

Ten Steps to Academic Success

A mother shares strategies learned through guiding her son through high school

by Susan Lepre, Ph.D

DOING WELL IN HIGH SCHOOL WILL OPEN ALL KINDS OF DOORS and opportunities for

your son or daughter with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. I am summarizing here the extra steps a parent can take to help his or her teenager adjust to high school and thrive academically. These steps are based on my experience with my son, who was a member of the National Honor Society and will start college this fall with scholarships. If your child has a 504 Plan, maintaining that plan throughout high school is a critical element in keeping your high school student with AD/HD academically on track. Every child's situation is unique, however, so adapt these strategies to suit your child's needs and abilities.

Devoted to real-life testimonies of coping with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Attention's newest department made its debut in December 2007. Send us your stories of living with AD/HD.

request a single group meeting with all of your child's teachers. Give the teachers a thumbnail sketch of your child and how his/her learning disability could affect his/her work. Give the teachers your email address and maintain an open line of communication. Ask to be informed about big tests by email so you can make sure your child is prepared. Not all teachers use or regularly check email, so you may have to contact them by phone or by note. Create a positive but realistic picture of your child so that teachers will think of the good traits (such as hardworking, sociable, funny) as well as the learning disability.

Meet with your adolescent's guidance counselor early in the first year and stay in touch throughout the year. Some parents have no, or very little, contact with the guidance counselor until college time—that is a BIG mistake. Develop a working relationship

ance counselors, because she/he is the link between the school and your adolescent.

Start each school year with an early emphasis on doing all homework and studying for tests. Encourage the teenager to establish himself each year as an A or B

studying for tests. Encourage the teenager to establish himself each year as an A or B student by showing a seriousness of purpose. Adolescents, particularly teenagers with AD/HD, often drift through September, not noticing early warnings of problems until academic warning notices are sent out and parents are alerted. By that time the student is in catch-up mode, trying to raise Cs and Ds to As and Bs. Some parents wait until there is a problem. Emphasize that focusing on academics early on is key to doing well throughout the year; then it is easier to maintain good grades. Parents have to pay attention to the grades and marks their adolescent is earning. Reaching out to a teacher during the first quarter gives that teacher the chance to tell you if there is even a minor problem with how your son or daughter behaves in the class. Work preventively to avoid problems, not after a problem has emerged.

with the counselor, while respecting the time

constraints and demands placed on most guid-

A member of CHADD for more than ten years, **Susan Lepre** has her PhD in Public Health from Columbia University. Her son, now graduated from high school, twice scored in the top one per cent of those completing their college preparation exams (ACT). He is an avid soccer player.

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The author's son, following his high school graduation in June 2008.

Engage a tutor before there is a crisis. Practice prevention—avert the crisis before one develops and the adolescent with AD/HD experiences success, not failure. Students with AD/HD work better when they are maintaining good marks and succeeding, than when they are in a crisis. If money is an issue, investigate options for obtaining free or low-cost tutoring. If you cannot get a tutor on a regular basis, try to plan for occasional tutoring sessions to help the adolescent plan large projects and research papers.

Develop a talking relationship with the tutor—be the bridge between the teenager and the tutor. The tutor may encounter resistance, hostility, or indifference, and needs all the warmth and friendliness you can provide. Help to build the rapport between the tutor and your child.

Appreciate your adolescent's tutor! Tutoring will benefit your teen now and in the future by helping him or her to formalize good study and work habits. Working closely with a teenager with AD/HD requires great patience, tact, and flexibility as well as academic knowledge.

Always thank everyone at the school who helps you keep your teenager with AD/HD on track, especially those who let you know ahead of time about big tests or big projects coming up for your son or daughter. Even when adolescents do not show visible signs of the disorder, AD/HD always, always, always impacts their academic career. This might include putting off research papers or projects, not bringing home the correct books, forgetting to do an assignment or losing marks for handing in the assignment late or not at all.

Keep your own outside activities to a minimum when your son or daughter is in high school. Regard the effort you put into helping your adolescent stay on track as being a time-intensive activity. You will need sufficient time to maintain contact with teachers and the student's guidance counselor, supervise homework completion, and various administrative tasks such as registering for SAT or ACT tests. Administrative skills become paramount during the second half of high school, when the adolescent needs to keep up with outside academic demands (prepping for the ACT or SAT) as well as the academic demands from the high school itself. Because of the impaired executive function that often accompanies AD/HD, parents of teens with the disorder may need to help with administrative jobs (such as applications) that require detail and coordination functions.

projects. Do not regard vacations as only for recreation. It is much easier during school breaks to concentrate on complex tasks than it is when the student is putting in a full school day, preparing daily assignments, and studying for tests. If necessary, have the tutor come to assist, particularly with large projects or papers. It is important for a student with AD/HD to stay connected with academic work so there is a less abrupt transition when school resumes.

Cultivate a team of professionals who can support your efforts with your son or daughter.

The team will include the treating

physician, the tutor, and if possible, a clinical psychologist. The challenge of academic work in high school is quite different from that in middle school. Cherish the people who help you keep going and help your adolescent to be academically successful.

