

SKILL BUILDING WITH THE ADHD CHILD: AN INVITATION FOR PARENTS

Over the last twenty years, I have had the opportunity, challenge, and privilege of working with ADHD children and their parents. These parents have to assume many roles.... advocate, tutor, disciplinarian. Another role that I see many parents assume is that of “skill builder”. This role of “skill builder” is similar to that of a coach. Parents who are skill builders view their child’s particular difficulties as a “skill deficits” rather than as deliberate non-compliance or as permanent problems.

Some “skill deficits” that are often seen in ADHD children are:

Difficulty in identifying and appropriately expressing feelings.

Difficulty in being able to calm down and relax once upset.

Difficulty in the ability to stop, think, and consider alternatives before choosing a course of action.

Difficulty in understanding social cues – using and responding to nonverbal language.

Difficulty in planning ahead and being future-oriented.

“Skill building” takes a positive approach to these areas of difficulty. Unlike lecturing or discipline (the usual method of correcting “problems”), skill building can engage the child’s interest, enthusiasm, and motivation to change. If you would like to be a “skill builder” for your child, consider some of these methods that other parents have found success with:

Hold regular family meetings. I am often asked if I have a magic wand in what I do. Obviously the answer, is “no”. However, regular family meetings can have some magical outcomes. I recommend meeting on a regular basis to give compliments, discuss issues, and solve problems. In this way, parents teach children to appropriately express thoughts and feelings, to plan ahead, and to use discussion and brainstorming as a means of considering alternatives and solving problems.

Use games and activities to teach social skills. The “lecture mode” turns kids off. (Rolling of the eyes, sighing, shrugging the shoulders are usually signs that the child has hit the “off” button). However, ask the child to do an activity or play a game, and the response will be much different. Activities and games that teach are great ways for children to learn new skills. For example, many ADHD children have difficulty identifying and expressing their feelings. When we ask them **how** they feel, we may get “I don’t know”. Yet, if we can involve the child in **making a “feelings game”**, we can teach a “feelings vocabulary” and also initiate a discussion about how to deal with emotions. This game could be as simple as writing feeling words on individual pieces of paper and having each family member choose a word, draw a picture to go with it, and tell about a time he or she experienced that feeling.

Think of yourself as a “coach” or “teacher”. Break the skill you want to teach into smaller parts and teach each part systematically. Use praise and encouragement for effort and for success at each step of the way. Use visual aids (lists, charts, diagrams, calendars) to help teach a skill. Use “positive practice” – practicing the skill over and over until it becomes second nature. For example, relaxation skills can be broken down in to 1) removing self from stimulation, 2) utilizing deep breathing and muscle relaxation, and 3) soothing the mind with calming images and positive “self-talk.” In group therapy sessions, I have taught relaxation skills and children have told me that was the favorite activity of the group. A simple “stop sign” on a piece of paper can become a visual cue to help a child remember to relax. The child can surround the stop sign with his or her own “calming down” words. Some children are eventually able to visualize the stop sign and calming words in their minds as needed.

Even if a particular technique doesn’t immediately result in the desired outcome, the message that the child gets from the parent using the skill-building approach is valuable in itself. Using a systematic skill-building approach, rather than relying on lecturing and punishing, will help to instill a positive attitude and to boost self esteem. Some skills will be learned quickly, others will take much more time and energy, along with a concerted effort on everyone’s part. Athletic coaches know this, and parents need to recognize this as well.

In summary, being a “skill builder” offers parents the opportunity to teach valuable and effective “life skills” to their children. I invite you to become a “skill builder” today!!!!

Resources for Parents

Videos

Why Won’t My Child Pay Attention? by Dr. Sam Goldstein

Learning Disabilities and Social Skills...Last One Picked... First One Picked On, by Richard Lavoie

Books

Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success by Marshall Duke, Ph.D., Stephen Nowicki, Jr, Ph.D., and Elisabeth A. Martin, M.Ed.

Getting Along: Awareness Activities That Teach Responsibility, Self Respect, and Respect for Others by Anne W. Millyard and Rick Wilks

Stick Up For Yourself! Every Kid’s Guide to Personal Power and To Positive Self Esteem, by Gershen Kaufman, Ph.D. and Lev Paphael, Ph.d.