

## **A Parent's Experience of Schooling for a Child with ADHD**

**Children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have difficulty attending and persisting with tasks, are overactive and appear to be unable to inhibit impulsive actions or responses. Short concentration span and restlessness associated with ADHD can seriously impair the child's learning and result in behaviour problems. This article presents a parent's perspective on school experiences of her child with ADHD. The importance of teacher education is emphasised with some very useful strategies for teaching children with ADHD.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

My son, Dylan, is a fine young man – honest, good natured, kind hearted and caring. He is also the most exasperating, infuriating and challenging person I have ever met! You've guessed it – he has ADHD. Before he was diagnosed, I lived in a comfortable world where I had the luxury of believing that ADHD was an "American" condition, invented by 'bad' parents to cover up for the outrageous behaviour of their offspring and their own inadequate parenting. However, when my son began to display behaviour that I found unacceptable, I was forced to rethink my cosy view of life.

### **THE EARLY YEARS**

Dylan was an adorable baby (at least I thought so!) and became an equally adorable toddler. We only hit 'the Wall' as I call it when he went to playschool. Then started the dreaded 'beckon' from the teacher as I went to collect him. I cannot begin to describe the way in which my heart would subsequently sink when beckoned in this way, as this became a regular feature of our life together. Over the years I began to look on 'the beckon' as a symptom of my failure as a mother and the mere sight of the raised hand (or eyebrow) of the teacher plunged me into a sickening downward spiral. I now believe that Dylan's ADHD escaped my attention during the early years when he had the liberty to move about as he wished with no real constraints upon his freedom. When he was later required to sit still, he simply could not do it. Since much of our schooling revolves around an education for life and how to fit in into society, he was pre-disposed to fail. Through no fault of his own, he was hardwired to keep on the move, constantly seeking he knew not what – useful skills in pre-historic times, perhaps (or in the cutthroat world of business), but of little value in the contemporary classroom.

I became despondent at seeing other children, whose parents seemed to give them little supervision or discipline, behave more or less impeccably. Meanwhile my own son, who was well supervised and had a stable home and a loving mother, was running amok. I just couldn't understand where I had gone wrong.

## **PRIMARY SCHOOL**

### **Assessment**

When Dylan went to primary school, it was more of the same. Humiliation became a daily ritual for us both. The constantly running sound track in his life became a negative one – “don’t do that”, “stop doing the other”, “why won’t you do as you’re told?” etc. We had this for two and a half years until he was finally referred to a Child Guidance Clinic in first class. We were assessed and reviewed for 6 months (another humbling experience) before the diagnosis was made. Then following careful consideration he was prescribed daily medication. Another hurdle here – I felt as though he was some kind of addict on a Methadone Programme by the time an agreement had been reached with the school over administering the daily half tablet. How do children with other conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy manage, I wondered?

Let me say at this point that while my tone so far may seem negative, this describes our early years together and thankfully was not how things eventually worked out for us. Following the diagnosis, Dylan’s experiences were transformed in school. Even though he still had the same problems, still exhibited the same behavioural difficulties and still created challenges for his teachers, now we had an understanding of what his condition was all about. This made all the difference in the world to how he was subsequently managed.

### **Teaching Strategies that Worked**

Teachers in general took the time to understand his condition and made all the necessary adjustments. As a result, he blossomed and their lives became easier because he was not disrupting the entire class. Teachers identified the potential trouble spots and headed them off at the pass. For example, forming a line was always difficult for Dylan so lining up to go to and come back from break was always a problem. He would push and shove, get out of place, disappear altogether, etc. His teachers got into the habit of escorting the line out to the yard and back in on the way to and from their own breaks. Although this must have been a chore for them, in the long run it saved time because it eliminated the regular incidents of varying severity which used to occur. Teachers also recognised that children with ADHD often become the target of other children and ‘scapegoating’ or ‘winding up’ was not allowed. Children with ADHD can often be set up by ‘good’ kids and they fall victim to this time and again. This is obviously not good for either party and Dylan’s teachers were tuned in to this all the time.

Educationally, Dylan made surprising progress, although he did almost no work in school. Because the teachers allowed him to participate in whatever way he could – verbally, by drawings and occasionally in writing (no matter how scrawly!) – he seemed to pick up quite a bit and retained his natural curiosity about how the world works. He was provided with an educational assessment which had some limited usefulness. It was limited because there was no real follow up. I understand that the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is severely over-stretched and it is truly astonishing how many schools one psychologist is supposed to cover. How are they ever meant to be able to contribute to an individual child’s welfare with all that ground to cover? Dylan was also provided with a resource teacher each year and benefited greatly from the individual attention. Even more important was the extraordinary compassion and understanding he received from the resource teacher during his final two years

in primary school. I can never adequately convey my gratitude for this, except to say that it turned my son's life around. For the first time ever, he began to feel valued as a person, rather than being viewed as a problem to be solved. I know that my son could not verbalise his experiences, but I was always aware that he knew he was different and didn't want to be.

Over the years his teachers worked out some useful strategies to make life easier for him (and everybody else) in the classroom. For example, if the teacher noticed that he was getting edgy or displaying any of the signs of imminent trouble, Dylan would be sent on an errand to the principal's office or to do photocopying. This gave everyone a break, gave Dylan some much-needed exercise and made him feel important rather than a nuisance. On occasions it was even possible to let him go out for a short walk within the school grounds. This was only possible in his last year when he also had a classroom assistant who was wonderful and made his transition to secondary school a lot easier. Other imaginative solutions included getting Dylan to sort out and label all the music and storytelling discs, which kept him occupied, made him feel as though he was contributing and helped him with his reading and writing and all the time it didn't feel like work!

### **Structure and Routine**

It has been said that children with ADHD need only three things: structure, structure and structure! If the child's day is structured in such a way that he knows where he is supposed to be at any given time, then he should also know exactly what is expected of him. For this reason, school tours and similar treats can actually be very stressful. It takes careful planning to avoid trouble before it occurs. An ounce of forethought is worth a ton of hindsight in these situations! All things are possible with a small amount of clear thinking and perhaps consultation with parents. Remember that parents live with this problem behaviour every day and often have useful tips for dealing with some of the most common pitfalls. Having a sound routine is useful, always allowing a little flexibility, of course. Whilst it seems from the outside that these children love adventure and excitement, in truth they crave routine and structure. They are unable to provide this for themselves and depend upon adults as parents or teachers to provide it for them. Only then can they safely enjoy their frenetic approach to life.

### **TEACHER EDUCATION ABOUT ADHD**

One incident stands out in my mind as a metaphor for what doesn't work in managing children with ADHD. One day I got a call from Dylan's teacher to say that he was vomiting and could I come and pick him up. I went to collect him and the minute I saw how he was struggling for breath I realised he was in the middle of an asthma attack. I took one look at him, turned to the teacher and said "asthma attack, I'll get him home to his inhaler". The teacher's response was "Well, he's been vomiting everywhere" (a fact which was obvious by the little puddle by his side which had been covered with sawdust). I just took him home, gave him his inhalers and he settled down quickly afterwards. When I got to thinking about it, it seemed to me that my son was struggling both mentally and physically with the demands of coping in school. Emotionally, socially, educationally and psychologically, he was wretched and retching, fighting for the very air that he breathed, whilst the response to his dilemma was one of disapproval for disrupting the nice clean school. His problem was being mis-identified and he was being held accountable for something which was outside of his control – effectively the victim was being re-victimised. Thankfully this was an isolated incident. In some situations, a teacher's perception is that a child

with ADHD takes up too much of their time. It is true that a child with ADHD takes up a disproportionate amount of a teacher's time. However, the greater their understanding of ADHD and its implications for teaching and learning, the less time will be required to deal with the inappropriate behaviour.

If I could put forward some brief suggestions for dealing with a child with ADHD, these would include:

- **involve the parents**
- **get an assessment done by a Child Guidance Clinic**
- **refer the child to the NEPS also**
- **provide structure and routine**
- **be compassionate in the face of some very challenging behaviour**
- **read as much as you can about ADHD and related conditions**
- **get the support of your colleagues**
- **try to anticipate problems and put strategies in place**
- **accept work in unconventional formats (such as pictures, diagrams, etc.)**
- **make use of resource/learning support teachers (they often have a wealth of knowledge)**

## CONCLUSION

Finally, when dealing with children with ADHD, my experience is that what works is to be flexible, imaginative and compassionate. It would be helpful if all schools provided some educational reading material on ADHD for teachers as it is very important that teachers have an opportunity to become familiar with the condition and how to manage it. So many of Dylan's teachers had to provide this material for themselves, which seemed rather unfair. Of course, I had (and have) a selfish interest in seeing that my son's educational needs were met but it goes much deeper than that. Let's face it, most 'ordinary' children will get on reasonably well in school regardless of how good or not the teacher is. It is children like Dylan who need the extra input. In the short term, if children such as Dylan are handled properly, it makes life in school so much more beneficial for the other children and the teachers as well. In the longer term, if these children (mostly lads) are managed well, they can become decent upstanding citizens and contribute greatly to society rather than becoming involved with drugs and crime and subsequently being a burden on the state. It is not an over-dramatisation to say that it is vital that these children are saved from a terrible fate. Their future, more than any other, is in your hands.