

ASSISTING CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION PROBLEMS THROUGH LIFESTYLE CHANGES

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INTRODUCTION:

Parents and teachers often ask me for suggestions related to keeping children off medication when concerns about their maintaining attention are expressed. The following ideas have been gleaned from years of experience and research. They all relate to lifestyle changes that can have a positive impact, especially when children's problems do not have a biochemical, neurological base to them.

The suggestions are practical and workable. However, they are not always easy to implement, given our hurried, pressure-filled lives. At the same time, our most important responsibility is the development of physically healthy, emotionally stable, and spiritually attuned children. We must not substitute "pill popping" for good training. Therefore, our goal is to establish and maintain a lifestyle that will enhance the ability of our children to focus sufficiently so that they can achieve appropriate expectations, drug free to the extent possible.

The suggestions are outlined under various topical headings. They are the beginning points for consideration, any one of which could be discussed and implemented in greater detail. Each one is mentioned because of its high correlation to increasing attention, or to managing attention problems. To the degree that you can successfully implement the various strategies, you will notice that over time, life will become more positive, and successful, for your child.

My desire is that the suggestions prove beneficial as you train your child in the nurture (direction, discipline, structure, consistency) and admonition (love, acceptance, encouragement) of the Lord.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LIFESTYLE CHANGES KNOWN TO BE BENEFICIAL FOR CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION PROBLEMS:

1. Maintain strict control of diet.
 - a) Ensure three balanced meals daily, on a regular routine, with two to three healthy snacks. Good nutrition is the basic approach, with control of simple sugars and carbohydrates. While sugar is not shown in research to be a major factor for children in general, it relates to the issues of hypoglycemia, where there are highs and lows as a function of sugar metabolism. Some sugar eaten with meals seems okay, but should be avoided in high doses. Try to aim for less than 25 grams of carbohydrates at any one time. This means that cold drinks, fruit juice, snacks, candy bars, desserts, etc., must be very limited and possibly prohibited.

- b) Breakfast is a must!! A child needs to be up early enough to get his brain alert and working. Sometimes exercise and bathing in the mornings helps. In any case, breakfast must consist of protein and complex carbohydrates. Brain chemicals are protein based. Since protein is not a storable substance in the body, it must be renewed each day. This is the purpose of breakfast (break the fast). The protein does not have to be a meat source. Oatmeal, interestingly enough, seems to be the best source and sustains an even level of blood sugar throughout the morning. However, eggs, cheese, pancakes made from batter blended with cottage cheese, etc., are all possibilities, along with foods not traditionally considered for breakfast such as pizza, grilled chicken burritos, etc.
 - c) Dietary supplements such as vitamins should be added—just a good multi-purpose one is fine. Also, we have some positive reports for a broad vitamin B regimen (e.g., Focus Smart or Child B Complex Vitamins) and supplements like ginkgo biloba. Check with your pediatrician for recommendations.
 - d) Be sure the child stays hydrated by encouraging him to drink lots of water. Soft drinks and fruit juice are not good options. Limit caffeine intake, as well as sugar. Also, food additives (coloring, etc.) are problematic for some children.
2. Be sure the child is getting sufficient sleep. Up to age eight, 10 to 12 hours; up to age 12, 9 to 11 hours; teens, 8 to 10 hours are the recommended amounts. Develop a regular routine of calm-down following the evening meal—baths, reading, listening to stories or music, sleep. If the child is restless, moving throughout the night, a morning deadhead, etc., you may want to consider going through a sleep clinic to determine if there are medical reasons for poor sleep patterns.
 3. Be sure there is a daily period of exercise sufficient to “break a sweat.” Jogging, sports, tennis, swimming, trampoline, karate, etc., are good possibilities.
 4. Restrict television and video games. Some concern exists that the flickering video image exacerbates attention problems. This is in addition to the brain-numbing, zone-out mindset that occurs while watching senseless programming. Even video games that improve eye-hand coordination at the surface level do not generally require deep memory and processing of information. Both may be the most unproductive activity that children can engage in. The recommendation is for less than two hours total per day.

5. Get rid of clutter and organize the child's living space.
 - a) Typically, these children are collectors; their rooms are messy, the things needed can't be found, etc. Be brutal in cleaning out anything that has not been used in the last month. Collectible items can be placed in clear containers and kept in a storage area, such as an unused closet or the garage. Only clothing that fits and will be worn should remain—the fewer items the better. Organize everything so that it has a place and is in its place.
 - b) The places should be logical—e.g., bathroom items together, school items together, a few games (with all the pieces) together, etc.
 - c) Especially limit the visual clutter until the child seems more settled and can handle greater stimulation. The same is true for other distractions, such as the television on in an adjoining room. Until the child learns how to sustain focus on the primary stimulus, you must purposefully eliminate competing stimuli.
 - d) Organize a space for study and homework. For example, two pencils that work are better than 14 of all varieties that, in turn, divert the child's attention. All visual and auditory distraction should be at a minimum.
 - e) Use color for organization. For example, a folder the same color as the science book holds the homework and assignments related to science.
6. In the same way, eliminate the clutter from the child's schedule.
 - a) Over-commitment and busyness are the nemesis of modern life. However, these are children that the moment you say "hurry up," they downshift into a lower gear. The more the pressure related to time, the worse they do.
 - b) Again, be brutal in eliminating activities from the schedule so as to create a calm, controlled, directed, purposeful environment.
 - c) Implement a fairly regimented, predictable routine for each day, then stick with it most of the time. Surprises are nice, but NOT when life seems out of control already.
7. Train your child to pay attention.
 - a) Make sure you have the child's attention (Look at my eyes.) before you begin to give directions or information. Don't increase the loudness of your voice or speak the same thing several times. Quietly move from calling the child's name once, to touching an arm, to lifting the chin, etc., until you have eye contact. If you are unsure that the child has understood, ask him to repeat the information. You may

need to break the information into smaller bits if repetition is necessary. You can also make a short list of simple directions on a strip of sticky-note paper that then becomes a reminder bracelet.

- b) Do not repeat directions several times. Work on the child attending and getting the directions right the first time—enough so as to be able to repeat/demonstrate them.
- c) Play games that require acute visual or auditory attention.
 - numbers, letters, words repeated forward, later backward
 - add on games where the first person starts with “Grandma went to the store and got some apricots.” The next person adds to the sentence. “Grandma went to the store and got some apricots and bananas.” The game continues with each person remembering the items and adding the next item related to the alphabet letter.
 - looking at a picture for two minutes then naming (spoken or written) everything they can remember seeing
 - games like Memory, Battleship, I Spy, etc., that require concentrated focus to be successful

8. Explain, coach and support.

- a) These children generally don’t make logical connections between actions and consequences. Often, when disciplined, they will insist that they don’t understand what they did wrong. It’s important for parents to discuss feelings, perceptions, what makes others react negatively when we behave in certain ways, etc. Otherwise, they just “don’t get it.” Practice good interaction skills with friends or within a group.
- b) Often, these children do not easily process auditory information—words are transient, spoken and gone. Therefore, add visual information to provide more stable information. Use a cartoon drawing, for example, showing three panels of an event. Discuss what happened, how people felt, what could change. Do not lecture! The less words, the better.
- c) Set up a cueing system for when the child is nearing the limit of what is acceptable. In school I would often lay my pen on the child’s desk as a cue to “get it together.” At home or in a crowd, use a look, physical closeness, holding a hand, etc., in a positive way in order to train the child to respond within appropriate expectations. When the desired behavior is demonstrated, secretly reinforce the child and remove the cue. Later at home, discuss the situation as to what was inappropriate and how the child could have handled it better.

- d) Break the criticism trap. Managing a child who has problems focusing and remembering can be very frustrating. Therefore, parents and teachers can easily get into a negative interaction cycle. For example, a child misbehaves. The parent scolds. The child responds. Because it seems to work, the parent will automatically try scolding again. However, in every subsequent event, its loudness and intensity must increase in order to get the same response from the child. Thus, the interactions become more and more negative. This is called a criticism trap.
 - e) Understand that the child often perceives the world as if at warp speed, thus making little sense. The stimuli are overwhelming in the amount of information that must be processed. Therefore, for her, life seems generally "out of control" and she is just trying to survive. Adding adults who are also "out of control" is a recipe for disaster. She is not purposefully trying to make your life difficult. What she needs is simplification, consistency and coaching.
 - f) Understand that when a child becomes emotionally stressed, his brain downshifts from the cognitive centers handling logic, planning, organization, etc., to responses solely based on feelings (usually panic, anger and discouragement). Therefore, when you become upset and critical, you completely undermine what you are trying to teach the child. When you find his, or your own, frustration level increasing, back off or take a break. Come back when you both are more settled and can calmly work together to solve mutual problems.
9. Help the child structure what needs to be accomplished.
- a) Establish simple routines for almost every part of the day. For example, a morning routine could consist of going to the bathroom, making her bed, picking up the room, dressing for breakfast, eating, brushing teeth, getting school bag, going to the car. Place the list on a chart and help the child follow the same regimen daily until it becomes habitual.
 - b) Maintain a family calendar with events listed, so that there are no surprises. Also post duty rosters, etc. These postings allow you to call attention to items for which the child is responsible without having to nag. Without your always has to be responsible for reminding others what they must do, they can simply check the chart.
 - c) The child should keep a personal organizer such as a list of homework, projects, etc., each day.
 - d) Work with the child to schedule time in relation to what must be accomplished. For example, discuss homework assignments and allot reasonable time to them. If needed, the child can use a timer. When the time has passed, that segment of work must be put away and the

child must proceed to the next task. If time remains at the end, the child can return to unfinished items. Otherwise, he can get up early the next morning or take the uncompleted work to school and expect to suffer the consequences.

- e) Remember that the work belongs to the child. You create “learned helplessness” when you take responsibility for his work. Encourage and coach—and obviously get help if there is a learning problem. However, self-esteem is built on the fact that a student is competent in his own life arena. Important life lessons are learned as he is grappling with and solving his own problems.
- f) Organize the night before for the next day in order to reduce the friction each morning. If getting dressed is a problem, lay out clothing. If making a clothing choice is a problem, reduce the options to two possibilities. If matching clothing is a problem, color code the inside tags in order to label acceptable combinations. Place book bags and all school assignments by the door. Make lunches and store them in the refrigerator. Try to think ahead enough to reduce the morning confusion to a minimum.
- g) Consider setting up a system of rewards for jobs well done. The system may need to be more explicit and detailed if the child is young or the problems have escalated into a negative cycle. Otherwise, just knowing that the privilege of going to the park on the weekend depends on a week of minimal problems can work wonders.
- h) Work with the child’s teacher to implement a reward/ punishment system, if the problems are evidenced at school. For example, she can send a simple report daily as to three to five targeted behaviors that you want to see improved. You then have the opportunity to discuss the day and structure expectations for the next day. After several successful days, reward the child’s performance.
- i) Arrange tutoring for minor learning difficulties or obtain individual educational therapy for more severe learning problems. Often it is best for someone other than parents to take this responsibility, especially if the parent-child relationship has been affected by the frustrations faced each day.

CONCLUSION:

While these suggestions are appropriate for all children, they are critical in working with a child with attention problems. At the same time, medical intervention may be necessary for a small percentage of children. The recommended life-style changes will assist these children but may not solve the underlying neurological basis of any Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder that may be present. For other children, consistent, high quality parenting incorporating these suggestions will be sufficiently effective so as to avoid medication, or at least make it a final option.