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aged 10 to 14

Matters

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The Kids Behind the Label: Understanding ADHD

Understanding students with ADHD is not about knowing the medical definition of the disorder or learning a pocketful of tricks for the classroom. It's about listening.

Trudy Knowles

Educators are confronted every day with local, state, and federal mandates; large class sizes; lack of resources; high-stakes tests; and diversity of all kinds. Throw into that mix a youngster with attention-deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and it's no wonder that teachers are frustrated and at a loss for what to do.

What Is ADHD?

The professionals define ADHD as a neurological disorder characterized by impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattention. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* identifies three types of ADHD: ADHD—Predominantly Inattentive Type; ADHD—Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Type; and ADHD—Combined Type. Ten million to 25 million people in the United States—2.5 percent to 10 percent of the population—are believed to have some type of ADHD, which means that most teachers will have one or more ADHD students in their classrooms.

Students with ADHD constantly struggle with impulsivity and have difficulty sustaining focus and resisting a desire to get up and move about. Confront those students with a school environment that focuses on product, relies on timelines and deadlines, emphasizes high-stakes testing, and requires them to sit in rows of hard desks, walk in straight lines, and be silent in class, and it's also no wonder they are as frustrated as their teachers.

How can teachers plan instruction for an entire class when one or more students disrupt the class? How can they help the youngster who can't remember that there is something to remember? How can they get the ADHD student to take books home and bring back homework?

The answers to those questions lie with those who live with ADHD every day. They have learned that understanding students with ADHD is not about knowing the medical definition of the disorder or learning a pocketful of tricks for the classroom. It's about listening. These "kids behind the label" can tell you who they are, how ADHD affects their school, and what would help them be successful.

For my book, *The Kids Behind the Label*, I interviewed students to see what impact ADHD had on their schooling and what teachers could do to help. Professional diagnosis aside, these students were very clear about what ADHD meant to them. Consider the following:

My mom asked me how I would describe ADHD. There's kind of an iron circle around you, like a cage they keep birds in. That's what I feel like. I'm cramped into something and I can't move.

ADHD is not necessarily the inability to focus. It's the inability to not focus on everything. If the teacher was trying to teach a lesson and the two kids behind me were passing notes, and the kid next to me was tapping his pencil, I would be paying attention to each one of those things. Because I was paying attention to all of them, I couldn't fully understand what the teacher was saying.

These young people, whom I call the "storytellers" in my book, enlighten us with how their inability to focus, their difficulty with organization, the trouble they have keeping track of things, their impulsivity, and the inconsistency in their learning have impacted their schooling. And then they tell us what they want from their teachers.

What Can Teachers Do?

When asked what teachers could do or could have done to help them, the most common answer related not to the curriculum or instruction, but to the type of relationship students wanted to have with their teachers. They wanted teachers to be nice and to listen to them. They wanted to be liked, respected, and treated like human beings, saying for example:

I want teachers to listen to me more instead of just standing up there teaching and going through the motions—to actually listen to what the kids are doing. I'm not even just talking about listening to words—I'm talking about knowing what's going on in life.

Time and again, the storytellers said that what they wanted was to be seen as human beings with thoughts, feelings, and ideas. They wanted to be treasured for the gifts they brought to the classroom, not demeaned for not being able to perform the way everyone else does.

We need educators who see the spark, talent, intelligence, and enthusiasm of these youngsters, who see their potential and can harness that energy and excitement to ensure success in school and in life. We need to change our routines, change our curriculum, and change our instruction. More importantly, though, we need to listen and build relationships.

The ADHD students who succeed have teachers who recognize their disorder and, despite that, believe in them and know they can be successful. Weiss and Hechtman (1993) followed youngsters with ADHD into adulthood. They concluded, "When the adults who had been hyperactive were asked what had helped them most to overcome their childhood difficulties, their most common reply was that someone (usually a parent or teacher) had believed in them."

The Importance of Respect

There are many techniques that we can use to help ADHD students be successful. There are changes in the curriculum, in the choice of instructional techniques, and in the way we assess them. But none of those techniques will be successful without building that positive relationship. It starts with teachers having conversations with students who can help them find what will work.

School doesn't work for many ADHD students. It is not very easy for them, it usually isn't very much fun, and they often are at high risk for school failure and for drug and alcohol abuse. That is why we must listen to what they say and assure them that we will help them acquire the skills and knowledge they need while also letting them know they are valued and loved.

ADHD is a label. But if you listen, you will get to truly know the kids behind the label. That's where their success begins.

Advice in a Nutshell

Building Relationships

- Remember that ADHD is a neurological condition. It is not the youngster's fault, and he or she should not be punished for not being able to do something.
- Welcome the student. Tell the student you are happy that he or she is at school.
- Call the student by name.
- Make a plan with the student. The student knows what he or she needs.
- Listen to what the student has to say and respect what the student is telling you.
- Take the time to do those small things that help: Help pack the backpack, checking to see if all needed materials are in there; make sure assignments are written down clearly; check in with the student a few times a day.
- Don't sweat the small stuff, like forgetting a pencil.
- Care about and support the student's interests inside and out of school.
- Respect the life that this student is living every day in trying to make sense of the world.
- Allow for movement and for a quiet space in which to calm down.
- Remind rather than ridicule.
- Value the individual gifts and talents each student brings to the classroom.
- Be flexible. Everyone doesn't have to be doing everything the same way at the same time.
- Remember that no one is perfect.
- Be patient.
- Keep your sense of humor.
- Never, ever give up.

Changing Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- Make curriculum meaningful and relevant. Connect it to your students' lives.
- Ground curriculum in broad understandings and essential questions.
- Give students a voice in planning.
- Give students authentic experiences with content, letting them use their minds in real ways to solve real-life problems.
- Give students opportunities to explore, investigate, research, communicate, create, and think deeply about issues.
- Teach and assess in multiple ways.

Reference

Weiss, G., & Hechtman, L. T. (1993). *Hyperactive children grown up: ADHD in children, adolescents, and adults*. New York: Guilford.

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