

## 6

# Building Connections and Creating Hope

*“Creating a connected life takes time, and it requires work to maintain it over a lifetime ... A balanced, connected life leads to a sturdy kind of joy that hard times cannot easily strike down.”*

– Hallowell and Ratey 2005, p. 185

The reality is, AD/HD can create difficult challenges for students, families and teachers. But there is a bright side: these same challenges of AD/HD can actually be character-defining gifts. And for some students, AD/HD can even be a springboard to creativity, innovation and breakthrough thinking. Encouraging students and their parents to see the positive in AD/HD can go a long way in preventing patterns of negative experience. Teachers can contribute to these positive effects by providing opportunities for students and parents to:

- create connectedness
- rethink AD/HD
- build on strengths
- provide a safe and caring environment
- foster areas of interests
- increase students’ understanding of AD/HD.

## Create connectedness

One of the most important ways to create a positive, hopeful outlook is to help students feel a sense of connectedness. Connectedness can mean different things for different students, whether it is having friends in the classroom, belonging to a club, feeling passionate about an activity or caring for a pet. The important thing is that students feel like they are “part of something positive, something larger than [themselves]” (Hallowell and Ratey 2005, p. 183).

### SAMPLE STRATEGIES

#### ■ Show that you believe in students

- Make time to talk to students individually about their strengths, talents, interests, goals and needs. Ask students how they learn best and what will help them be more successful learners and connected in the school environment.
- Support and involve students’ parents and families. Family is the core connection for most children.
- Encourage students to participate in meaningful activities in and out of the classroom. Both group and solitary activities, such as painting or reading, can create a feeling of connectedness if students feel passionate about them.

## Rethink AD/HD

As teachers, our own perspective on AD/HD can make a big difference in how we interact with students and how they feel about themselves. By reframing judgements of the behaviour of students with AD/HD into more compassionate terms, we can build more positive relationships and make better instructional choices. Consider how rethinking AD/HD may be helpful for you and your students.

## Mental shifts about AD/HD<sup>20</sup>

### From seeing the child as ...

Bad, annoying  
Unwilling  
Lazy, unmotivated

Trying to get attention  
Inappropriate  
Doesn't try

Mean  
Doesn't care  
Refuses to sit still  
Resisting  
Trying to annoy me  
Showing off

### To understanding the child as ...

Challenged, having a low tolerance for frustration  
Unable  
Tired of failing and feeling helpless, does not know where or how to begin  
Needing contact, support, reassurance  
Unaware  
Can't get started, can't sustain attention, easily confused  
Defensive, hurt, unhappy  
Can't show feelings  
Overstimulated  
Doesn't "get it," frustrated, embarrassed, anxious  
Can't remember  
Having poor judgement, overcompensating, unaware of impact on others

Rethinking AD/HD can shift how teachers see their roles and their relationships with students. It could result in professional shifts such as the examples below.

### Professional shifts from focusing on:

Stopping behaviours	to	preventing problems, limiting poor choices
Behaviour modification	to	modelling, using visual cues
Changing people	to	changing environments, changing strategies

## Build on strengths

People with AD/HD can achieve great things once they learn to channel their energy in positive ways. They often become creative and resourceful learners out of necessity.

20. Adapted with permission from Diane Malbin, "Paradigm Shifts and FASD" (Portland, OR: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Consultation, Education and Training Services, Inc., 1997) and from Diane Malbin, *Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Trying Differently Rather than Harder* (Portland, OR: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Consultation, Education and Training Services, Inc., 1999), p. 42.

Many people with AD/HD also feel that their energetic and creative ways give them unique advantages. People with AD/HD often have traits such as divergent thinking, spontaneity, creativity, inquisitiveness, intuitiveness, resourcefulness and resilience. A good sense of humour and willingness to do things in untraditional ways can also serve them well. These individuals can experience great success by choosing career options that build on these types of unique strengths and abilities. For example, the drive for excitement and stimulation may lead to success in such areas as business, entertainment, sports and public speaking. The ability to think about many things at once can bring success in areas of art and innovation.

### SAMPLE STRATEGIES

#### ■ Appeal to students' individual strengths and interests

- Seek information about students' interests and passions. Provide opportunities based on their interests.
- Provide choices in projects and assignments that encourage students to use and demonstrate their strengths.
- Provide specific feedback about interests and strengths. Show students you notice and value what they are doing.

### Provide a safe environment

Many students with AD/HD are on what Mel Levine calls "a [daily] mission to save face" (2002, p. 286). It is essential that these students have a safe, supportive classroom environment and that teachers protect them from situations where they will feel humiliated or belittled.

### SAMPLE STRATEGIES

#### ■ Create a classroom environment that is welcoming to all students

- Foster an atmosphere in which all students feel that it is safe to make mistakes without fear of ridicule or criticism.

- Provide opportunities for students to voice their feelings, concerns and ideas through journal writing, discussions, class meetings and one-to-one meetings with the teacher.

## Foster areas of interest

Students with AD/HD may be frustrated with many of the activities they have to do in school. It is important that these students find activities that they feel successful about either inside or outside the classroom. Developing areas of interest gives students the opportunity to experience joy, build confidence and feel a sense of connectedness.

### SAMPLE STRATEGIES

#### ■ Recognize and respect students' self-selected areas of interest

- Provide opportunities for students to deepen their knowledge in an area of interest. As students gain knowledge, they may gain passion, motivation and confidence.
- Provide opportunities for students to discover activities that grab their imagination and seem like “play” to them. This exploration can lead to the discovery of areas of talent and strength.
- Celebrate students' expertise. Recognizing their depth of knowledge about a subject contributes to students' intellectual self-confidence or “feeling smart.”
- Provide students with opportunities to participate in school activities that showcase their strengths to peers (e.g., art, music, drama, physical education).
- Encourage students to join groups, teams or organizations that let them pursue their interests at school or in the community. Help them develop the social skills (e.g., taking turns, listening to others) that are essential to being an effective group member.

## Increase students' understanding of AD/HD

An important way to create hope for students is to help them better understand AD/HD, including the positive side.

### SAMPLE STRATEGIES

#### ■ Create opportunities for students to learn about AD/HD

- Describe the student's difficulties in realistic but positive terms. For example, Hallowell describes a hyperactivity/impulsivity type of AD/HD with the following metaphor:

"... your brain is turbocharged. That means it can go really, really fast. The only problem is that sometimes it can't put on the brakes. And sometimes it needs special motor oil so it won't overheat and break down. But with the right motor oil and the right brakes, it wins lots of races" (Hallowell and Ratey 2005, p. 129).

- Encourage students to discuss the impact AD/HD may have on school and in other parts of life. Consider the ideas for putting a positive spin on AD/HD in the following "A Minus May Be A Plus!" chart, developed by Calgary Learning Centre.<sup>21</sup>

#### A Minus May Be A Plus!

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| • Hyperactive and can't sit still      | • Lots of energy and drive                  |
| • Distractible and can't focus         | • Notices everything around them            |
| • Talks too much in class              | • Very social and relates well to people    |
| • Can't keep mind on homework          | • Fascinated by the natural world           |
| • Wastes hours on computer games       | • Can throw themselves into projects        |
| • Stubborn and argumentative           | • Independent; knows own mind               |
| • Never plans ahead; impulsive         | • Thinks on feet and able to react quickly  |
| • Doesn't have the discipline to study | • Learns quickly through watching and doing |
| • Never finishes things                | • Good initiator of new projects            |
| • Is lost in daydreams                 | • Has tons of creative ideas                |

21. Adapted with permission from the Calgary Learning Centre (Calgary, Alberta, 2000).

## Building Connections and Creating Hope

- Tell positive stories about individuals and how their AD/HD affected their lives. For example:

David Neelan has an interesting story. As a result of his AD/HD, David often arrived at the airport only to find he had somehow misplaced his ticket. The experience inspired him to invent the electronic ticket. The result? David is now the CEO of upstart JetBlue Airlines, and the rest of us enjoy the benefits of ticketless travel.

- Encourage students with AD/HD to generate a list of positive qualities associated with AD/HD. Consider the following list Calgary Learning Centre generated in their work with youth affected by AD/HD.<sup>22</sup>

### Ten Good Things about People with AD/HD

- Lots of energy
- Can do several things at one time
- Ask good questions
- Have interesting answers
- Good sense of humour
- See details that other people may miss
- Can think of different ways to do things
- Enthusiastic
- Imaginative and creative
- Sensitive and compassionate

- Provide books on AD/HD that students can read and discuss with their families. For example:

Beal, Eileen. *Everything You Need to Know about ADD/AD/HD*. New York, NY: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 1998.

Galvin, Matthew. *Otto Learns about His Medicine*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2001.

Kraus, Jeanne. *Cory Stories: A Kid's Book about Living with ADHD*. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2005.

Nadeau, Kathleen G. and Ellen B. Dixon. *Learning to Slow Down and Pay Attention: A Book for Kids about AD/HD*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2005.

22. Adapted with permission from the Calgary Learning Centre (Calgary, Alberta, 2000).

Quinn, Patricia O. *Putting on the Brakes: Young People's Guide to Understanding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2001.

B-1

See Appendix B-1 for more information on these books for children and young people with AD/HD.