August Chat Focuses on Back to School Issues

CHADD's August "Ask the Expert" chat featured Sandra Rief, M.A., who focused on Back to School issues.

An award-winning educator with 23 years of experience, Ms. Rief is also a speaker, trainer, author and consultant who specializes in practical strategies for reaching and teaching students with AD/HD and other learning, attention and behavioral challenges. She has written several well-known books and developed videos on the topic.

The following is the transcript of the August 2005 “Ask the Expert” chat. To accurately relay all the information from that chat, only minimal edits have been made.

The Chat

Question:
Hi Dr. Rief, my 16-year old son is having trouble with impulsive "blurt outs" at school. I'm trying to come up with strategies to help him think before saying something that will get him in trouble. Any suggestions?

Sandra Rief:
If he keeps a piece of note paper on hand, and jots down thoughts it sometimes helps. Also, a counting system ... have him practice maybe counting to 5 before responding. Blurting is a big problem. Teachers can help with that by building in cueing systems to remind kids to raise their hand or "thumbs up" when they think they have an answer before calling on anyone. Also, for any of your children who may be on a Daily Report Card or monitoring system tied to a reward for certain target behaviors, remembering to raise their hands are good target behaviors.

Question:
I am challenged by middle school teachers who want to develop "independent learners." How to reconcile with need for modifications or scaffolding (organization, time management, etc.)?

Sandra Rief:
Part of it is educating of the teachers that kids with executive functioning difficulties are approximately 30 percent delayed in those "independent skills" and need extra scaffolding and accommodations. Fortunately, the new IDEA 2004 will strengthen the requirements to address organization/time management issues of kids with disabilities.

Question:
What is the single most important item to tell parents at the beginning of the school year about educating a student with AD/HD?

Sandra Rief:
The single most important item for teachers to tell parents is probably the teacher's intent that they will do everything possible to work together with the student and family and other school support personnel to ensure that their child will experience school success. If you are an educator, that communication is that you are willing and determined to work collaboratively and address that child's special needs is probably the most important thing parents would like to hear from their children's teachers.

Question:
It was recommended that we wait until mid-October (after the first sixth grade progress reports come out) to decide whether Ritalin is the way to go. I would rather start off the school year with a week of Ritalin already begun. Any thoughts? It will be my daughter's first experience with any medication for her ADD.

Sandra Rief:
If your child has experienced difficulty all through these school years and is now in sixth grade, I personally see no reason why you should wait until October. But, that's a decision between you and your physician. The first weeks of the school year are so very important - learning all the new expectations, materials, etc. The only reason I see for their recommendation to wait is for the teacher to observe your daughter's baseline behavior before medication. The teacher can then report treatment effects and changes in behavior better if given some time to see the child on or off medication. But again, this is a parent-doctor decision.

Question:
My daughter, age 9, has been in school one week and has already been threatened with a trip to the principal's office twice for some mild ADHD related behaviors. Is it realistic for the teachers to believe her behavior will change with such a measure? Would something else be more effective?

Sandra Rief:
I'm sorry to hear that the school is so over-reactive to mild ADHD related behaviors. Such punishment is not warranted and will not be effective in changing those behaviors. Instead, much more time (1:1) in teaching and positively reinforcing teacher expectations is much more effective. It sounds like your daughter's teacher needs to implement many more proactive classroom management strategies. Is she a new teacher? Is she aware that your child has ADHD? I recommend setting up a meeting and explaining your daughter's ADHD - asking ways you can help. Being careful not to sound like you're questioning the teacher's authority, etc., I'd communicate that you want to work together and maybe set up a home/school plan as early in the year as possible.

Question:
My 9-year old is struggling with AD/HD and dyslexia. How can I help him with his multiplication facts?

Sandra Rief:
Learning multiplication facts is a challenge for so many children with ADHD and/or LD. There are some good mnemonic (memory) programs that teach the facts by associations. One program is called "Memory Joggers" another is advertised all the time in the

ATTENTION! magazine. I can't think of the name. Also, there are commercial tapes/CDs of the times tables put to melody which helps. Any multi-sensory techniques are very beneficial. I share many of them in my books, as well.

Question:
How can you follow up with your student if he lies to you about his tasks?

Sandra Rief:
That's a tough one. You may very well need a home/school form in which the teachers have to sign off or indicate if work has been turned in. Some teachers are willing to email to parents and let them know about missing assignments (e.g., 3 missing assignments=phone call or email home). If you are a teacher then follow up should result in a negative consequence for lying. Sometimes the student is not "lying" but really forgot if he or she completed or turned in assigned tasks. So, I would be careful about assuming or accusing the student of lying. But, require that the task be completed (with help if needed) and perhaps deduct points or other penalty.

Question:
So many parents in our support group are having problems in the morning before school trying to get their kids up and off to school. They have been trying to wake them early in the morning to administer medicine but that doesn't help to address the home issues, i.e. anger, anxiety, confrontations. Some books we have read say that is how they get themselves stimulated to start the day. Are there any other ideas?

Sandra Rief:
I'm not sure about that. I doubt if many children want to start the morning with conflict. I recommend various systems for structuring the morning routine that are consistent with your children's developmental levels. For example, for young children use of charts with pictures of the steps of a morning routine and points/token system for completion of those steps by certain time frames (e.g., by 7:30...by 7:45...). Sharon Weiss' book called "From Chaos to Calm" is a good one for such suggestions.

Question:
Do you feel there is any advantage to my son being in a Charter school that is for Kids with ADHD as opposed to being in a mainstream school?

Sandra Rief:
I don't really know the advantage. In my experience any mainstream school that is receptive to educating ALL students and providing whatever supports/interventions may be needed is a good environment. Unfortunately, it's a year to year...teacher to teacher issue. Also, the school's multidisciplinary team is a good indicator of how knowledgeable that school staff is with regard to helping kids with ADHD, LD, etc. succeed in general education classrooms. So, it's always helpful to get to know the members of your school's support team (multidisciplinary team - which goes by many names or acronyms depending on your district).

Question:
I have a 10-year old son going into 5th grade. I am most concerned about the teachers and their lack of knowledge regarding kids with executive functioning issues. Are there any thoughts on how to encourage teachers to learn more?

Sandra Rief:
I think it helps to provide short articles on executive functioning to teachers. Most are simply unaware of the term, what it means, and steps to help with executive functioning difficulties. Chris Dendy's articles are good ones. I also have a section on executive functioning in my books, as well as lots of other sources that can be copied and given to teachers (something short and sweet). If your school is receptive to ways to help ALL students become better organized, etc., there are lots of great systems and programs they can implement...which helps the whole class as well as the student with EF challenges. Some schools, for example, implement a school wide system of requiring use of 3-ring notebook, assignment calendar with teacher modeling of recording assignments, checking that materials are in backpack with student buddies monitoring each other, etc.

Question:
I noticed my son is much more agitated when I pick him up from work and he has to do homework. What can I do to make the transition from school to home easier?

Sandra Rief:
Your son probably needs a good break - snack, playtime, etc. before homework. Having a homework routine that meets his personal style and needs is important. Make a list of things to do for the evening and ask your son's preference on how he wants to tackle things. Ask which tasks he needs your assistance on, and which ones he can do independently. Build in rewards for accomplishing mini goals along the way.

Question:
My daughter gets distracted so easily and loses her place where she is. Apparently she's sensitive to all the noises around her. She hears every pencil move around her during test and this really slows her down. Are there any suggestions?

Sandra Rief:
Your daughter might do best with the accommodation during test time and seatwork (independent time) to use earphones/earplugs, moving to a quieter area with less distractions, or other such environmental accommodation. Sometimes testing in another area (e.g., resource room) can be arranged.

Question:
We are still told that ADHD is NOT a disability! In our school the Principal says it comes under OHI (Other Health Impaired). What rights do we have?

Sandra Rief:
Tell the principal that OHI is one of the disability categories under IDEA. If your child has met the OHI criteria, then he is entitled to an IEP and special education/related services. It sounds like your principal is uninformed about special education law. I would contact the district's special education director and inform that person about your situation and principal's comments.

Question:
My son would start his 6th grade on Monday (private Catholic School). How do I go about requesting accommodations from the teachers?

Sandra Rief:
I would set up a meeting and in a positive, non-threatening, cooperative manner explain your son's needs and the type of accommodations and supports that have been effective in the past. Being that it is a private school, however, I'm not sure if they are "required" to accommodate. If they do not receive any federal funds, then Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 does not apply to them. Hopefully, they will be reasonable and willing to work with you.

Question:
My son is very apprehensive about starting the 4th grade after a bad experience in the 3rd grade. What can we do to help him have a positive outlook?

Sandra Rief:
If there is a way to contact his 4th grade teacher and explain his apprehension and ask him/her to perhaps meet him in advance, or call him at home to welcome your child to his new class...that might go a long way in starting off on a positive note. I think most teachers would be happy to do so if aware of the situation and his concerns. END.

Question:
Teachers may not think it appropriate to give students with disabilities extra help e.g., printed notes or outlines to follow lectures). Independent schools in particular may balk at implementing strategies that they see as "advantageous" instead of "necessary" for ADD students. Are there any thoughts on this?

Sandra Rief:
This is often problematic when teachers don't understand the need to accommodate particularly for written language and Executive functioning deficits. I like to explain that accommodations are meant to level the playing field...not give unfair advantage; and accommodations are always based on student NEEDS. I tell teachers that I have always told my students at the beginning of the year that "I guarantee one thing...I will never treat you all the same. We are all different learners and it differs what various students need to be successful. My job as teacher is to provide whatever is necessary to help you all learn best. So, if there's something you need to help you...let me know."

Question:
Is it better to get in touch with all my sons teachers (5th grade) and let them know he has ADHD or just as problems arise. I always feel they would put some kind of stigma on him.

Sandra Rief:
I recommend that you always disclose your child's ADHD to teachers. This way they are aware and in most cases can better understand and be empathic to your son's school difficulties. Just informing the teachers, without making demands...and letting them know that you want to be a partner with them - helping in any way - is a good idea.

Question:
Can you briefly explain the rights under Section 504 and IDEA in public schools for children in elementary through high school. Also, can you briefly explain the accommodations provided in college/university?

Sandra Rief:
Regarding Section 504, it is a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disabling conditions by programs and activities receiving federal funds (e.g., all public schools). Eligibility criteria involves student having a record of or regarded as having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life function. Considering that learning is a life function...if a student with ADHD has a substantial limitation in learning, they are protected under Section 504. The rights are to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Kids who qualify with 504 Accommodation plans typically have classroom accommodations in their plan. But, it is not limited under law to just accommodations. Related services, for example, can also be included in a 504 plan. Those students who qualify under IDEA - special education law - are entitled to an Individualized Educational Program and related services. So, these students all have the rights for free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, but also have full special education programs and supports (more than kid with 504 plans only typically receive).

Question:
Do you think that electronic organizers/handheld computers help or distract teens with ADD? My daughter's teachers are opposed to giving one to her for school use...but I'm tempted to get one for her to start school. What do you think?

Sandra Rief:
I think electronic organizers are very beneficial for teens recording assignments, checking their schedules, etc. There may need to be rules regarding when she can access and use the devices (e.g., until first 2 minutes of class period after bell rings, not until last 5 minutes of class period) so it isn't a distraction throughout instruction.

Question:
Can you suggest a book that is specific to organization/behavior-mood techniques to help us in elementary school?

Sandra Rief:
Well...My latest book *How to Reach & Teach Children with ADD/ADHD*, 2nd edition (came out in March, 2005) has tons of stuff for just that.

Question:
I have been unable to find a tutor (particularly math) that specializes in children with executive functioning difficulties. (I have really tried many avenues including local ADHD organizations, pediatrician, schools, etc...) Any suggestions on how to find the right tutor?

Sandra Rief:
You might want to contact a local university, graduate student in math, teacher in training...might be a great source of referrals. Also, an ADHD coach certainly has the specialty in executive function difficulties. Maybe a trained ADHD coach who also has

the skill in math, can do both. You didn't mention the grade level...if it's elementary it shouldn't be a problem to find a tutor. But, someone with the knowledge in executive function and math skills in upper levels is more difficult to find.

Question:
Do you have any advice for an older student who just can't seem to excel? Main issue: initiating studying (I'm on medication.).

Sandra Rief:
Working with a study buddy or study group might help in this regard. Also, ADHD coaching can be beneficial for this situation. You might also want to try rewarding yourself for mini-goals related to study habits. For example, set up (with help needed) a realistic work/study schedule and set timers or other devices to motivate you to get started and accomplish a certain, reasonable amount of work. If you meet your goal, reward yourself.

Question:
One of the most heart wrenching things about school is to see your child excluded from playground games. What types of professionals could we contact that could offer the needed social skills training and where would we look for them?

Sandra Rief:
That is very painful for sure. In school, many counselors offer social skills training groups. I would certainly check at your school if this is a possibility. Also, I believe many clinical psychologists offer this type of service. Various clinics or developmental learning/behavioral centers that provide diagnosis and service to kids with ADHD, LD, etc., have such training programs.

Question:
I have a question regarding a teacher's responsibility to adhere to written accommodations. In your experience, when should a parent seek legal ramifications against a district for not implementing the 504 accommodations?

Sandra Rief:
Before seeking the legal route it is always recommended to try all avenues to resolve the issues first. Many times schools are lax about monitoring and implementing the 504 plan. And also it isn't made clear to teachers that they are responsible and can be held liable for neglecting or refusing to do so. A bit of education is in order and hopefully this can be resolved. The district's 504 Coordinator should be aware and involved. That person (the 504 Coordinator) definitely needs to meet with you and the school administration to address this issue of noncompliance with the 504 plan. END.

Question:
Is there a nationalized form/education pamphlet to give teachers on the first day of school to educate them about the ADHD condition?

Sandra Rief:
Mamita, the best source of information about the disorder is the CHADD fact sheet(s) - printed and distributed to teachers.

Question:
How does one find a coach and could this be provided by the school under IDEA or 504?

Sandra Rief:
There are national ADHD coaching associations. I believe you can find this information on CHADD's Web site (CHADD's National Resource Center on AD/HD: http://www.help4adhd.org/en/living/coaching) or through the *ATTENTION* magazine. Good question about coaching being provided under IDEA or 504. I have never heard of a school paying for this kind of service. It is highly unlikely. But, if your child has an IEP and receives special education services, the organization skill and time management training/monitoring can be part of the IEP goals/objectives that are supported and provided by the special education staff.

Question:
Should I encourage my son to look into accommodations for college? He was on a 504 in high school and I think he will need to have some minor ones for college, particularly regarding taking notes. Are they available?

Sandra Rief:
Yes, they are available. If your son was on a 504 in high school, I would definitely contact the college or encourage your son to do so to arrange for these kinds of accommodations to continue.

Question:
Dr. Rief, any thoughts on how to help our son remember to bring home his homework and notes from his teacher and keep track of it when he returns to school? Thanks!

Sandra Rief:
Your son's notebook should have a special, prominent and colored folder for homework and notes that is required to travel between home and school daily. You might set up a monitoring and reward system ... earning points/privileges for remembering to bring things home. And on those days he forgets to bring home needed materials and information, a penalty of some type (loss of privilege that evening) may be needed. Lots of kids with ADHD forget to turn in their homework or return notes from home. I would ask the teacher to please set up a system (e.g., buddy reminders, note card attached to desk, etc.) to remind him to turn in things when entering the classroom.

Question:
What do we do to get the extra one on one when your child isn't grasping the work as quickly, when in public schools they expect you to work independently because their classrooms are large and don't allow for one on one teaching?

Sandra Rief:
One-on-one in large classrooms is very difficult to achieve...no matter how wonderful the teacher may be. It is realistic, though, and helpful if teachers structure their classrooms for lots of cooperative small group work and partner activities, and provide mini lessons

and review/support to small groups of kids, as needed. Even in special education programs, most students do not receive 1:1. That would be optimal, if possible; but unrealistic in most cases. So, appropriate grouping and instruction at varying and differentiated levels is the way most teachers address students' different learning needs.

Question:
Do you have a teacher training program that you offer? Will you do speaking events?

Sandra Rief:
Yes, I do teacher training all over the country. If you go to my website, you can get information about my speaking events and training topics. My website is www.sandrarief.com. By the way, if any of you have questions later and want to contact me, I have a section on my website called "Ask Sandra". I promise to respond to you.

Trish:
Thank you very much Ms. Rief for volunteering for the chat this evening. Thank you for coming everyone.

Sandra Rief:
I appreciate the chance to chat with you all. You had great questions, and I enjoyed being with you. I wish you all a wonderful, successful school year. Good night everyone.

Moderator:
Everyone: For more detailed information after the chat please visit the National Resource Center on AD/HD website at www.help4adhd.org.

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