear understanding of ADHD and providing brain-based strategies is even more critical.

So, let me take you inside the ADHD brain. When thinking about your ADHD student, look beyond their behaviours and remember that they have neurobiological brain differences. Their social and emotional skills are delayed by about 20%. Keep in mind that your 10-year-old student may have the social and emotional capacity of an 8-year-old. Because children with ADHD have behaviours that are perceived as frustrating by others, **they receive 20,000 more**

negative comments about themselves compared to their neurotypical peers by the age of 12. Let that number sink in and imagine how it impacts a child’s developing self-esteem.

1. **In ADHD brains, there is an imbalance of dopamine and norepinephrine.** Both of these neurotransmitters are vital in fueling the prefrontal cortex of the brain which is where all the executive functioning takes place. In order for brains to solve problems, make decisions, plan, organise, get motivated, see other perspectives, etc. the prefrontal cortex must be stimulated by dopamine and epinephrine.

2. **ADHD brains have a glitchy attention switch.** When you are engaged in a task, clumps of neurons light up. These neurons make up the *task-positive network (TPN)*. When you are off-task, perhaps daydreaming or imagining, a different set of neurons is activated. These are called the *default mode network (DMN)*. In a neurotypical brain when the TPN is on, the DMN is off, and vice versa. This allows individuals to focus on tasks and take periodic breaks. For people with ADHD, both networks are activated at the same time. Although this is an over-simplified explanation, the impact of this glitchy switch includes hyperfocus (e.g., not being able to get off of technology), difficulty focusing

on tasks (since the daydream switch is on at the same time as the focus switch), not completing projects, feelings of despair and negative self-talk.

3. **ADHD brains are emotionally dysregulated.** The amygdala is the emotional alarm system in the brain. It tells your body to fight the danger, run from it or freeze. When the amygdala is activated, you are in a “caveman” brain and you can’t access your prefrontal cortex to think rationally. This part of the brain can’t tell the difference between the danger of being chased by a tiger or the frustration of losing an assignment. Daily life stresses, such as running late, disappointing a teacher, being rejected by a friend or forgetting homework all activate the amygdala. Individuals with

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ADHD seem to be in a constant state of fight-flight-freeze. Learning cannot happen when the student is feeling stressed.

So now that you know some of the neuroscience, you can now use my #1 brain-based strategy to support your students. LOVE!

L- Listen deeply to your student. Show a genuine interest in them and find out what they are excited about. When they are speaking, truly listen with your eyes, your ears and your heart by letting your facial expression and tone of voice mirror back what they are feeling.

O- Oxytocin is released into the bloodstream when the child feels a connection to an adult who is deeply listening to them. Oxytocin calms the child down on a cellular level, blocks cortisol and helps them feel safe. Another great way to release oxytocin, as well as dopamine, is to celebrate their wins. Break tasks into small, manageable pieces for them so that it is easy to accomplish. Then...celebrate. The celebration can be as simple as a high five.

V - Validate their feelings. Rather than trying to correct behaviours and fix problems, take the time to validate how your student is feeling and show them empathy.

E - Emotional Intelligence - Develop emotional literacy, allowing your students the space to feel their emotions and co-create a toolbox of strategies. For example, when your student feels bored, they may need to have an exercise break. The exercise may give them the norepinephrine that their brains need to refocus on the task.

The next time a student in your classroom is displaying frustrating behaviours like calling out, interrupting, pushing

to the front of the line or arguing...remember the words of Russell Barkley, "Children who need love the most, will always ask for it in the most unloving ways." Show your students the LOVE that their brains need. Connect before you correct. Build your connection with the child and help them to feel safe. Share your LOVE and calm with them.

Thank you for giving your students LOVE! Teachers play such a key role in helping children with ADHD thrive and reach their fullest potential. 🍎



Lara Dawn

Lara Dawn is the founder of The ADHD Village - an online community that offers brain-based, science-backed support to thousands of families worldwide. She is a certified elementary school teacher with over 20 years of experience specializing in environmental science and special education. She is happily married and has two neurodiverse, preteen sons.

Lara supports parents in learning how to eliminate stress while navigating their children's ADHD so that they are calm, confident, and deeply connected to their children.

She also helps parents raise children to embrace their ADHD and feel empowered so that they can be in control of their emotions and behaviours.

When Lara is not working with her clients or spending time with her family, you can find her down by the lake, riding her bike and loving nature, spending time with lifelong friends who make her laugh, or jumping in a kayak and enjoying the moment.

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