



Classroom Interventions for AD/HD

by Ann Abramowitz, Ph.D.

The ABC Model for Behavior Change

In understanding intervention strategies to help children with AD/HD, it is helpful to use the **Antecedent—Behavior—Consequence (ABC)** framework. Many parents who have participated in AD/HD parent-training programs may be familiar with this framework. It is based in learning theory and is just as applicable to classroom interventions as to parenting practices at home.

In this model, **behavior** is observable—meaning that it can be measured. This focus emphasizes what the child *does* rather than general characteristics of the child. Thus, hyperactivity is *not* a behavior, nor is stubbornness, aggressiveness, having poor peer relationships or taking too long to complete work. Similarly, cooperativeness, politeness, getting along well with other kids and being attentive are not behaviors either.

The ABC model requires educators to restate observations in terms of what behaviors they would like the child to exhibit less or more frequently. For example, “running in the classroom,” “yelling” and “talking during work time” might need to be reduced. “Working steadily,” “following the rules of the game,” “raising his/her hand before contributing,” “saying something nice to another child” and “copying homework assignments from the board” might be identified as behaviors to increase.

Identifying observable behaviors enables teachers to target precise areas for intervention and also enables them to readily determine if the intervention is successful. This approach also encourages positive thinking about specific behaviors that should be

changed rather than making global negative statements about the youngster. Decreasing problem behaviors and promoting appropriate, positive behaviors is accomplished through strategically modifying antecedents and consequences.

Antecedents precede the behavior and set the stage for it. They have a tremendous influence over which behaviors occur. Antecedents include characteristics of the environment (such as the way the classroom is organized), characteristics of the task (such as its length, level of difficulty, format and level of interest to the child), behaviors performed by other people such as the teacher and classmates and the feeling state of the child (such as hunger, tiredness, happiness and boredom). Several antecedent teacher behaviors and classroom and task modifications are especially important when designing interventions for AD/HD. Many classroom strategies are based on modifications of antecedent conditions, particularly those involving the organization of the classroom, the method the teacher presents instruction and gives directions and the ways in which assignments are given.

Consequences follow the behavior and are a direct result of the behavior. A consequence does one of two things—increases the likelihood of a behavior’s occurrence or decreases it. The effects of a particular consequence on a given youngster’s behavior are not always what the teacher intends. For example, a stern lecture given because of misbehavior might inadvertently provide attention that the child seeks. The fact that the child is getting attention, even though it is negative, may encourage him or her to repeat the behavior. Conversely, a privilege such as eligibility to

TODAY’S TEACHERS have many excellent strategies for managing behaviors related to attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) in their classrooms. In addition, parents and teachers can partner to help youngsters with AD/HD do well. Although working with these children and teenagers requires thoughtful effort, carefully planned and consistently implemented classroom interventions can result in substantial improvement in behavior and academic performance.

Classroom Interventions for AD/HD

participate on a field trip is only a reward if the child expects to enjoy the trip.

Classroom consequences that are contingent on students' behavior fall into several general categories: verbal feedback, use of some kind of reward (such as a privilege, checkmark, point or token) or loss of the same, work tasks (chores) and time out. Programs based on consequences that systematically reward appropriate behavior such as completing work, getting along well with peers, remembering to raise one's hand and keeping track of materials can be very effective.

Such programs can be instituted classroom-wide or as special programs for youngsters who need assistance in learning and demonstrating those behaviors consistently. These programs can isolate a single behavior in need of improvement or can involve **token**

economies where youngsters earn (and sometimes lose) points or tokens for exhibiting specified behaviors. These points or tokens are exchanged later for preferred activities, privileges or tangible rewards.

Many teachers find that careful use of antecedents can reduce the need to rely on special programs involving rewards and punishment. Important antecedents include giving instructions clearly and checking to make sure they are understood, having a clear schedule, clearly stating (and re-stating) rules and consequences, and making optimal use of classroom space for children's workspace and placement of equipment and materials. Additionally, making the tasks of optimal length, difficulty level and interest level can greatly influence task engagement. Teachers can also provide students with task choices, for example, a menu of possible reading or math assignments from which the student chooses one assignment. This type of intervention has been successful in reducing disruptive behavior and increasing attention during written tasks.

Since reward/response cost programs can involve a fair amount of extra work, "front-loading the system" by paying attention to antecedents in the classroom often is the most sensible and time-saving strategy with which to begin.

Two Especially Helpful Strategies

Two types of strategies deserve special mention. The first, called "**peer-mediated interventions**," involves harnessing the power of classmates to help the youngster with AD/HD improve his or her behavior. Here is why this can be so helpful: when a teacher relies on programs involving rewards, response cost and other consequences contingent on the child's behavior, he or she is taking on the job by himself or herself. At the same time, classmates likely are paying attention to the off-task youngster, who may be attracting this attention through various means—silliness, making annoying physical contact or perhaps blurting things out.

It is hard for the teacher to find consequences, positive or negative, powerful enough to counteract the rewards (attention) provided by the classmates. However, the teacher can work with the children so that they understand the role they are inadvertently playing in rewarding the inappropriate behavior of their classmate and engage them (sometimes using class-wide rewards) in ignoring misbehavior. Besides the fact that this sort of intervention eliminates a powerful reward for misbehaving, it can help all the youngsters feel better about themselves as a group.

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Another widely used intervention that has excellent research support is a **daily report card (DRC)**, which combines a home component with goals for behavioral improvement in the classroom. The DRC states several behavioral goals (usually two to five) that the child or teenager is working on. At regular intervals, such as the end of each subject or task, the teacher marks the goal as met or not met for that time period, and at the end of the day the child brings home a summary report from the teacher that indicates which goals were achieved. The parent is then able to stay informed and also can provide rewards or consequences.

Some Issues to Consider

"He's not the only one in the class." Parents and teachers often worry that it will be too difficult for the teacher to meet the needs of the youngster with AD/HD (and often there are several children in the class with this diagnosis) while teaching everyone else. This concern should not be scoffed at, as youngsters with AD/HD often do require more attention than their classmates. The good news is the strategies mentioned here can be beneficial for all students, while making the classroom a better place for those with AD/HD. Often when teachers employ these strategies classroom-wide, particularly those in the antecedent category, they find that students with and without AD/HD alike are more cooperative, attentive and productive.

"Is it wise to single out a child for rewards?" Parents and teachers sometimes express the concern that special programs involving rewards might inappropriately single out the child with behavioral problems. In my experience, as long as the programs are well presented, this should not be a concern. To the contrary, it can be an enormous relief to classmates who see that the youngster who has been exhibiting difficulties has now settled down. As with peer-mediated strategies, the emphasis should be on cooperation—everyone helping others so the whole class can benefit.

"Aren't these techniques just for elementary schools?" Behavioral strategies are not just for the lower grades. Middle and high school students with AD/HD benefit from these strategies as well. The organizational demands of secondary school are challenging for most teens with AD/HD, and at the same time it can be difficult for teachers to implement strategies with consistency across classes. It is crucial that teachers communicate with one another and that



Some Important Antecedents to Consider

- Teacher enthusiasm
- Clear schedule
- Tasks that are not too long
- Task directions that are clear
- Verbal commands and instructions that are clear
- Teacher making sure directions are understood
- High interest level materials whenever possible
- Teacher stating rules clearly and frequently, along with consequences if rules are not followed
- Time of day
- Child's feeling state (hunger, energy level, etc.)
- Physical organization of the classroom
- Auditory and visual distractions

Effective Verbal Feedback

- Praise is sincere and specific to the behavior
- Reprimands are clear, brief, firm, specific to the behavior and not delivered with emotion
- Feedback is frequent
- Feedback follows the behavior as immediately as possible
- Keep a positive tone
- Use no more than one warning; follow up quickly with back-up consequence as appropriate



Conference Notes
Ann Abramowitz, Ph.D., will conduct a breakout session on elementary school-based social-skills interventions for girls at CHADD's Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas, October 27–29, 2005.



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someone who has experience working with students with AD/HD provide leadership in setting up the strategies to be used and in evaluating their effectiveness. Under the general category of antecedents, some of the most important strategies for success include a dynamic instructional style, assignments that are manageable from the standpoint of organization, accessible posting of assignments, availability of a second set of textbooks and providing class notes when needed. Consequences for adolescents can be provided at school and home and generally include earning and losing privileges of all types.

A Final Note

Parents often worry that their child's teacher may have had limited experience using these strategies with youngsters who have AD/HD. What if the teacher is relatively unfamiliar with the techniques described? Generally the school system has other personnel whose help can be enlisted. With the student support team as an organizing resource, the teacher can receive sup-

port from those in the school or elsewhere in the district in implementing the needed strategies. Finally, parents often wonder how to deal with resistance to these approaches. While complex, the best tools are education and communication. Fortunately, there are excellent resources for educators, three of which are listed below. ■

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For further information

Dendy, C.A.Z. (2000). *Teaching Teens with ADD and ADHD: A Quick Reference Guide for Teachers and Parents*. Bethesda, Md.: Woodbine House. (Outstanding reference for secondary school issues)

DuPaul, G.J. & Stoner, G. (2003) *ADHD in the Schools: Assessment and Intervention Strategies*. New York, N.Y.: Guilford. (Especially recommended for educators and psychologists)

Pfiffner, L.J. (1996). *All about ADHD: The Complete Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers*. New York, N.Y.: Scholastic. (Contains a wealth of strategies for dealing with AD/HD in the classroom)

Sample Daily Report Card

Name: _____

Day and Date:	Language Arts		Math		Social Science		Science		Daily Special	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Worked steadily										
Turned in homework and classwork										
Refrained from making noises										
Talked respectfully to teacher										

Followed rules at lunch **Yes** **No**

Walked in halls appropriately **Yes** **No**