

DON'T FIGHT THEM. JOIN THEM!: COMMUNITY-WIDE PLAN FOR SUPPORTING "ACTIVE, HANDS-ON LEARNERS," INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH ATTENTION-DEFICIT DISORDER (ADD/ADHD)

(this passionate plea was presented by Dr. Kathy McGuire to her child's school district as she struggled to help her own adopted child with ADHD to graduate from high school)

May 28, 2001

By ignoring the presence of a substantial number of ADD/ADHD children in the schools, the school system seems to be **producing** the juvenile delinquents, dropouts, failures, angry shooters which society then decries and wrings their hands over, expending great amounts of money and emotional energy on their "rehabilitation". By failing to acknowledge that these children have a hands-on, "active" learning style which is completely incompatible with the passivity of traditional classroom education, the schools are requiring them to attempt to "fit into" a totally inappropriate educational system against which they must rebel.

By allowing them to be disciplined, and harshly, for behaviors, from forgetting and disorganization to impulsiveness, which are part and parcel of the kind of nervous system they have and in no way subject to voluntary control, the schools are forcing them into the roles of troublemaker, dropout, and delinquent. By forcing them to spend the entire day, year after year, in a setting which has no outlet for their strengths and their own way of learning and in which they are rejected as "misfits," the schools are turning them into angry, violent, acting-out people.

By failing to make space for their individuality and their creative gifts, the schools are cooperating with the successfully-conforming, clique-forming students in ostracizing them and casting them out. It is no wonder then that some of them, unable to control their angry impulses to avenge the misery of their school days, come to school with guns and shoot those who are hurting them.

ADD/ADHD children are destined to fail in school. They are square pegs being fit into round holes seven hours a day. No adult would tolerate a job situation that unsuited to his or her natural abilities for twelve years! Certainly by 4th grade, they begin to do poorly, not because they are lacking in intelligence, but because they are lacking in the "executive function," the organizational skills needed to meet increasing classroom demands for their "independence and responsibility." By junior high, when teachers decide that they should be really "independent and responsible", they are bound to fail.

Lacking the "executive function" level of brain organization, forgetful and disorganized, the ADD/ADHD child does not write down assignments, test dates, and instructions for studying and preparing. S/he cannot break long term projects down into small steps to be completed in an organized way over a time period. S/he cannot organize

notes for a "notebook check" nor keep up a "grade accumulation sheet." S/he cannot follow multi-part instructions written in paragraph form. S/he will not write long essay answers unless cued to "say more." S/he cannot remember books and other materials, forgets to turn in assignments that have to be done, loses books, forms, report cards. S/he does not learn to become organized or to control impulses from past punishments or threatened future punishments.

And, even if all of these "executive function" problems are accommodated, the student with ADD/ADHD is expected to spend the majority of time in core classes **copying notes from the teacher's notes on an overhead.** What could be more deadly to a "hands on" learner than copying someone else's notes? Plus, their problems with small motor control for handwriting completely take their attention away from any possible learning, so that, at best, if they don't get in trouble for boredom, they will have completed a handwriting exercise.

ADD/ADHD kids need an arena for demonstrating strengths and skills, for belonging to a group of peers as much as any other adolescent in the schools. So they find their group, the other failures, dropouts, troublemakers, skaters, body-piercers, "wierdos." They become more and more defiant in announcing their difference, their unwillingness to conform to a situation which is completely at odds to their abilities and learning style. They self-medicate and seek risks; they become pregnant.

Looking at statistics for ADD/ADHD in the general population, you are talking about from 8-12% of children severely enough affected for medical diagnosis (American Academy of Pediatrics). If you look instead at a measure of learning styles like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, you have 38% of children with a rule-following, passive orientation (SJ) toward learning, 38% who are active, hands-on learners (SP), 12% who are "scientists," (NT) and 12% who are humanities-oriented (NF).

Yet the majority of teachers have the rule-following, passive orientation (SJ), and it is this orientation that is imposed on most children, most of the time. And the 38% active learners (SP) are spending their entire school day in an atmosphere completely hostile to their well being, a situation which is so stressful and unsuited to them that, if we as adults found ourselves in such a "job" situation, we would get out of it as fast as we could.

Solution:

Create an educational setting which capitalizes on the strengths of these "active learners" and provides them with the skills needed to pursue gainful work and happiness within the structure of our society.

Goals:

1. Provision of equal opportunity for education to students with an "active learning" style.

2. Provision of a "path of excellence" to technical programs for students wishing a technically-oriented education and to college for students following an academic path.
3. Decrease in juvenile delinquency, school failure and drop out, and school violence.
4. Avoidance of a cresting wave of 504 plans, IDEA evaluations, due process hearings, civil lawsuits, and class action lawsuits which are caused by fighting against parents seeking equal rights to education for their children.
5. Creation of a positive, community spirit of empathy and compassion and respect for all kinds of people.

Necessary resources:

1. A "can do," proactive attitude among administrators, teachers, parents, juvenile justice, and community resources with active brainstorming to overcome obstacles.
2. An active, community-wide program against prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes toward these children as "lazy, disorganized, unmotivated" and positive definition of their academic and social strengths.
3. Cooperation among all agencies and resources in the community toward the common goals.
4. Creation of a standing committee to work toward these goals.

Provision of the active-learning environment from K-12 could be through integration of active, multi-modality teaching and evaluation into all classrooms, creation of an "active learning" block in each school, or creation of a "magnet" school oriented around active learning (this is my favorite -- not a "dumping ground" but an innovative, specialized school).

Funding can come from reorientation of facilities and staff already being used to teach these students and/or from foundations or demonstration grants or, perhaps, the juvenile justice system -- "Can do" brainstorming will be needed to find a way to cover any additional funding, e.g., making the future new elementary school already planned into the "active learning" magnet, buy an existing facility -- someone will come up with a way if there is the will!

Research and other support can come from the Department of Education at nearby Universities, piloting a statewide, nation-wide demonstration project.

Ideally, **planning** will be instigated by the school system, with open input from parents, students, community experts, disability rights advocates, educators, juvenile justice, anyone interested in throwing ideas into the pot. When community members and parents feel they have had a say, and a part, in creating a positive option, they will support it even if administrative constraints must enter into the final decisions.

Permission can be granted from the State for a demonstration project, charter school, some avenue which recognizes the goals of reducing juvenile delinquency and school violence as equal to criteria for standardized testing, etc. "Can do" brainstorming needed to find a way.

1. Early Intervention:

Goal: Identify and support these children and their families as early as possible, preventing the punishment which will lead to angry, defiant behavior later on.

Especially ADHD children are too active as soon as they are born, do no sleep through the night, do not sit still as soon as they can crawl, do not obey, do not learn from punishment. By the time they are toddlers, especially if paired with an authoritarian parent who demands obedience, and/or an impulsive parent, him or herself undiagnosed ADHD, self-medicating through alcohol and drugs, these children are hearing "No! No!" all day, are being beaten and pounded and shaken into submission.

ADD/ADHD is a hereditary disorder. Work with community agencies, obstetricians, pediatricians to reach out to the impulsive pregnant teens and other parents as early as possible, educating them about ADD/ADHD as hereditary, getting them help with the chaos and confusion of their own lives due to the disorder. Cooperate with community centers in offering support groups for parents which help them deal with their own disorder as well as reducing violent punishment in parenting these children.

Spot these kids in kindergarten (mine was already the only one standing on his head during story time) and reach out to their parents.

Teach parents and the community to look at children in terms of differing gifts and talents, rather than disabilities. Use the Myers-Briggs Typology Indicator (MBTI), highly validated and reliable, simple, inexpensive, with adult and children versions, to identify learning styles, teaching styles, possible career orientations, and Keirsey and Bates *Please Understand Me* (Prometheus Nemesis Book Company, 1984) as a simple explanation of the "differing gifts" which everyone brings to the table.

Use Howard Gardner's (*Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, 1983; *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, Basic Books, 1999; David Perkins, *Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning For Every Child*, The Free Press, 1992) model of seven different intelligences to get every child and every parent to look at their own strengths and their own weaknesses.

Start the positive programs in kindergarten. Or at least, up until middle school, make sure that children are not punished for forgetting, disorganization, and other symptoms of ADD/ADHD/active learning and give them positive outlets for their gifts.

2. Discipline:

Goal: Enhancing the self-esteem of these children who are always doing the "wrong" thing, who have been being punished for over-activity and not listening since toddlerhood.

Place so much emphasis upon positive reinforcement, point systems, awards, immediate feedback, activity, fun, that these kids won't have time or need to misbehave.

Understand what behaviors are voluntary (those taking scheming and long-term planning) and those which are involuntary (forgetting, disorganization, lack of motivation for boring, repetitive tasks, impulsiveness). Teach ways of coping and design environments to support positive behavior. Use natural and logical consequences a la Dreikurs rather than punishment. Avoid humiliation at all cost. Use a "can do" attitude to bring together educators, parents, community experts to figure out a hierarchy of behaviors and consequences that works for these children.

Stop punishing these children for forgetting and disorganization. Provide all students and parents with weekly and monthly syllabi listing expectations for students. Keep textbooks in class -- or throw them out! Send the kids to home or library to search the Internet, watch The Discover/History/Learning Channels, watch appropriate movies, interview their parents and community members to gather information.

Keep in mind that these children, because of hyperactivity, not listening, impulsiveness, forgetting, and disorganization, are doing the "wrong thing" all day long, every day of their lives. Lighten up as much as possible. Make the school environment so fun and pleasant that the worst consequence would be not being allowed to come to school.

Give these children short-term consequences and lots of opportunities to try again. Have the kids participate in a "school discipline council" where they are involved in deciding how to deal with troublesome behaviors on campus.

3. School Culture:

Goal: Provision of a positive peer group for these children to identify with.

You want to make this school, or this program within schools, the place that these children want to hang out, more than the Mall, the skateboard park, etc. You want to make the image of this school, or program, so positive that people are dying to get their children into it.

This will be the school, or program, where "Band" means electric guitars, drums, keyboard, learning about music by creating their own, bringing in their favorite music to share and to say why they like it, creating their own lyrics, having "guest" performers and bands of their choosing -- reading, writing, public speaking, problem-solving, Internet search all around active involvement in the kind of music they enjoy.

These children are not interesting in the boring repetition of a task in order to be the "best band." They do not want to play trombone instead of drums because the band needs trombones. They are interested in process, not product. They want to make music that is exciting now, in the moment, every moment. They want to win personal awards every week. They want to have fun. That is the bottom line.

Similarly with athletics. Although they may be great natural athletes, these children begin to drop out of organized sports by junior high. At this level, sports are not played for the process, the fun, but involve a lot of boring, repetitive practice. Since only a few children actually play, sports now involves a lot of sitting on the bench. Also, higher-level team sports also involve a lot of "executive function" activities like memorizing strategies, remembering where to go in a play, waiting around, impulse control. None of these skills come easily for active learners.

These kids gravitate towards martial arts training of all kinds, which is also recognized as helping them with the discipline and self-control they need to learn. Let's teach a variety of martial arts, from aikido to tae kwando to kickboxing to karate, at school, for boys and girls. Let's have teams, engage in regional competitions, give this kind of sport as much status as football, baseball, basketball. Needed: a "can do" attitude to figure out how to bring martial arts into the schools.

Many of these kids also think that "boot camp" would be fun; many at least fantasize about careers in the armed services. Integrate these kinds of challenging activities (ropes courses, obstacle courses) into athletics.

And then there are skateboarding, rollerblading, rock climbing, ice skating, water polo, kayaking, rafting, water parks-- all the sports these kids gravitate toward which involve intense, kinesthetic, on-the-edge gracefulness and concentration more than boring, repetitive practice. "Can do" attitude needed! There is a way. Get donations of facilities, sponsorship by sports stores and outdoor stores, etc. Create teams with competitions, awards, esteem.

4. Empathy Training:

Goal: Decrease the clique-ishness, ostracism, and bullying which contribute to school violence.

Throughout the district, teach empathic listening skills and develop educational opportunities in all classes to explore and understand the different strengths and weaknesses of various peoples. Actively explore the different cliques, do sociograms, have the kids listen, talk, write about the inner worlds of kids who are different from themselves. Actively form children into learning groups which emphasize different skills, using the Myers-Briggs and Gardner's multiple intelligences as models.

Emphasize peer helping -- anyone who has a certain gift figuring out how to teach it or use it to help another child. Make "peer helping" an elective, a great thing to put on one's resume, so attractive that kids want to participate.

Use the theme of empathic understanding, diversity, across curriculum areas throughout the district, e.g., as a theme for English, History, Science, Social Studies, Geography, Language Learning, etc.

5. Curriculum:

Goal: Learning while having fun; process rather than product orientation; playing to these children's strengths and possible future careers.

Bottom line: design the curriculum around what these children like to do, their strengths, instead of trying to fit them into a traditional, passive learning style which humiliates, bores, denigrates, and infuriates them.

Consult with teachers who already present "hands-on" learning projects to the Gifted and Talented children and in technical programs, who understand this "active, hands on" learning style.

Throw out textbooks, worksheets, and all two-dimensional, passive learning and assessment tools and emphasize three-dimensional active, interactive, applied, "hands-on" learning. For example, decide what the kids need to learn in each unit of work, give them the list, and have them work as individuals and groups to ferret out the information and create projects to demonstrate their "competency-based" learning, e.g., their ability to apply the concepts and information in real situations (see Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, and David Perkins, *Smart Schools*).

Throw out an outdated prejudice that reading and writing are the only paths to knowledge and to careers and allow these children to use the skills they have to prepare for the careers they will want to be involved in. Brainstorm and research about what these careers and skills will be. Allow these children to learn through modalities which they gravitate toward: active, hands-on exploration; kinesthetic learning through activity; television, film, video, music, computers; play-acting; group problem-solving; interviewing resources, etc., etc.

Have reading and writing directly related to active tasks the children want to accomplish, e.g., reading of manuals for machines to be operated, of plays to be performed, of Internet-search material according to a child's interests, etc. These children will read and write, if these activities are related to what they are trying to accomplish.

Go to www.schools.com and search for Private Schools: ADHD. Send for the brochures which will outline the innovative programs used with these children

Attract the teachers who will love this kind of teaching: more interaction, less tedious grading. Use the MBTI to help teachers understand their preferred teaching style.

You know how to do this! Certainly, there are enough books and expertise in this community to plan this curriculum, together with the technical and GT programs which are already in this direction! And, there are endless creative parents, who have been through the downside of the ADD/ADHD struggle with traditional education , who are bursting with ideas and enthusiasm to make a positive contribution.

Anyway, these are enough ideas to get our community going in a positive direction. We will never keep this kids from being angry and dropping out unless we give them a place to be all day which emphasizes their strengths, not their weaknesses, which raises their self-esteem instead of lowering it, and which keeps them actively engaged in learning instead of bored and furious.

At Creative Edge Focusing ™, www.cefocusing.com, visit Interest Areas Positive Parenting and Education. Join with Dr. McGuire and others collaborating on The Creative Edge Focusing e-discussion/support group. Become a Certified Creative Edge Focusing Consultant, bringing Listening/Focusing skills into parenting and education.