

**Professor Susan Young, BSc, PhD, DClinPsy, CPsychol, CSci, AFBPS
HCPC Registered Clinical and Forensic Psychologist No. PYL22718
BPS Specialist Register of Clinical Neuropsychologists No. 0005388618294**

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH NEURODEVELOPMENTAL CONDITIONS

Strategies to help the child to focus and sustain attention

Personal responsibility – the following techniques refer to young children with ADHD but as they move into adolescence, they should be encouraged to take personal responsibility for study routines and social behaviour.

Gain attention – before you ask a question or give an instruction, call the child by name.

Giving instructions – ensure these are brief and concise. Avoid vague unclear requests by breaking down a request into a clear series of steps. Ask the child to repeat what is required in order to ensure the child fully understands what is required. Long, complicated instructions should also be broken down, but they should always be supplemented in written and/or visual format (e.g. abstract illustrations). Check the child has understood what is required, by asking them to repeat it!

Remove and avoid distraction – when engaged in home study and/or needing to focus on important tasks, remove any technology from eyesight or reach. Think of the environment and make changes to reduce opportunity for distraction e.g. facing a window, door or corridor. If a child lacks maturity to self-regulate their use of technology, parents should impose limits on its use (e.g. applying parental controls and/or via 'house rules').

White noise – some children struggle with silence and may be better supported for home study (and sleep) by wearing headphones with soft music. This is because it is preferable to cancel out extraneous stimuli with 'predictable noise' in cases where this cannot be controlled.

Focus – Fiddle and Fidget toys are tools designed to sustain attention and sensory input, and counter restlessness. It needs to be used when needed, such as in the classroom or when doing homework and when the child has completed the task it should be put away.

Visual aids – supplement verbally presented material with visually presented material (e.g. pictures, icons, cue cards).

Create space – look around you. Is it an optimal environment that minimises opportunity for distraction? Clear the room of unnecessary clutter. Change the environment by moving a desk and/or chair away from a window, door, or corridor.

Avoid losing/misplacing items - designate specific areas to put important items that are easily misplaced, such as keys, travel pass, credit cards, membership cards. This could be in a draw or by the front door.

Minimise distraction – switch off the phone and put it away out of sight until the task is done. Try noise cancellation headphones. Some children can't tolerate silence and need low level noise to concentrate; you can access apps for 'white noise' and/or calming background music to play in the background. This may be especially helpful to sleep at night.

Strategies to help the child to get stuff done

Routine and structure – setting and adhering to a structure and routine will help the child to be better organised.

Set goals – determine clear and achievable short-term goals. Set weekly targets and assignments and, together with the child, review them at the end of each week.

Break goals into steps – organise, plan and execute plans by breaking down tasks into smaller steps and focus on one step at a time, starting with the first step and working up towards the goal.

Planning and Organisation – encourage the use of timetables, diaries, checklists, and alarms to help with planning and organisation. It may be helpful to have a pinboard or whiteboard in their room to list homework tasks and revision topics; this can be erased when completed.

Prioritise important tasks – teach the child to think about 'what MUST I do today....what can wait until tomorrow?' and to order your tasks according to their priority (you don't have to physically move them around but you can put a 'T' for 'today' next to that day's tasks). Don't forget to tick them off!

Post-its – put important information and reminders on post-its and place them where they can be clearly seen and followed on a daily basis.

Reminders – students often have difficulty planning their work; they leave everything to the last minute and rush through it, often making lots of careless errors and sometimes not completing it at all. They miss deadlines, especially for topics in which they have limited interest. External reminders and checks (by parents/carers), imposing structure and study routines, and giving frequent praise and rewards will be helpful. Electronic reminders may also be helpful.

Regular breaks – when engaged in home study, take regular breaks of 5 minutes every 30-60 minutes (depending on the child's tolerance to focus). The break should not involve use of technology but may include a movement break (see above) or a restful break in another room. Use a timer/alarm to ensure a short break doesn't become a long break.

Troubleshoot – prepare for difficulties and contingencies by thinking in advance of things that might impede progress and identify ways to overcome these obstacles.

Strategies to improve behaviour

Harness strengths – realise your child's strengths and encourage them to engage in activities that will develop them. This will optimise success and cultivate a sense of pride and achievement

Disclosure - A lack of social skills, an atypical style of social communication and/or a difficulty regulating emotions may lead to misunderstandings. For example, they may be perceived by others to be rude. Unless a diagnosis is disclosed, their behaviour may be misinterpreted and poorly understood leading to rejection and/or social withdrawal. Furthermore, without disclosure, you will not be entitled to any reasonable adjustments that may be appropriate at school.

Skills rehearsal – prepare the child for specific events (such as going to a restaurant) by telling them what to expect. Forewarned is forearmed! Practice social skills with the child by rehearsing appropriate routines and behaviours in role plays. This should include reading social cues, interpreting verbal tone of voice and generating appropriate comments as this will help the child avoid misunderstanding the intentions and emotions of others.

Sanctions – Try to ignore minor inappropriate behaviour where possible. Pick your battles! If discipline is required be mindful not to appear to single out or stigmatising the child; if possible, try to do this away from siblings (and in classroom settings, outside of the class environment).

Feedback – provide frequent, immediate, and consistent feedback about performance and behaviour.

Get active – incorporate daily exercise in the child's routine (e.g. go for a walk). When possible, do this with the child as this will help everyone!

Sleep – the rule is no screens (tv, phone, computer, tablet), caffeine or alcohol for one hour before bedtime. Have a consistent routine for getting ready to bed. This will tell the body it is bedtime. Use white noise if needed (see ‘Minimise Noise’ above). Use Central Control (see link in further information section below) to help relax if the child has difficulty drifting off. For older children, no napping in the day – this confuses (and can reverse) the night-time sleep cycle.

Assertiveness – if the child is highly compliant teach them to learn to say no in a polite manner without hurting someone’s feelings and/or how to reach a position of compromise.

Star Chart – for young children, behavioural problems can be managed by introducing a Star Chart. Stars are awarded for good behaviour, effort and/or achievement. The child can be awarded small rewards that build up to larger reward. For an example, see ‘Do’s, Don’ts and Rewards: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Children with ADHD’ (see further information below to obtain a link).

Strategies to manage stress and negative emotions

Coping statements – teach your child to engage in positive self-talk to help them cope through distressing times. Replacing negative or anxiety-provoking thoughts with positive thoughts (e.g. I can do this, I am doing the best that I can, I am good enough) will help prevent them from becoming stressed and overwhelmed and promote self-worth and self-efficacy

Sensory overload – for children who have specific sensitivities or aversions, whenever possible avoid what can be predicted. For example, instead of using appliances during the day, use them late at night when the child is asleep. Avoid brightly lit places. In some contexts, noise cancelling headphones may be helpful to counter hypersensitivity to background noise.

Social skills – some children may find particular contexts highly demanding. Some have the skills for socialising efficiently but they are not interested or motivated to make friends, preferring to spend time alone engaged in solo occupations. As a rule of thumb, if it’s not causing distress, don’t force it.

Stay calm – combat stress and anxiety by applying Central Control. This is a psychological intervention that induces relaxation of mind and body by teaching breathing techniques, progressive muscle tension/relaxation techniques and mindfulness (see further information section below to obtain a link).

Get help - Liaise with school SENCO and/or learning support staff at school to aid consistency across settings.

Strategies for school

Optimise the environment – the child may benefit from a quiet, distraction-free environment and regular rest breaks for tests and examinations. Classroom adaptations may be required for children who are hypersensitive to specific stimuli (e.g. sound, lighting).

Minimise distraction – and help the child to sustain attention by placing them at the front of the class and away from a window.

Focus – permit the child to use Fiddle toys and Fidgets in class. These are tools designed to sustain attention and sensory input, and counter restlessness.

Checks and prompts – children are able to focus and concentrate on tasks for a short period, but it takes a huge amount of effort to sustain that, especially if it is a task in which they lack interest. To help a young person stay on task, check in on them at regular intervals and give prompts to re-focus. This will also help them at home when completing homework.

Give praise – for giving attention and listening. This feedback could be giving an acknowledgement that they are on task and doing well. When you do this, it is motivating and reinforcing.

Movement breaks – whenever possible provide an opportunity for movement breaks. This may be achieved by asking the child to engage in an active helpful chore, such as handing out worksheets, wiping the board, and/or by allowing them to stand and stretch. If the whole class does the latter, this will not draw specific attention to the child.

Visual aids – supplement verbally presented material with visually presented material (e.g. pictures, icons, cue cards). For young children, have the class timetable on the wall and refer to it. This helps the child maintain awareness of activities.

Maintain engagement – this can be achieved by regularly asking questions in. Alternatively, if the teacher notices attention is wavering (e.g. appearing to daydream) and/or is going off-task, a change of voice (in volume or tone) or making a loud noise (such as a sudden clap) may help to redirect attention.

Communication - speak slowly and break important information into small, management chunks. Reinforce a 'message' by including visual support (e.g. gestures and actions).

Written support – ensure important information and homework tasks are supplemented by written communication. Check at the end of class to ensure that the child knows what is expected.

Coping statements – promote positive self-talk to overcome feelings of distress and frustration such as (e.g. I can do this, I am doing the best that I can, I am good enough). This will foster self-worth and self-efficacy

Harness strengths – realise the child’s strengths and encourage them to engage in extra-curricular activities that will develop them. This will optimise success and cultivate a sense of pride and achievement

Further Reading and Information

- a) Psychoeducational resources for parents and carers (including ‘Do’s, Don’ts and Rewards: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Children with ADHD’) are available to download free of charge from my website (see resources for service-users section): <http://www.psychology-services.uk.com/service-users>
- b) My YouTube channel (Dr Susan Young).
- c) Take a look at ‘Spot it and Sort it – learn how to help your child”. Here I describe specific cognitive and behavioural techniques that address difficulties associated with stress, anxiety, inattention, frustration and anger, hyperactivity, impulsivity, low mood and depression. Other topics will help the child to manage social relationships and learn life skills to help them to solve problems, set goals and plan for the future. Available on my Teachable platform: <https://professor-susan-young-psychology-services.teachable.com>
- d) Central control relaxation link: <https://www.psychology-services.uk.com/central-control.htm>
- e) Although written for healthcare practitioners, I have received feedback from clients that my book is user friendly and helpful as it is full of advice and strategies. It is available from Amazon: Cognitive-behavioural Therapy for ADHD in Adolescents and Adults: A Psychological Guide to Practice 2nd Edition. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd (written by Susan Young and Jessica Bramham): https://www.amazon.com/Cognitive-Behavioural-Therapy-ADHD-Adolescents-Adults/dp/1119960738/ref=sr_1_1?crid=26ZIWZJ623DSK&keywords=young+bramham+adhd+cognitive+therapy&qid=1671205802&srefix=young+bramham+adhd+cognitive+therapy%2Caps%2C181&sr=8-1
- f) Guidance for parents, carers and teachers can be found in ‘Helping Children with ADHD: A CBT Guide for Practitioners, Parents and Teachers’ (written by Susan Young and Jade Smith): https://www.amazon.co.uk/Helping-Children-ADHD-Practitioners-Teachers/dp/1118903188/ref=sr_1_1?crid=12PCVLA5KF9X&keywords=young+smith+CBT+adhd&qid=1671205933&srefix=young+smith+cbt+adhd%2Caps%2C132&sr=8-1
- g) For information about the difficulties females (both children and adults) experience with ADHD and how healthcare practitioners may help them, take a look at the expert consensus statement about females with ADHD. This is available in an open

access publication (i.e. it is free to download): Young et al., (2020) Females with ADHD: An expert consensus statement taking a lifespan approach providing guidance for the identification and treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in girls and women. *BMC Psychiatry*, 20, 404: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02707-9>.

- h) For information about the difficulties experienced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and ADHD and how healthcare practitioners may help them, take a look at the expert consensus statement about individuals with ASD and ADHD. This is available in an open access publication (i.e. it is free to download): Young et al (2020) Guidance for identification and treatment of individuals with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder based upon expert consensus. *BMC Medicine*, 18:146: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-020-01585-y>

- i) See also ‘ADHD Insights with Professor Susan Young’ consisting of three clinical presentations about (1) Females with ADHD, (2) ADHD and Autism and (3) the Risks of Untreated ADHD and the Benefits of Treated ADHD. These can be viewed on my Teachable platform: <https://professor-susan-young-psychology-services.teachable.com>