

Q&A An Interview with Sandra Rief

This issue ATTENTION! interviews Sandy Rief, a resource specialist in the San Diego public school system and author of the popular book How to Reach and Teach ADD/ADHD Children (Simon and Schuster). Ms. Rief is a full time teacher. She has been teaching children with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders for over twenty years. Besides teaching, Ms. Rief travels the country speaking, consulting, and training teachers. Teachers and parents alike will find that Ms. Rief offers sound advice and she offers some terrific messages about education and the teaching profession.

ATTENTION! Many of our readers know you from your book How to Reach and Teach ADD/ADHD Children. Is there another book in the works?

Ms. Rief: Yes. I'm really excited because I'm finishing up a book I'm co-authoring with a friend of mine who is a classroom teacher at my school. And this one is called How to Reach and Teach all Children in an Inclusive Classroom. It's a book of ready-to-use strategies, lessons, and activities for teaching students with diverse learning needs. This book takes my first one a step farther. [Editor's note: Ms. Rief's second book will be out in September; it is also published by Simon and Schuster.]

ATTENTION! How are you defining the term "inclusive"?

Ms. Rief: I mean that children with any kind of special needs can be successful within the regular classroom. I focus on children with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, children who have limited English proficiency, and other "less visible" disabilities. I have not worked with children who have severe disabilities in the regular classroom, so I'm really not referring to those children.

I know that in addition to teaching, you speak to and train teachers throughout the country. What concerns, what tough questions, do you hear from teachers?

It's very rare to find a teacher who isn't anxious to learn more about how she can help her students. Most teachers really want to meet the needs of all their children, but they may be frustrated because they're lacking some of the techniques. They may not have all the skills they need to feel competent in meeting the needs of children with disabilities.

I find that teachers indeed do get frustrated -- more around behavioral issues. When you have students who present behavior problems, it makes teaching the entire class difficult. If there's only one child then it's not that much of a problem. But when you have multiple numbers of children with different behavioral challenges and special needs, it is very difficult for the teacher.

How should a teacher approach educating children with ADD or other disabilities?

The children who are most successful are in classrooms where high interest activities are going on, where they are interacting with their peers and participating in the lessons, and where there's structure. When I say structure, I mean that the students know precisely what is expected of them. The teacher knows what she expects to see and is positively reinforcing those expectations.

The teacher who is committed to every student's success will find the means to do so. It takes a lot of experimentation. There is no one right way to do something; you have to offer a lot of choices within the classroom. For example, if the lesson is based on a book the class is reading, a teacher shouldn't simply assign a written book report. She should instead give students choices of how they want to report on the book. There are countless ways that students could complete this project; let them choose the modalities in which they are most proficient. It could be writing, yes, but it could also be through drama, art work, or verbal presentation. Teachers can and should offer these kinds of choices in all parts of the curriculum.

The most critical piece of advice is probably: find something that works and if something stops working, then try something else. Teachers need to have the freedom, the latitude, to keep on trying to find what works for a particular child.

You meet teachers throughout the country. Can you share your general impressions about how prepared teachers are for meeting the needs of children with ADD?

I'm very pleased by the positive trends I'm seeing. There's much more awareness about learning disabilities and ADD, and a much greater desire to learn than there was five years ago. It used to be that any child who had any special needs whatsoever was considered to be just the responsibility of special education teachers; regular classroom teachers did not consider these children to be their responsibility. I would say through the efforts of CHADD and parents, that has changed greatly.

School districts everywhere are calling and pleading for training. Large and small school districts are recognizing that they need to train their staff in the strategies and

techniques for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. What makes me very optimistic is the fact that general education training for teachers, across the curriculum, is focusing on how to teach all children. They're talking about important issues like authentic assessment, diversity, and inclusion. That's really good news for our children with special needs.

How has the awareness and understanding of ADD among teachers changed over the past five years?

Teachers simply didn't know about ADD five or six years ago. That was true for special education and general education teachers. I've seen tremendous growth in awareness and in skill levels.

It's wonderful to hear such good news from education's "front lines." But I have to ask what may be a difficult question: When reading some of the major, national education publications, one picks up a "doubting Thomas," a questioning, an almost hostile attitude towards ADD. Recently, one such publication gave a great deal of space to an author who promoted what he called, "The Myth of ADD." Why is that picture so different from what you are describing?

You're right. I don't think there's a single classroom teacher anywhere who is going to say anything to that effect. Classroom teachers have all seen children with ADD who have exhibited tremendous changes and positive growth after being treated with a multi-modal treatment program. Yes, it angers me when I read that or I hear the negative backlash. I don't think you have too many teachers who feel that way at all.

I think many of us will be heartened by that statement. Returning now, to the classroom: would you describe the average classroom as a good or a tough place for a child with ADD to learn?

That is a hard question because it simply varies from class to class. Again, I think the key element is the teacher. There are certain things that need to be in place for a child to be successful. The emotional climate has to be safe. The classroom must be a place where every child feels respect and appreciation for diversity and different learning styles. When I say emotionally safe, I mean living free from ridicule and humiliation. The standards of the classroom must be clear: we are tolerant of one another and we respect one another.

There is a whole range of teaching styles. I don't think the teaching style is as important as the message delivered by the teacher to every student: "You're important, I care

about each and every one of you; I'm going to do everything within my power to help you succeed in this classroom."

We always say classrooms need to be structured. They do, because children with ADD simply cannot function in a chaotic room where expectations and standards are not clear. But a structured classroom can be very deceiving. I know that parents will often look in on a classroom and if it's quiet and all the children are working at their desks, they will conclude that they're looking at a structured room where their child will be successful. You can't judge a room's structure that way because often that's not what we mean by a structured classroom. It's very often the room where the children are out of their seats, sitting in groups on the floor, and there's slight chatter -- a workable noise level because there's a lot of activity going on. A casual observer might look at that room and conclude that the structure is not there. Structure is absolutely there. The children know precisely what's expected of them, and that probably is the best place for a child with ADD.

Can you give us tips for choosing a classroom for a child with ADD?

That's very difficult. I generally don't recommend that a parent demand a certain room. Even somebody who knows the teachers well, like myself, can find it very hard to predict what teacher will work best for what child. You might think a child may not do well in a classroom and you get completely surprised -- that was the best teacher in the world for that child and vice versa.

The most important advice for parents is you need to be with a teacher who is open and willing to communicate with you. You need a teacher who is a team player, who wants you as part of the team, who encourages and does everything she can to bring parents into a partnership, who is willing to listen and be flexible. That is the kind of teacher you want. So, if in trying to communicate with the teacher, you find that she doesn't want to listen to you, doesn't care what you have to say, doesn't want you in the room, then I would say no, no, no, that's not where you want your child.

What suggestions do you have for parents to help their children succeed in the classroom?

First of all, communicate that to the teacher. Ask the teacher how you can help and support. Teachers will love that, will respect parents for that, and will generally take them up on that.

You need to closely monitor your child's work production and behavior. Parents and teachers should work out a consistent way of communicating about assignments. In our

school, parents know that students' binders go home every night in their backpacks and that the assignment calendar will be in the binder.

Parents should help their child with organization -- any way that they can help their child organize their materials and workplace -- so that the child doesn't fall behind. As soon as a child does start to slip, intervention needs to take place. You don't want a child to fall far behind, so if homework or other assignments are not coming home, then that's when the parent needs to get on the phone, call the teacher, ask for a conference, and try to work those things out.

I find most teachers truly respect the parent who doesn't come on real strong, doesn't go in with "guns blazing," but instead says, "We're on the same team. I understand that my child may have challenges and I want to do anything I can to support him. Please, I would like to work together with you. Let me know how I can help. Please make sure you let me know if my child is not getting his work done." The more gentle approach usually works best.

What should parents do if they find that, despite the best efforts at collaboration and communication, things just aren't working out with a particular teacher?

First of all, I would always try to work through the teacher. If that doesn't work, then the next step is to ask for a meeting with all of the members of the team involved in your child's education. Be straight forward at the meeting. Share your feelings that things are not working and that you want to explore other interventions. After that, if your child is still in an unproductive situation then it's an administrative issue and that's when parents need to make some noise.