

2

Building Home-School Partnerships

“When parents, teachers, students and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students ...”

– Epstein et al. 2002, p. 7

Parents and teachers have important roles in supporting students with AD/HD. How well a child with AD/HD does throughout life is best predicted by:

- parents’ use of effective parenting skills
- positive relationships with other children
- success in school.

Research supports the importance of a collaborative approach in which parents, teachers, psychologists and medical professionals work together to address the child’s AD/HD. Effective collaboration and communication promotes consistency and support across the major settings in a child’s life. With consistency and support, children with AD/HD can be successful and move into adolescence and adulthood with skills and a positive sense of self.

Roles and responsibilities of partners

The teacher has a valuable opportunity to help the child who is experiencing attention difficulties. Often, the first suspicions of such challenges arise at school, and parents may not recognize how their child's behaviour differs from that of others the same age. On the other hand, parents may be only too aware of their child's differences and need support to deal with their concerns. The diagnosis and treatment of AD/HD also involves professionals beyond the school level, typically physicians and psychologists. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all the partners will encourage collaborative problem solving and improve students' opportunities for school success.

Parents can:

- provide useful information about the child, including
 - strengths and needs
 - medical and developmental history, including type of AD/HD, if previously diagnosed
 - hobbies and interests
 - effective reinforcers and motivators
 - factors in family life and the child's environment that may contribute to the child's distractibility, stress level or academic difficulty
 - possible emotional needs that require sensitivity
- participate in the diagnostic process
- consult with medical practitioners on the effectiveness of approaches, including both medication and behavioural strategies
- make decisions regarding medication and management of their child's AD/HD
- support progress and celebrate successes achieved both inside and outside of the classroom
- advocate on the child's behalf throughout the school years and beyond.

Teachers can:

- work with the student and/or parent to set academic and behavioural goals, and to make plans for achieving them. For students who are also coded with a special educational need, goal setting could be part of the Individualized Program Planning (IPP) process
- consult with other school and jurisdiction staff, including psychologists and behavioural consultants

- provide teacher assistants with directions regarding specific strategies for supporting the student with AD/HD
- monitor responses to various approaches and strategies
- communicate regularly with parents
- offer support and strategies to parents
- observe, document and report areas of strengths and behaviours of concern
- encourage medical investigation but refrain from offering advice or opinions on medical diagnosis or medication.

Teacher assistants can:

- provide supportive and complementary services in the classroom to enhance the learning experiences of students
- provide academic and behavioural support by reinforcing appropriate skills and behaviours, consistent with the teacher's expectations and directions.

Psychologists can:

- gather information from teachers, parents, students, student records and other school staff such as family liaison workers
- observe the child in the classroom, when possible, to determine teacher's expectations and student's responses
- collaborate with school personnel regarding strategies and programming
- conduct individual assessments to determine how the student approaches tasks or to rule out other disorders or explanations
- make a diagnosis based on all information
- offer findings and recommendations to parents and school staff
- offer information for monitoring of medication trials and evaluation of strategies
- consult on an Individualized Program Plan (IPP), if needed
- provide parents with information about community support including referrals for treating and managing coexisting conditions.

Physicians can:

- be part of a diagnostic team in a clinic setting
- gather information from parents and, with parent permission, from school staff
- rule out or take into consideration other medical factors
- make a diagnosis based on all information
- discuss potential approaches, including medications, with parents and child
- recommend resources for further reading
- provide frequent patient contact during early treatment stage and medication trials
- provide contact with school staff during medication trials or while evaluating effectiveness of strategies.

Home-school partnerships

Recognize that some parents may be uncomfortable meeting with teachers, particularly if this is their first meeting. In challenging or difficult situations, parents' care and concern for their child might show up as tension, anxiety or frustration. It's important to remain nonjudgemental and to avoid making assumptions because the parents' presenting behaviours might not necessarily reflect how they truly feel or how they are actually coping. Keep in mind that most parents do not have a background in education and some have little or no experience in working with schools. There may also be emotional barriers and other issues that get in the way of creating an atmosphere of collaboration. Factors may include:

- parents who struggled at school themselves. They may find it uncomfortable to work in partnership with teachers
- a sense of guilt that they are in some way responsible for their child's difficulties. Some families may still be struggling with feelings of loss and grief as they try to come to terms with their child's AD/HD and the resulting behaviours and learning difficulties
- family situations that make participating in their child's education a challenge, such as shift work, language barriers or families that are dealing with more than one child with attention difficulties
- cultural beliefs that school and home are separate
- trust issues. It takes time to develop a level of trust where parents feel comfortable talking about their child

- a lack of confidence in the school's ability to provide adequate support for students with attention difficulties
- denial. Some parents find it difficult to believe that their child has different needs than other children, particularly those students whose main difficulties are academic. These children may not experience the same degree of difficulty outside of the school environment.

Taking time at the onset to provide information and clarify expectations will foster a sense of openness and partnership with parents. As parents become more comfortable collaborating with their child's teachers, they will more readily share information and perspectives that can be used to enhance their child's learning.

As partners in supporting students with AD/HD, teachers need to collaborate with parents. These students have complex learning needs and a team approach will go a long way to addressing these needs.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ Take steps to increase parents' comfort levels at meetings

- Arrange meetings at mutually convenient times in a comfortable setting.
- Consider parents' comfort level when determining the number of school staff to attend meetings.
- Provide parents with the topics to be discussed a day or two in advance. This will allow them time to think about the items to be discussed and to collect relevant information and questions to bring to the meeting.
- Ensure parents have opportunities to be meaningfully involved in the problem-solving process, not just receive information.
- Consider what information parents might have that could be of value. Include a list of questions with the meeting notice, such as:
 - Have there been changes at home that you want to share such as a new family member, a change in a parent's work schedule, new after-school activities or daycare arrangements?

- Are there new supports in place for the child such as a tutor or time spent with a mentor or older student?
 - Has there been a change in medication or dosage?
- Encourage parents to create a list of questions they want answered during the meeting.
- Arrange chairs and tables to establish an atmosphere of collaboration.
- Use chart paper and markers to record notes and decisions made during the meeting, and review the decisions at the end of the meeting.
- Value the information that parents share, and allow adequate time within meetings for thoughtful reflection and discussion.

■ Shine a light on students' strengths

- Recognize and communicate positives as well as concerns. Discussing the “bright side” of AD/HD (such as high energy, creative talents, powers of observation and sociability) can be helpful especially when parents and their child may be at a low point in coming to terms with this lifelong challenge.
- Ask parents about areas of interests and strengths, particularly activities the child successfully does at home for extended periods of time.
- Acknowledge the strategies that parents have developed to help them be successful, and encourage them to share these strategies with their child.
- Assure parents that strategies can be learned to limit the negative impact of AD/HD. Many students with AD/HD go on to have highly successful and rewarding lives.

■ Communicate about children's needs

- Observe, document and describe the behaviours that are having a negative impact on the child's learning and relationships.
- Provide concrete examples, such as: “John has difficulty completing work in class. For example, yesterday during math class he finished only 3 of 10 math questions—he was out of his seat several times to get materials, to sharpen his pencil and to chat with peers.”

- Describe rather than label, for example: “Shane tends to call out answers, sometimes before the question has been asked. He has lots of ideas and tends to interrupt the other children before they have a chance to speak.”
- Be nonjudgemental. The behaviours that you are describing are not “bad,” but they interfere with learning. This is particularly important because many parents of children with AD/HD have characteristics that are similar to those of their children; i.e., they may tend to be forgetful, miss parts of conversations and interrupt when others are speaking.
- Clarify the reasons for your concerns. While a particular behaviour may not seem unusual or problematic outside the school, it may create a difficulty for the student or others within the school setting. This distinction is important in establishing behavioural goals.

■ Monitor changes in behaviour in response to strategies, programming, accommodations or medical interventions

- Describe observed behaviours clearly, monitor changes carefully and adjust interventions as needed.
- Complete daily checklists if required to help in identifying effective management plans.
- Alert parents to any significant changes in their child’s behaviour.

■ Work with parents to create structure

- Encourage parents to focus on structure and routine at home. This approach enhances feelings of safety and security for the student who is challenged in his or her own management of time, materials and tasks. Predictability reduces the need for explanation, negotiation and potential conflict.
- Share information about expectations at school. Consistent expectations among those working with the student will increase the tendency to comply.

- Communicate with parents on a regular basis to keep them informed about their child’s positive and negative behaviour and progress.
- Discuss interventions that work well at school and can be adapted for home such as strategies for deflecting and absorbing “Yes, but ...” arguments. Some techniques can reduce the likelihood of adults becoming engaged in no-win arguments with a child who is resistant. For example:

When a student tries to debate a request such as “It’s time to put away the math blocks,” the adult can resist engaging in an argument by matter-of-factly stating, “Regardless, it is time to put away the math blocks.” Additional protests can be responded to with a firm “Nevertheless, it’s time to put the blocks away.”

- Use strategies in the classroom that parents have found to be successful at home.
- Encourage a consistent approach at home and at school in responding to students’ behaviour.
- Encourage parents to set up an appropriate study space at home and to equip it with essential materials.
- Encourage parents to establish routines for studying, for review of completed homework, and for periodic checks of notebooks and bookbags.

■ Communicate respect

- Be sensitive to the challenges of parenting a child or teen with AD/HD and the concerns of the family. Parents of children with AD/HD often feel a range of emotions about their child’s difficulties such as denial, frustration, worry, embarrassment, anger and even despair.
- Provide a positive perspective on individual differences and unique challenges.
- Develop rapport with the student to enhance the student’s willingness to change and develop improved work habits or more appropriate responses to situations.
- Acknowledge the potential for growth and improvement in addition to concerns and problems.

- Be sensitive to the possibility that a parent may have some characteristics of AD/HD and that this may cause some additional stress at home.

■ Help parents to develop knowledge about AD/HD

B-2

- Share information about AD/HD. For a list of books for parents, see Appendix B-2.
- Provide information about resources, community services, networks and support groups.
- Provide parents with tips for talking to their child about AD/HD.
- Share ideas for keeping informed about developments in the treatment and management of AD/HD (see Chapter 8 for more ideas).

■ Enhance home-school communication

- Early in the school year, set up a meeting with the student, parents and teachers.
- Follow up this face-to-face contact with notes, phone calls and e-mails about progress, problems or success.
- In multi-teacher settings, consider having one teacher take responsibility for tracking the student over the school year; e.g., monitoring homework agendas, resolving problems and celebrating successes.
- Consider daily or weekly use of a communication book signed by parents, the teacher and the student to ensure that parents are aware of issues that arise in class and teachers are aware of issues that arise at home.
- Ensure that positive messages are included frequently to limit discouragement.
- Contact parents regularly through telephone calls or e-mails. Discuss the preferred contact method (e.g., phone call, after-school check-ins, etc.) and the best times to contact one another. If using e-mail, it might also be helpful to discuss expectations for response time to questions or concerns.

■ Make homework an opportunity for communication

- Recognize that homework is often an area of family tension and conflict.
- Create assignments that are meaningful and provide independent practice for skills covered in class:
 - consider the difficulty of the work and the time for the child to complete the work (often students with AD/HD take two to three times as long to complete a task compared to their peers)
 - modify as necessary (for example, reduce the number of spelling words to study, assign only even-numbered math problems, allow tape-recorded responses).
- Avoid sending home unfinished class work as homework. If unfinished assignments during the school day are an ongoing issue, this challenge needs to be addressed in class. Parents should not be expected to fix this problem at home, especially because by evening many children will be overtired and/or medication may not be in effect.
- Set up routines and reminders to ensure that students record assignments in a homework agenda and have the materials needed. Provide clear guidelines and timelines.
- Break down large or complex assignments into chunks with timelines for the completion of each part.
- Set up routines and reminders to assist students to hand in homework. Check completed homework and return it with feedback as soon as possible.
- Encourage parents to
 - set a regular time for homework or develop a weekly homework schedule
 - provide a quiet workplace and materials
 - review the recorded assignments with the child
 - assist the child in planning the tasks for the evening
 - schedule breaks or reward completing tasks with a break
 - emphasize the positive by looking for the things the child has done correctly and give positive feedback

- encourage independence. The focus should be first on assisting children to start on homework, and then on being available to provide encouragement. Children also might need help breaking down difficult tasks or clarifying directions. If the child uses accommodations at school, encourage parents to provide them at home (e.g., use of a computer or spellchecker, help with unfamiliar words, etc.)
 - let the teacher know if the homework is too confusing or difficult for the child to do or if it is taking too long (e.g., more than one hour a night at the grades 4–6 level).
- If homework completion becomes an issue, work with students and their parents to come up with alternate solutions.

■ Work with parents to generate solutions

- Establish that the child’s best interests and priority needs must be what drive decision making and planning.
- Express your own dedication to resolving the differences for future mutual benefit (e.g., “I appreciate your willingness to ...” or “I’m committed to finding a plan that will work for everyone”).
- Deal specifically with solutions to the identified issues and be prepared to offer alternatives.
- Focus on the issues, and not the emotions and personalities involved.
- Sometimes a disagreement occurs as a direct result of misunderstanding. Always clarify exactly what the issue is before jumping ahead to solutions.
- Give parents opportunities to state their understanding of the situation and then paraphrase what you have heard. Ensure your understanding of their concerns and perspectives is accurate.
- Decide what you can compromise on. Effective resolution usually requires some form of compromise by both parties.
- Be sure that your expectations are realistic and reasonable.
- Explicitly state you are committed to the agreed-upon solutions and encourage parents to also do this.

A-2

See Appendix A-2 for more information on solution-focused meetings, including a sample meeting planner.

Resources for parents

There are a number of Alberta Education print and online resources that can provide information and ideas parents can use to participate in their child's education. All of these resources are available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre at www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca/ or telephone (780) 427-2767. The more current resources can also be downloaded at no cost from the Alberta Education Web site.

FYI

The Parent Advantage: Helping Children Become More Successful Learners at Home and School, Grades 1-9 (1998) includes strategies parents can use to help their child improve organizational, reading, writing, spelling, math, test-taking and project skills. Available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre.

The Learning Team: A Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs (2003) provides practical information on building a learning team, the IPP process, transition planning, resolving differences and keeping informed. The handbook can be downloaded as a PDF file from Alberta Education's Web site at

FYI

www.education.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/speced/partners.

The Journey: A Handbook for Parents of Children Who are Gifted and Talented (2004) offers information and strategies that parents can use to nurture their child's learning and emotional well-being at home, in school and in the community. It includes a section on gifted children with AD/HD. It can be downloaded as a PDF file from Alberta Education's Web site at

FYI

www.education.gov.ab.ca/K_12/curriculum/resources/TheJourney/journey.asp.