# Behavior and School

**PARENTS OF CHILDREN AFFECTED BY AD/HD OFTEN HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR** in school. During an Ask the Expert online chat held earlier this year, parents posed questions directly to George DuPaul, PhD, a professor of school psychology and chairperson of the department of education and human services at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

George DuPaul, PhD

DuPaul's research focuses on school-based academic and behavioral interventions for youth in K-12 settings, early intervention for children at-risk for AD/HD, and the assessment and treatment of college students with significant AD/HD symptoms. Among his many publications, DuPaul co-authored *ADHD in the Schools: Assessment and Intervention Strategies* (Guilford, 2003), *Promoting Children's Health: Integrating Health, School, Family, and Community Systems* (Guilford, 2003), and *Childhood Mental Health Disorders: Evidence Base and Contextual Factors for Psychosocial, Psychopharmacological, and Combined Interventions* (American Psychological Association, 2007). A former member of CHADD's professional advisory board, DuPaul has also served on the editorial advisory board of *Attention* magazine. He received CHADD's Hall of Fame award in November 2008.

**My daughter's kindergarten teacher says that she has difficulty playing with the other students. She reports that she hits, refuses to share, and throws a tantrum when other students get attention. Is this because of her AD/HD, or is she misbehaving?**

It is possible that some of this behavior is due to her AD/HD, as she may be doing this because she is impulsive and inattentive. However, there may be other reasons. For example, perhaps she does not have a lot of experience in playing with other children or lacks some of the skills to play with others. Or maybe she is looking for attention from her classmates or teacher and is going about an attempt for attention in the wrong way.

One thing that may help is for her teacher to take a look at when she (the teacher) pays attention to the girl and whether she needs to increase how often she attends to her. In that way, maybe the girl could be provided with some help in how best to ask for attention as well as some training in how best to play with other children. Maybe some supervised playtime with one child to begin with.

Because she may be inattentive and impulsive (as a function of her AD/HD), this kind of experience is going to take some time. This will require patience on the part of you and the teacher.

**What is the best approach to help my seventh-grade son with social problems in school? He is overly sensitive and an easy target for bullies. The school has labeled him as someone who cannot get along with others.**

Well, there are several things to think about. First, does he have opportunities to interact with other kids outside of school? If not, then it would be good to identify his interests and see if you can find any opportunities to do things he's interested in with other kids.

The other thing to think about is whether he knows the options he has when he is feeling sensitive or being bullied. He may need some training in how to be assertive but not aggressive, as well as in whom he can seek out if he is running into difficulties with other kids.

If the school has identified him as someone who needs help in this area, then it should be asked to provide some ideas for you as to how to get that help. Is social skills training available in your area? Can the school get him involved in some training?

And there should be a bullying prevention program in your district. Perhaps you could talk to the folks who are in charge of bullying prevention in your child's school for additional ideas and resources.

**I am wondering how long a child, based upon age, should be able to focus on a task. I have been told 3-5 minutes per year; so, at age seven, a child should be able to focus for 21-35 minutes without moving off task. Does that sound correct?**

That actually sounds on the long side. Children vary greatly in their attention spans, particularly these days with electronics and multitasking. I would say that a typical seven-year-old should focus for at least 10 to 15 minutes and perhaps longer. But again this varies greatly. Classroom teachers typically have a good idea about these things and so your child's teacher could give you some idea.

It is also different for boys versus girls, with boys having shorter attention spans in general. It also depends on what else is going on around them, what time of the day it is, how tired they are, and so forth. Most school assignments at this age last about 20 minutes or so at most.

TRACKS / ISTOCK

**FOR MORE INFO**
CHADD members can visit chadd.org to read the full transcript of this chat.

**We do homework with our eight-year-old daughter nightly and often need to redirect her as we begin and later when she starts getting distracted. We also take breaks with left-right brain physical exercises or yoga. We're worried that she's getting dependent on us to do homework. How can we help her monitor attention and develop independent study?**

First, I think you are on the right track with structuring her time, monitoring what she is doing, and providing her with breaks. Second, she is only eight years old, so you have a lot of time to work with, and you don't really need to worry about her becoming too dependent on you. However, you don't ever want to get into the situation of actually doing her homework for her if you can avoid that.

The other thing that you can add to what you are doing is to help her set goals for herself in terms of how much she gets done in a certain period of time. Then if she meets that goal she should get to do something fun with you. Of course, you want to make sure she is setting realistic goals because you want her to feel successful throughout. But the key is to have a standard time for homework, to provide a non-distracting environment, to monitor her work, to give her short breaks as needed, and then to reward her efforts.

Eventually, as she gets older, you can gradually back off of your involvement if you are concerned about her becoming too dependent on you.

**Our eight-year-old, highly verbal son was recently diagnosed with AD/HD. Medication was not recommended at this time. Counseling was recommended to help with self-control and making better choices in addition to a possible Section 504 plan (currently there is nothing in place and counseling has not started yet). His teacher says that he comes to school with an agenda, distracts others, and doesn't get his work done. How can the school help to get him to cooperate in the classroom? We have six weeks before counseling starts. What can be done in the meantime?**

Are there things that are happening at home that set up his "agenda?" If so, maybe you could look at his routine before he leaves for school and figure out how to make that as positive as possible. Maybe his teacher could greet him in the morning before he goes off, and have a brief, positive interaction with him—remind him of expectations and encourage him.

She or he should then praise his efforts to get the day started in the right direction and maybe steer him toward activities or tasks that he handles better as a way to start the day. Maybe he could be given a responsibility for the classroom—collecting papers, doing an errand for the teacher—something that occupies him and distracts him so that he gets off to a positive start.

And hopefully, his counseling will involve working with his teacher to set up a plan that involves behavioral strategies, making some changes in the way tasks and commands are presented to him, and giving him the opportunity to earn rewards for doing well. This should be part of his 504 plan, because what we know is most effective for children with AD/HD is the use of behavioral strategies that structure the environment and provide motivation. Whereas individual (talk) counseling may be helpful somewhat, it is rarely sufficient to address this kind of difficulty.

**Do you have suggestions for getting school-aged children to better plan school projects in advance, especially when they are getting older and less information about their work comes home for parents?**

This is always a challenge, even when the child doesn't have AD/HD! I think when you know that a long-term project has been assigned, you want to sit down with the child and set short-term goals. Break the assignment down into steps or parts that can be completed and set realistic expectations for when these can be completed. Then work into the child's daily homework routine some time to work on the long-term project. Doing a little bit each day is far better than trying to get it all done at the last minute, and it is less overwhelming. If they think of it as a series of small steps or tasks rather than a big long assignment, then they will be less overwhelmed. And you want to have something positive associated with the child's efforts—as he or she gets each step done, there should be some fun activity or item available.This is the kind of thing—setting short-term goals, working in small chunks, rewarding ongoing efforts—that the child will ultimately need to learn to do on his or her own, but it takes time, patience, and practice!

**What kind of advice can a parent take to the child's teacher for in-class assignments? How can the teacher work with a child to focus on the assignment in class and not disrupt other students or get off-track?**

Some of the same principles apply, but of course this is more challenging in a large classroom with other kids. I've always suggested to teachers that they try to modify class assignments so that the child will be successful, such as cutting down the number of items or by breaking the work period into smaller units to start and then providing children with an opportunity to take brief "attention breaks" after getting some of the work done. That way the child's inattention is under the control of the teacher, not the student.

The teacher can make sure that something positive—praise, opportunity to play an educational game, etc.—happens when the child completes the assignment (even when modified). When the child goes off-task, I suggest that teachers not make a huge deal out of it. Try to redirect calmly and privately without embarrassing the child in front of the class. ●