



# 10 Ideas for School Success

by Linda L. Ramer and Deborah H. Gordon

EVERY PARENT wants his or her child to succeed in school. It may seem to take a Herculean effort on the part of the parents, but they are the ones who can make the difference between success and failure for a child with AD/HD. In this article, we'll give you a "top 10 list" of ways you can help your child succeed in school. Parents don't have to be superhuman and perfectly consistent for these suggestions to work, but doing your best to follow them, especially working with your child's teachers as team members, will help your child succeed academically.

**1. Be a positive communicator.** There's an old saying, "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar," and the adage applies as much to educators as to insects. Teachers want their students to succeed, so go to your child's teachers and tell them you're concerned about how your child is doing. Offer to help. The teachers will see you as a team player—an ally and not an adversary—and they'll bend over backwards to work with you.

Parents are the best possible advocates for their children, since they are the ones who know their children's strengths and weaknesses. Obtaining ser-

vices for your child requires staying in close communication with the school and working cooperatively with your child's teachers.

How can you set the right tone? Start the IEP or 504 meeting off on a positive note. Let them know that you support their efforts to help your child.

Ask the team leader to provide you with a written summary of the discussion along with a copy of the 504 or IEP plan. Make sure the plan lists each participant's commitment. If you have a friend who's highly organized and has a good memory, have that person come along to provide support and take notes.



Students should have a regular place to do their homework—often a quiet spot in their bedroom, but if your child focuses best in the kitchen with music playing, that's okay, too.

Put yourself in the teachers' shoes. Treat them as you would like to be treated, and make them your collaborators, not your opponents.

**2. Be proactive.** Don't wait for your child's school to come to you. You are your child's primary advocate, so contact the school as soon as you think it's appropriate. In the lower grades, make an appointment to personally meet your child's new teacher each year. Let teachers know you are there to support their efforts. Explain your child's strengths, problem areas and learning style. (Most students with AD/HD learn best by being actively engaged and physically doing something, such as working on the computer or building a model.) Plan how you and the teacher will work together to ensure the success of your child.

At the secondary level, continue to meet all of your child's teachers, even though they may change each semester. Schedule meetings to brief all new teachers about your child and talk about the accommodations your child requires. Don't ever assume that because you discussed 504 accommodations with one group of teachers, that the next group will be aware of them. Students also may need different accommodations in

each class, depending on the subject and the teaching style. Work with the teachers so they can utilize an approach that will benefit your child.

Don't hesitate to inform teachers when there are important changes in your child's life. Are there problems at home? Is the doctor adjusting medication? Do new responsibilities exist, such as a job or helping with siblings? If something affects your child, let the teachers know so that your child has extra support during atypical times.

**3. Obtain regular medical care for your child.** All children should have a complete yearly checkup, particularly children with AD/HD. For example, if the child is on medication, is it helping? Should it be changed, increased or reduced? If your child is not on medication, should it be considered? Treatment with medication is a major decision that should be discussed with your child's physician.

The same is true about counseling. Talk to your child's physician, teachers and others who work with your child (i.e., school counselor or reading therapist), then decide if counseling and/or behavior therapy are appropriate for your child. When a child isn't succeeding, it is important to make sure that nothing has been missed, and a thorough medical evaluation is the place to begin.

**4. Stay on top of your child's academic progress.** As children move through school, parents should make sure they have acquired the skills necessary to succeed at each grade level.

It's normal for young children to learn by doing. Preschoolers and kindergartners learn by touching, seeing, playing and being active. For this reason, it can be hard to determine if a young child has AD/HD.

As children grow, their behavior may begin to indicate a problem. Here is an example of a teacher's comments.

**First grade:** "Will continue to do well in school with praise and parental support."

**Second grade:** "Needs to continue focusing his attention on the teacher and given task, and work on his self-control."

**Third grade:** "Gets a bit too active at times, which distracts others. Needs to concentrate on getting his work done well rather than fast."

Parents should make sure children are learning what they are supposed to learn in each grade, particularly when a pattern like this begins to emerge and AD/HD is suspected.

What should you do if your child has trouble keeping up? Again, make sure no new medical problems exist. Then, request a thorough educational assessment and schedule a meeting with your child's teachers. (Under federal law, school districts must provide such evaluations at no cost to parents. To safeguard your rights, you may wish to present your request in writing to the school principal and to your child's teachers.)

**5. Help organize your child.** Children with AD/HD are notorious for being disorganized, so help your child get organized. Here are some ideas:

- Work with your child to organize his or her binder. Section it off by subject and assign areas within each section for notes, returned tests, assignments, completed homework, etc. Color-code by subject. (For example, if you choose green for math, cover the math book in green, use a green divider for the math section, and use a green envelope for holding math homework.)

- Organize your child's time. Keep morning, after-school and bedtime routines as consistent as possible. List the child's activities on a calendar. Know where your children are going, whom they are with and what they are doing.

- Organize your children's different spaces. Make sure they know where things are in their rooms

(despite the inevitable untidiness). Students should have a regular place to do their homework—often a quiet spot in their bedroom, but if your child focuses best in the kitchen with music playing, that's okay, too. (You can keep tabs on how your child is doing as you prepare dinner.)

- Organize your child's behavior. Children with AD/HD need clear rules and guidelines. Praise and reward kids when they follow the rules, and discipline them calmly and firmly when they break them. None of us can be perfectly consistent in this area, so don't sweat the small stuff and don't try to micromanage your kids' lives. Simply try your best and don't beat yourself up when you fall short. This applies to your child, also. You want your child to do his or her best, so expect a good effort—but don't expect perfection.

**6. Track your child's educational improvements through weekly progress reports from the teachers.**

Request regular written reports when you have your "get-acquainted" meeting with each new teacher. You can also ask for the due dates of reports or projects, and the dates of major exams like midterms and finals; then you and your child won't have any surprises. Stay in close communication with teachers and keep that communication positive. When problems come up (and they usually do), talk to the teacher about how you can work together to solve them and include your child in the discussion. Make a plan so the next time will be different. It might help to remember what Einstein said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." That's good advice for parents of students with AD/HD.

**7. Make sure homework gets done and gets to school.**

The weekly progress reports will tell you what work your child's teachers have assigned, when it is due and if it has been completed. (Students may have accommodations as to the *amount* of work required, but they are still responsible for turning that work in.) Once a week, do a backpack check to make sure all of your child's homework is complete and turned in.

Students should put their backpacks in front of the door they exit each morning. If the alarm clock doesn't go off and it's a horrible, miserable, very bad day, they may trip over their backpacks on the way out, but at least they won't forget them with their finished homework inside.

Remember to stay positive with your child. Students are responsible for recording their assignments, bringing home proper materials and doing their



## School Success Checklist

- Be positive
- Be proactive
- Obtain regular medical care
- Follow academic progress
- Help organize
- Track improvements
- Check homework
- Encourage appropriate behavior
- Identify problems early
- Acknowledge your efforts

homework. When your child does these things, offer praise, rewards and hugs. When they forget, don't accept excuses and let them experience the consequences.

**Children with AD/HD need clear rules and guidelines. Praise and reward kids when they follow the rules, and discipline them calmly and firmly when they break them.**

**8. Remember, children with AD/HD don't always exhibit appropriate behavior.** All too often, they don't think—they just react—and they don't learn from their mistakes as quickly as other kids do. They are more likely to use inappropriate verbal, written and body language to vehemently express what they feel, and their lack of maturity often gets them into trouble.

As parents, you should recognize that your child with AD/HD might lag behind his or her classmates in terms of behavior and language. (When children are young for their grade in school, the problem is even more difficult.) Try not to get frustrated and angry. Instead, provide structure and consistency from the outside, and work with the child's instructors to teach the appropriate behavior and improve the situation in school.

When parents and teachers are in close communication, children soon understand that they won't be able to get away with misbehavior at school. When problems arise, work with your child's teachers to develop a behavior plan. When the child does something good (or bad) in school, he or she is rewarded (or held accountable) at school *and* at home. Role-playing can help them to identify what to do in specific situations.

**9. Identify problems early.** If you suspect that your child is having difficulties in school as a result of AD/HD, the sooner you get on top of things, the better it will be for your child's academic success and self-esteem.

All too often, children with AD/HD hear only negative comments about themselves, and this is incredibly self-destructive. They begin to believe they are bad—that they can't achieve and can't behave. In time, they can stop trying and grow hostile to school. It's no easy task to turn around a child who has shut



down or turned off, so intervene early to get your child help.

**10. Give yourself and your child a pat on the back!**

None of this is easy. It takes a lot of time and energy, especially in today's frantic world, where most of us have a dozen things we could be doing at any given time. When problems occur, get yourself together and try again. Your child's success and happiness will be worth it. ■

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