

APPENDIX C: PARTNERING WITH PARENTS IS ESSENTIAL

by Catherine Nehring Massie

As with any child with a disability, partnering with parents is essential for effectively helping a child. Montessori teachers must always keep in mind that parents of children with attentional challenges are under extreme stress. We must provide parent education, parent resources and try to support a positive family dynamic. We can encourage hope in the parents by sharing their child's successes daily—no matter how small. We can also provide inspiration with stories of famous people who have ADHD (see appendix A).

In partnering with parents, teachers need to provide encouragement and practical advice to help them maintain a positive relationship with their child. Parenting a child with ADHD can be extremely frustrating, anxiety-producing, and exhausting. As discussed by Dr. Murphy-Ryan, ADHD is highly heritable; therefore, parents of ADHD children may be less able to help their children due to their own ADHD traits. Ironically, in some cases, this may cause parents to be even less able to recognize the challenges being faced by their children. Prof. Joachim Dattke of the Theodor Hellbrügge Foundation explains that parents need to feel empowered to help their child. They need to be given very specific tasks at which they can be successful in helping their child. This strengthens the parent-child bond, which is essential to the child's success.

There are numerous proven strategies in the ADHD literature that parents can use to support their child in developing attentional capacity; to develop their child's abilities, interests and talents; to acquire coping and compensating skills; and to minimize the negative cultural influences on their child's already limited attentional capacity. These strategies provide a protective factor in the child's life, reducing the severity of their disability from ADHD and enhancing their chances for success and enjoyment of life.

Dr. Montessori's anachronistic term, *Mental Hygiene*, perfectly describes what we can provide a child with attention challenges

through a medical-educational partnership in a Montessori school. Viewing child development from a medical perspective, Montessori drew an interesting parallel between the applications of scientifically-created hygienic methods to ensure physical health (e.g., hand-washing to prevent illness) and the application of scientific pedagogy to create methods to ensure mental, psychological and sociological health. In *The Absorbent Mind*, she writes,

Instead of leaving everything to chance, the child's growth at this time should be a matter for scientific care and attention. This means that something more is needed than mere physical hygiene. Just as the latter ward off injuries to his body, so we need mental hygiene to protect his mind and soul from harm. (15)

Following this principal of Mental Hygiene, we can provide parents with a number of strategies to implement which will provide protective factors in their child's life. Below you will find a list of strategies that have significantly helped many children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD.

"MENTAL HYGIENE" FOR FAMILIES WITH ATTENTION-CHALLENGED CHILDREN

The following list provides preventative and empowering mental hygiene strategies targeted at the particular needs of children with ADHD.

1. Lots of Physical Activity

Highly active children thrive with a variety of physical activities, both social activities (e.g., playing soccer) and individual activities (e.g., running). Physical activity helps them feel centered and better able to attend.

- Invest in high-caliber, skill-based instruction. Some of these children will become future athletic champions. The focus on skills helps to train their ability to attend in a healthy, high-interest activity. Coaches may need to be informed of your child's challenges and reassured of your partnership with them to manage your child's participation in a positive manner.

- Encourage, but do not force, practice at home. Parent involvement is very motivating and supportive of an active lifestyle needed by these children. Practice with them, where possible, and make it fun. Work it into daily family life so that it can become a healthy routine/habit. Be assured that these children think and learn quickly, so they may not need as much practice as other children; and home practice, just like homework, is often the single most difficult thing for them to do in their lives. So keep it positive, do not nag, threaten or punish; this may harm their enjoyment or motivation for doing this activity.

2. Quality Musical Training

- Inattentive children thrive with a variety of musical activities, both individual (e.g., instrumental) and social (e.g., band, chorus). The creation of music requires sustained mental and physical attention. It is also an innately enjoyable, multisensory and motor activity; there is no better therapy for the support of attentional development!
- Invest in the best skill-based instruction available. These children can develop the ability to entertain themselves and others through movement of their bodies. Teachers and conductors, just like athletic coaches, may need to be informed of your child's challenges and reassured of your partnership with them to manage your child's participation in a positive manner.
- Encourage, but do not force, practice at home. Parent involvement is very motivating, just like in learning athletic sports. Practice with them, where possible, and make it fun. Work it into daily family life so that it can become a healthy routine/habit. Be assured that these children think and learn quickly, so they may not need as much practice as other children; and home practice, just like homework, is often the

single most difficult thing for them to do in their life. Children with inattentiveness may require shorter, more frequent practices. So keep it positive, do not nag, threaten or punish; this may harm their enjoyment or motivation for doing this activity. Keep in mind that this may become their calling in life!

- The Suzuki Method of Talent Education is perfect for these children because of the three-part partnership (Suzuki teacher, student, and parent as the home teacher) and combination of individual (one-on-one, individualized, skill-based instruction) and group (playing together as a group, attending to performance of self and others, simultaneously) components.

3. Ensure a Proper Diet

Children with ADHD need to eat a regular, healthy, balanced diet and avoid processed foods that are full of potential central nervous system irritants (preservatives and additives).

- Limit synthetic food dyes and additives. There are known variations in the way people process dopamine and histamine in the brain that makes certain people (about 8% of ADHD children) sensitive to food additives in a way that exacerbates hyperactivity. Parents can safely (because additives have no nutritional value) do a three-month trial of removal of all food dyes and additives to see if this helps their child's behaviors.
- Have your child take a daily multivitamin. Children with ADHD are at higher risk for mineral deficiencies (which can worsen their ADHD symptoms), due to not sitting still to eat regular balanced meals and/or due to appetite suppression from stimulant medications.
- About one-third of children with ADHD improve in response to evidence-based dietary interventions. Check with your pediatrician or nutritionist

before doing dietary trials or supplementations in your child's diet. There is some research evidence to suggest that deficiencies in some minerals—such as iron and zinc—may worsen ADHD symptoms and conversely dietary supplementation may improve your child's functioning. (Too much iron can be toxic, so iron supplementation must be monitored by a physician.)

- Limit sugars. Children with ADHD need a steady, regular energy supply to allow them to focus. Sugars provide a large spike followed by a large crash in energy and can cause irritability and inattentiveness. High quality protein can provide a stable energy source—found in nuts, legumes, eggs, unsweetened yogurt, real cheese, unprocessed meat, whole grains, and other healthy protein sources. Artificial sugar sources increase risks for diabetes and metabolic problems and should be avoided.
- Drink lots of water. Staying well-hydrated is important to maintain general physical and mental health.

4. Ensure Good Sleep Habits

It is well documented that sleep deprivation causes significantly diminished academic performance. Children with ADHD may have special challenges with sleep, such as insomnia at bedtime. Teenagers, especially, have trouble following good sleep hygiene. It is essential to keep a regular schedule of sleep. The formation of habits is extra difficult for children with ADHD, so parents will have to be consistent in order to help them create healthy daily sleep habits. Follow these principles of good sleep hygiene:

- Bed is for sleep *only*.
- No electronic devices in the bedroom, except for a clock that is faced away from the bed so your child cannot see it from the bed.
- Quiet environment.

- Temperature comfortable.
- Read a book if not sleepy.
- Do not allow drinking a lot of water before bedtime, so sleep will not be disrupted by getting up to use the bathroom.

5. Teach Self-Regulation Skills

Teach tools to help children learn to recognize and manage their energy. (See suggestions in this journal's chapter by Barbara Luborsky, OTR/L, and appendix B "Tools for Teachers.")

- Have your child learn mind-body practices, such as yoga, breathing techniques, mindfulness, and/or meditation. There is strong research evidence that mind-body practices are very helpful for children with ADHD. Mind-body practices calm the part of their nervous system responsible for aggressiveness and emotional reactivity; in other words, these practices improve emotional regulation. Yoga has the most scientific evidence behind it and can be considered a complementary treatment for ADHD. To be beneficial, yoga practice must become part of the child's daily routine. Implementing daily yoga as a family routine is the best way to support a child's formation of this habit. Yoga benefits everyone!
- Have your child spend lots of unstructured time in nature observing, experiencing, exploring, or just engaging in creative play. This builds mindfulness and creativity and enhances the development of control of attention, or selective attention (i.e., attending to a single stimulus out of many multisensory stimuli). The child attunes to the sound of a red bird singing or the rustle of the leaves in the wind or the cracking of footsteps on a dead branch. Mindfulness and meditation can both be enjoyably practiced in nature. Mindfulness is the observation of oneself (which requires and builds the focus of attention)

in the present moment. The multisensory pleasures or sensations of nature are perfectly suited for this experience. Finally, there is so much botany, zoology, geology, and beauty to observe in nature!

Help your child find the strategies that best support optimal functioning. These strategies must be taught as a skill and practiced until they become a habit.

6. Teach Social Skills

For children with ADHD, social skills generally need to be taught explicitly because they generally are not paying close enough attention to pick up these skills on their own. These children may have difficulty tuning in to subtle social cues or responding in an appropriate or timely manner due to their inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity. Lack of social skills can be very harmful to the development of friendships and group acceptance. It is very important to monitor your child's social interactions and help them address any deficiencies in this important area of their life.

- Encourage participation in healthy social groups. A good place to start is joining clubs, teams, or group activities in which the child has interest and talent.
- While your child is young (first plane), plan social activities for your child, then supervise, model and coach your child's interactions. In the second and third planes of development, social skills are most effectively taught at school or by a therapist in a fun group setting.
- Arrange, encourage, and participate in counseling, family and/or individual.

7. Provide an Executive Function (EF) Coach

An EF coach can help your child succeed in school. This is particularly important for adolescents in middle and high schools but may benefit some college students as well.

- An EF coach will help your child in creating organizational habits.
- An EF coach will help with development of study skills and test prep skills.
- An EF coach will assist in daily and longer term planning.

8. Limit or Ban Your Child's Exposure to Electronic Devices

Excessive screen time can change the way a child's brain develops (reducing the development of the social and communication areas of the brain) and can impact lifelong physical health and healthy living habit-formation. Limit your child's exposure to electronic devices to the greatest extent possible.

- Strictly limit your child's access to TV or disconnect television service.
- Strictly enforce daily or weekly time limits on total screen time for your child.
- Children with ADHD are at risk for media addictions and tend to spend more time in front of screens than typical children.

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