Kids with ADHD Go Back to School: A Letter to Teachers is the Write Start

by the Staff of the NYU Child Study Center

Introduction

For most kids, going back to school means getting a new notebook and new supplies. It also means getting ready to meet new teachers. For kids with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), the beginning of school can be a time of apprehension. Some parents of children with ADHD have found that when they talk to teachers before the start of the school year, their children are likely to have a positive school experience. It’s important, however, to be aware of the content of what you tell them and the process of how you tell them. Here are some guidelines:

Providing a factual perspective

On a formal level, you may wish to: share brief, accurate and interesting books, articles and pamphlets concerning ADHD with teachers; consider donating copies to the school’s staff library, if feasible. Be sure to identify aspects in the material that relate particularly well to your child, and also identify the parts that don’t. For example, many teachers are unaware that ADHD can manifest in various ways, that there are different subtypes. Some children may be motorically restless and inattentive; others may be inattentive but not hyperactive. Provide material of different lengths and formats so that teachers can read as much or as little as they want. Decide which official documents, such as psychological and educational reports and Individual Education Plans (IEP), you want teachers to review, and provide them with copies when appropriate.

Providing a personal perspective through letters

It’s important to set the stage for the teacher to see the child as an individual, separate from whatever previous ideas or information they have. It has often been helpful for parent and child to write individualized personal letters to teachers as a way to communicate this information. Many families have found letter writing to be a wonderful process that brings the child closer to his or her teachers on a more personal level - a level that facilitates more personal connections among teacher, child and parent. The letter is a chance to present the child as an individual, not just a child with ADHD.

As a parent, your letter should include a description of your child, identifying which subtype of ADHD he or she has and specifying the characteristics of the subtype that
your child displays. You might also describe what treatment is being used, the people on the treatment team and the treatment itself, including information about behavior plans and medications currently in use and any that have been discontinued. Describe the strategies that you and previous teachers have found to be helpful, such as advance warnings about schedule changes or touch prompts. Also specify techniques that have not worked or have even backfired. Include other personal information: your child’s likes, dislikes, hobbies, strengths, weaknesses and accomplishments.

In a letter from your child to his/her teacher(s), you might try to help your child identify, in his or her own words, what ADHD is, how it affects him or her, and what helps him or her to learn best in class. Letters like the ones described above enable children to educate their teachers about themselves and their ADHD, rather than waiting for the disorder to manifest itself in a negative context, and they tend to evoke an empathic response from teachers. The letters to teachers that follow were written by children with ADHD. They reflect different developmental stages and levels of insight into ADHD, but they all give teachers insight into the children as individuals.

**Letter 1: Child Age 12**

I just want to inform you that I have a problem. My problem is I have ADD. ADD stands for Attention Deficit Disorder. If you don’t know what that means, I will tell you. It is a kind of disease that makes you hyper and not concentrate to my full power. I take medicine for it and it helps me a great deal. But there is two things that I can not help and that is I can not sit in one place for more than fifteen minutes. I have a very easy solution for that which is every fifteen or twenty minutes I move or walk to the back. (I have one teacher that doesn’t know I have this and she gets very mad when I get up and she doesn’t let me get up.) The other thing is sometimes I daydream and there is a very easy solution for that. It is to whenever it looks like I’m spacing off say something like “Wake up,” to me.

**Letter 2: Child Age 13**

How the Ritalin helped me get from my worst day of my life to the best day of my life

One day I was sitting and thinking what was my worse day of my life. Well it went back to 5th grade in my school. It was the day before games day (It was the day we would play games the whole period) when my teacher came and told me I couldn’t come to games day instead I had to work while my class had games day. So my Parents came down to speak with him. He told my Parents that I had Problems. For the next few weeks my life went downhill. I had trouble at home. My teacher kicked me out of his class for good. I had trouble in my Urdu studies my life was a total wreck. Until one day my mother told me I got you a psychologist which was the day of new beginning for my good life.

When I started with my Psychologist he went over a lot of things with me and one time he confronted me about Ritalin which was the best thing. The day I started
Ritalin my Imam called my mother and asked her what she had done to me to make me learn so well. So my mother told him about Ritalin and he said for a joke I wish I could make some. So, from then on it has been going pretty good. Now I got a job at a camp with a two week trial and if I do good I could stay. Now I am working there on my second year going on my third year and I love it. That was the best day of my life.

**Letter 3: Child Age 8**

I learned that getting my work done isn’t such a pain. When I am working I get bored and then I try to do something a little more fun because the work on the board and stuff, like math, textbooks, it’s really a pain. It gets very boring and my attention goes to something else, like drawing characters. If I am bored I have a sudden urge for drawing, because I love to draw. That’s why sometimes I may not get my work done.

I go to a helper. He’s given me some advice for a little celebration. If I get all my work done in school, I feel good.

_Could you help me on “My Work” chart? Every day, whatever I finish with the class, and whatever I finish later, could you help me fill this out?_

**Communication is the key**

This early and open communication among children, teachers and parents has several benefits.

1. It decreases the time it takes for a new teacher to work effectively with the child.
2. It presents the child as approachable, likable and easier to connect with.
3. It begins the process of open communication.
4. It provides an opportunity to empower children to deal with their ADHD. They can get an early start in advocating for themselves, which will serve them well throughout their school years and beyond.

**Recommended Reading**