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Guiding Principles for Raising a Child with ADHD

ADHD is a deficit in self-control-in what some professionals call the *executive functions* critical to planning, organisation, and carrying out complex human behaviour over long periods of time. That is, in a child with ADHD, the "executive" in the brain that is supposed to be organising and controlling behaviour, helping the child plan for the future and follow through on those plans, is doing a very poor job. The child is not suffering from a lack of skill or knowledge, so showing the child how to do something to correct her problems will not be of much help. Instead you will find it more effective to give clear instructions, rearrange work so it's more interesting and motivating, redirect the child's behaviour toward future goals versus immediate gratification, and provide immediate rewards for a completed task or adherence to rules.

Sound simple? It is relatively simple-in theory. In practice, it's not always easy to implement. Over 24 years of clinical experience, I've found that parents benefit from 14 general principles distilled from our current understanding of ADHD. As touchstone in the daily behaviour management of children with ADHD, these principles have served parents well in designing both home and classroom management programs for these children. Brief illustrations of some of the principles are given here.

Remember that principle-centred parenting of a child with ADHD means; (1) pausing before reacting to the present misconduct of the child, (2) using this delay to reflect on the principles contained in this book, (3) choosing a response to the child that is consistent with these principles. To keep you grounded in this approach to rearing your child, I suggest you tape a photocopy of the list of principles provided at the end of this chapter to both your bathroom mirror and your refrigerator door. You can also put a copy on a wall in your workspace of you work outside the home. Glancing at these 14 guiding principles when you get up, and seeing them throughout the day, will give you a gentle reminder of what you are striving for.

1. Give your child more immediate feedback and consequences

As Dr Virgina Douglas, a renowned Canadian psychologist and expert on ADHD, and others noted long ago, children with ADHD seem much more under the control of the moment than normal children do. Either you become part of that moment, or you will have little influence over your child with ADHD.

As already explained, when confronted by a job that they find tedious, boring, or unrewarding, children with ADHD will feel the urge to find something else to do. If you want them to stay at a task, you'll have to arrange for positive feedback and consequences that will make the task more rewarding, as well as mild negative consequences for shifting off-task. Similarly, when you're attempting to change

negative behaviours, you must provide quick rewards and feedback for behaving well and swift negative consequences for acting inappropriately.

Positive feedback can be given in the form of praise or compliments, as long as you state expressly and specifically what the child did that was positive. It can also be in the form of physical affection. IN some instances it will have to involve rewards such as extra privileges, or systems by which the child earns points toward privileges, because your praise will not be enough to motivate the child to stick with the assigned task. Whatever type of feedback you give, however, the more immediately it can be provided, the more effective it will be.

For example, if a child with ADHD normally has problems playing nicely with a younger sibling, the most effective reinforcement of cooperative play would be for you to be on the alert for any instances of cooperation, sharing, and kindness shown by the child with ADHD and then give them immediate and mildly negative feedback and consequences after bullying the younger child. You tell the child exactly what he has just done (rather than yelling) and why it is not acceptable; then you remove a privilege the child had access to that day, or some earned tokens in a token program.

2. Give your child more frequent feedback

Children with ADHD need feedback and consequences that are not just swift but also frequent. Immediate consequences or feedback can be helpful even when given occasionally, but they are even more beneficial when given often. Admittedly, going too far with this can get irritating and intrusive to your child and tiring for you, but it is necessary to do this as much as your time, schedule, and energy permit-especially when you're trying to change some form of significant misbehaviour. For instance, rather than waiting to praise a child who has considerable trouble finishing homework when all of the homework is finally done, or punishing the child for not finishing after several hours when it should have taken 20 minutes, instruct the child that she can now earn points for completing each math problem, with the points adding up toward purchasing a privilege. A reasonable time limit-say 20 minutes-is also set for the while assignment, and when the time expires the child is fined (loses) one point for each problem not done. During the work period you praise the child frequently for remaining on-task, and provide words of encouragement to keep working hard at the same time you're tallying points.

Oftern parents get very busy with their own household responsibilities and forget to check frequently on the child. One way to remind yourself is to place small stickers with smiley faces on them around the house in locations where you frequently look-in the corner of bathroom mirror, on the edge of the face of a kitchen clock, and so on. Whenever you spot a sticker, comment to your child on what you like that the child is going at that very moment-even if it's just sitting quietly watching television. You can also set a cooking timer or watch for various brief intervals or use the device called a MotivAider, which is worn on a belt or in a pocket and vibrates at the programmed intervals. This device is available from the ADD warehouse.

3. Use larger and more powerful consequences

Your child with ADHD will require more salient or powerful consequences than other children to encourage him to perform work, follow rules, or behave well. These can include physical affection,

privileges, special snacks or treats, tokens or points, material rewards like small toys or collectible items, and even occasionally money.

This may seem to violate the common wisdom that children should not be materially rewarded too often because rewards may replace intrinsic rewards such as the pleasure of reading, the desire to please parents and friends, the pride of mastering a job or new activity, or the esteem of peers for playing a game well. But these forms of reinforcement or rewards are much less likely to influence children with ADHD to behave well. They also do not consistently motivate these children to start working, to inhibit their urges to do inappropriate things, and to persist in their work. The nature of your child's disability dictates that you use larger, more significant, and sometimes more material consequences to develop and maintain your child's positive behaviours.

4. Use incentives before punishment

It is common for parents to resort to punishment when a child misbehaves or disobeys. This may be all right for a child without ADHD, who misbehaves only occasionally and thus receives a small amount of punishment. It is not all right for a child with ADHD, who is likely to misbehave much more often and could receive a great deal of negative consequences. Punishment, when used alone or in the relative absence of ongoing rewards and positive feedback, is not very effective at changing behaviour. It usually leads to resentment and hostility in your child, and eventually to the child's avoidance of you. Sometimes it can even lead to efforts at countercontrol: Your child tries to find ways to strike back, retaliate, or get even for the excessive punishment.

It is critical that you avoid this all-too-common drift toward using punishment first. Frequently remind yourself of this rule: positives before negatives. It might help to remember that your child receives more than enough reprimands, punishments, and rejection from others who do not understand the child's disability and that only rewards and incentives teach what you expect your child to do.

The rule of using positives before negatives is simple. When you want to change an undesirable behaviour, first decide what positive behaviour you want to replace it with. This will instinctively lead you to start watching for that positive behaviour. When it occurs, you will be more likely to praise and reward it.

Only after hits new behaviour has been rewarded consistently for at least one week should you begin punishing the undesired opposite behaviour. Even then, try to use only mild punishment such as the loss of a privilege or special activity or a brief time-out, and keep the punishments in balance with the rewards: only one punishment for every two or three instances of praise and reward. Punish consistently but selectively, only for the occurrence of this particular negative behaviour. Do not punish your child for everything else she is doing wrong.

Let's look at the examples of a child who frequently interrupts, intrudes, and blurts out comments at the dinner table. You speak with the child just before the next family mealtime about what you would like to see the child do more of at the table: try not to talk so much, wait until others are finished before talking, and talk only after finishing chewing food. You explain that the child can earn points for following rules. Throughout the meal, you mark points on a small card and make sure the child sees this occurring, at the same time giving some nonverbal cues, such as a wink that lets the child know

you appreciate how hard the child struggles to adhere to these rules. You ignore rule violations for a week or so, and then let the child know just before the next meal that from now on breaking rules means losing a point. Remember that a fine or penalty should be imposed no more than once for every two or three rewards.

5. Externalise time and bridge time where necessary

As my theory of ADHD makes plain, children with ADHD are delayed in their development of an internal sense of time and of the future. Because they do not have the same sense of time as normal children, they cannot respond to demands that involve timelines and preparation for the future as well as others can. They need some external reference to the time period allowed for an assigned task. For instance, if your child is given 20 minutes to clean up his room, you will need to set a cooking timer for 20 minutes, place it where it will be visible in the child's room, and draw his attention to it. You can also use a watch with a built-in timer and alarm, or a tape player on which you have recorded a tape that counts backward for a specified time interval, perhaps indicating when each minute has elapsed ("10 minutes until time is up, 9 minutes until time is up," and so on). Use any means you can to externalise the time interval and to give the child a more accurate way of marking time during the work period.

For tasks that involve much longer time intervals, like book reports or science projects assigned to your child as homework, you will need to bridge time-that is, break the assignment into small daily steps so that a little piece of the task is done everyday. By bridging time, you are building little steps across the gap in time between when the work was assigned and when it may be due (a few weeks or even a few months from now). Without these methods, the child will likely leave the work to be done until the very last minute, which often makes it impossible to do a good job.

6. Externalise the important information at the point of performance.

Because working memory, or the ability to keep in mind information necessary to complete a task, is impaired significantly in children with ADHD, I have found it very helpful to place important information in a physical form at the point where the work has to be done. I call this point where the work is being done the point of performance-a phrase that Dr. Sam Goldstein invented to refer to the critical place and time for performing a task. If you child has homework to do at the kitchen table (where she can be supervised during dinner preparation, for example), place before her on the table a card listing important rules and reminders, such as "Stay on task, don't space out, and ask for help if you need it," or "Read directions carefully, do all the work, and when finished go back and double-check all your answers for completeness and accuracy." These reminders should be tailored to address the problems that each child has at that point of performance. If your child usually has trouble when a friend comes to the house to play, take her aside right before the friend is to arrive and review the social rules she needs to follow, such as "Share your toys, control your temper, take turns in games, and ask your friend about herself and her interests." You could even write these down on a card and review them with your child in private a few times while the friend is at the house. Again, the more you can make important information present at points of performance, the more likely the child will be to remember that information and use it to guide her behaviour.

7. Externalise the source of motivation at the point of performance.

As my theory suggests, children with ADHD have trouble internalising not only time and rules but also motivation. They are not able to muster the internal motivation frequently needed to stay with work that is otherwise boring, tedious, effortful, or protracted. This deficit in intrinsic motivation can be overcome to a large extent by giving the child an external motivation boost such as an incentive, reward, or reinforcer to behave himself. Restrict his activity, and follow rules-whatever is difficult for the child at that point of performance. Dr. Stephen Covey refers to this sort of thing as creating a win/win situation in his seven habits of highly effective people. This incentive can be an offer to let the child have something he wants when the work is done (a special snack or treat), to have a privilege he enjoys (extra TV time or time on video games), or to earn some tokens or points that he can save up toward a later privilege.

8. Make thinking and problem solving more physical

Children with ADHD do not seem to be able to play around with mental information as well as others do when they must stop and think about a situation or problem. They respond impulsively, without giving due regard to their options. I think it may be helpful, therefore, to find ways to represent a problem and it alternative solutions in a more physical way. For instance, if your child has to write a short essay for school and doesn't seem to be responding well to this assignment, have her use a word processor and simply write down everything that comes to mind over a short period of time. This way every thought gets captured rather than being lost to forgetfulness, and the child can then expand on and play around with the ideas in a physical form instead of a mental one. The same thing can be done using index cards or even by drawing little pictures or symbols on a blank sheet of paper, where each represents some idea that has to be kept in mind to solve the problem.

This may be the most difficult type of information to externalise, but it seems particularly effective with schoolwork. So whenever problem solving of any type must be done, see if you can think of some way to make the problem and parts of possible solutions physical so that your child can touch them, manipulate the pieces, move them around, and come up with new arrangements of the pieces of information that might help him solve the problem. The two discoverers of DNA, Drs. Francis Watson and James Crick, appear to have done just this when they puzzled over the structure of DNA. They out down on scraps of paper the various parts known to be involved in DNA, and then just kept playfully moving them around in different arrangements until, quite by accident, the correct arrangement became apparent.

9. Strive for consistency

You must use the same strategies for managing your child's behaviour every time. Applying consistency means four important things: (1) being consistent over time, (2) not giving up too soon when you are just starting a behaviour change program, (3) responding in the same fashion even when the setting changes, and (4) making sure that both parents are using the same methods. Being unpredictable or capricious in your enforcement of the rules is a common invitation to failure. So is losing hope when your new method of management fails to yield dramatic, immediate results. Try a behaviour change program for at least two weeks before deciding it isn't working. Don't fall prey to the trap that snares many parents: responding to behaviours one way at home but an entirely different

way in public places. Finally try to maintain a united parental front as much as you can, granted the inevitable differences in parenting styles.

10. Act, don't yak!

Dr. Sam Goldstein, a psychologist and expert on clinical work with ADHD said it beautifully when he advised parents to stop talking and use consequences: Act, don't yak! Your child does not lack intelligence, skill or reasoning, so simply talking to the child won't change the underlying neurological problem that makes her so uninhibited. Your child is much more sensitive to the consequences and feedback you use and much less sensitive to your reasoning, than is a child without ADHD. So act quickly and act frequently, and your child will behave better for you. Keep talking and all you will get is aggravation, not compliance.

11. Plan ahead for problem situations

I'm sure you're familiar with the scenario: You're in a store and your child with ADHD begins to tear open packages, pull things off shelves, and generally create havoc, despite repeated threats and commands. You become flustered and frustrated, unable to think quickly and clearly, so a solution eludes you. Your dismay is intensified y the disdainful glares of salespeople and other shoppers, and you try to skulk out of the shop, pulling your screaming child behind you.

I am often struck by parents' ability, when pressed, to predict where their children are likely to misbehave. So I am surprised by how few seem to put this information to good use. Why not use it in preparing for such problems to arise again? You can save yourself much anguish if you learn to anticipate problem situations, consider ahead of time how best to deal with them, develop a plan of forehand, and then follow through on your plan should a problem arise. People may find it hard to believe that even just sharing the plan with the child before entering a potential problem setting greatly reduces the odds that behaviour problems will arise. But it works! Tyr these five steps before entering any problem setting:

Step 1: Stop just before entering the site of a potential problem, such as a store, restaurant, church, or friend's home.

Step 2: Review with your child two or three rules that the child often has trouble following in that situation. For a store the rules could be "Stay next to me, don't ask for anything, and do as I say." No longer-winded explanations, just a brief statement of the rules. Then ask the child to repeat these simple rules back.

Step 3: Step up the reward or incentive-stopping for a frozen yoghurt on the way home for example-that your child can earn by obeying the rules.

Step 4: Explain the punishment that may have to be used, such as a loss of points of privilege.

Step 5: Follow your plan as you enter the situation, and remember to give your child immediate and frequent feedback while there. If you must, punish the child swiftly for any acts that violate the rules.

12. Keep a disability perspective.

At times, when faced with a difficult-to-manage child with ADHD, parents may lose all perspective on the immediate problem. They may become enraged, angered, embarrassed, or at the very least

frustrated when their intial attempts at management do not work. They may even stoop to the level of the child and argue about the issue as another child might do. You must remember at all times that you are the adult; you are this disabled child's teacher and coach. If either of you is to keep your wits about you, it clearly has to be you.

One way to keep your cool in trying circumstances is to try to maintain some psychological distance from your child's problems. Pretend you are a stranger so you can view the situation for what it really represents-a parent's attempt to deal with a behaviourally disabled child. If you can do this, you are likely to react to your child more reasonably, fairly, and rationally than if you let your child's problems upset you.

13. Don't personalise your child's problems or disorder

Don't allow your own sense of self-worth and personal dignity to become wrapped up in whether or not you "win" an argument or encounter with your child. No one is keeping score here. Stay clam if possible, maintain a sense of humour about the problem, and by all means try to follow the other principles listed here when you respond to your child. Sometimes this may even mean re-moving yourself from the situation for a moment by going to a different room to gather your wits and regain control over your feelings. Don't conclude that you're a bad parent when a situation goes wrong or does not turn out as you wanted.

14. Practice forgiveness

Practicing forgiveness is the most important principle, but often the most difficult to implement consistently in daily life. It means three things. Firstly, each day, after your child is put to bed or before you retire for the night, take just a moment to review the day and forgive your child for transgressions. Let go of the anger, resentment, disappointment or other personally destructive emotions that have arisen that day because of your child's misconduct or disruptions. The child cannot always control what he does and deserves to be forgiven.

Do not misunderstand this essential point. It does not mean that your child should not be held accountable for misdeeds. It means that you should let go of any bitterness over them.

Second, concentrate on forgiving others who may have misunderstood your child's inappropriate behaviour that day and acted in ways offensive to you and your child, or simply dismissed your child as lazy or morally defective. You know better; don't buy into what others think about your child. Take any corrective action that's needed and continue to advocate for your child, but let go of the hurt, anger, and resentment such instances may have inflicted on you.

Finally, you must learn to practice forgiving yourself for your own mistakes in the management of your child that day. Children with ADHD have the capacity to bring out the worst in parents, which frequently results in parents feeling terribly guilty over their errors. Without giving yourself license to make the same errors repeatedly without consequence, let go of the self-deprecation, shame, humiliation, resentment, or anger that accompanies such acts of self-evaluation. Replace them with a frank evaluation of your performance as a parent that day, identifying which areas to improve and making a personal commitment to strive to get it right the next day.

You will find this principle the hardest to adhere tom but the must fundamental to the art of effective and peaceful management of your child with ADHD.

From *Taking Charge of ADHD* by Russell A. Barkley. Permission to photocopy this list is granted to purchasers of this book for personal use only.