

## Developing Confidence in School When You Have ADHD

**Do you know why you have ADHD? ...Because you are extremely intelligent!** No, I am not being sarcastic. In fact, I could not be more sincere. Most people with ADHD have such a strong interest in a great variety of things, they have a hard time maintaining focus on one thing at a time. Of course, there are additional reasons too, but I am here to tell you that every person I know with ADHD (friends, relatives, and students) have an extraordinary number of talents and are all *extremely* bright. So, why do so many students with ADHD struggle in school?

**The traditional school environment is not very exciting for most students, but especially students with ADHD.** What they (and some of their teachers) fail to realize is that school is not boring because the information is too complex. On the contrary...school is boring because there is often not enough activity to keep their active minds engaged. One common characteristic of people with ADHD is that they learn best by doing; they prefer to get their hands on something and *figure out* how it works rather than *read about* how it works. They typically represent the epitome of “hands on, minds on” learners. However, in most school situations, there is way too much idle time sitting at desks.

**Many parents of students with ADHD say that their children do best when they can be involved in class by helping the teacher or having some type of leadership role. They thrive on projects and the opportunity to investigate the answer to a problem.** Case in point...If my 21-month old son’s feet aren’t moving, then his mind is. He will not hold still for 20 seconds to let me change him unless I can find something that he can hold in his hands and investigate. Already his pediatrician is on guard for ADHD. While we certainly understand this is a little premature, I can tell that he will have trouble in a traditional classroom setting because it seems these behaviors are part of his core personality.

### Is ADHD Really a Disorder?

**I have always hated the name “Attention Deficit *Disorder!*”** My observations, from knowing and working with dozens and dozens of

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friends, relatives, and students who have ADHD are that they just have to make some additional accommodations to function in our modern society. For example, I am left-handed and the whole world is backwards for me. I can never use scissors without looking like I have a physical disability. I always get ink smears on my hand when I write because my hand glides right over the freshly written words. When I have to sign my name on a credit card machine, the stylus is always anchored down on the wrong side of the machine and my signature looks like that of a kindergartner. The desks in college were all backwards for me so I had to learn how to write on my lap while looking like I was hunchback. Does this mean I have a disorder? Of course not! It just means that I need to make some accommodations and accept the fact that people will make fun of me when I use scissors or try to pay for my groceries. Technically, ADHD is a disorder because it is a medical condition caused by an imbalance of chemicals in the brain and can be treated medically, but the word “disorder” makes it sound as if there is something *wrong* with people who have ADHD. Au contraire. For most people, it is simply a process of making some adjustments.

## What Are Those Adjustments?

There are an infinite number of strategies and tricks that may be helpful for people who have ADHD and most will be a matter of what works best for each individual. However, there are three factors that are key to making any strategy successful:

**Develop healthy routines.** People with ADHD have a hard time creating structure within their own minds, so they must rely on structure from outside sources and develop habitual routines to help them keep track of their responsibilities and belongings. For example, one man I know with ADHD explained, “I was always leaving things behind in restaurants and stores; my wallet, keys, jacket, briefcase, diaper bag, etc. So I started getting in the habit of looking back every time I left a table, seat, or check-out counter to make sure I didn’t leave anything. It works well. I haven’t left anything behind in years!” Good routines to develop for school include using a planner, taking a few minutes at the end of every day to clean garbage out of your book bag and put papers in your folders, and gather everything you need for school the night before so you don’t forget anything in the chaos of the morning.

**Find a mentor.** When you are trying to develop routines and change habits to be successful in school, it is always helpful to have someone who can be your “sounding board,” who can help motivate you, and keep you focused. A good mentor should be a responsible and trusted adult or older student whom you trust; perhaps a neighbor, aunt/uncle, tutor, personal coach, community volunteer, peer counselor or student from a local high school or college. Try to avoid having your parent fill this role because you are likely to quickly perceive your parents as “nagging” you rather than encouraging you. A mentor may sometimes “nag,” but is often easier to take it from someone other than a parent.

Your mentor will help you identify some goals and check in with you every other day or two-three times per week to see what you are doing to reach those goals and offer you encouragement. They should be available to listen to you vent when you are frustrated and may have some suggestions to help you. Of course, your mentor will also be on hand to help you celebrate each of your accomplishments along the way, even the small ones.

**Take it one step at a time.** Try to figure out the one area that is causing you the greatest problem and work on this first. You may want to talk to your parents, teachers, and even your mentor to determine where to start. For example, if your teachers tell you that the main reason that your grades are falling is because you are not turning in your assignments, then you know that this is what you should try to improve first. Get help from your teachers, guidance counselors, parents, your mentor, and the Homework Rx® Toolkit at our website to help you determine strategies that will help you with this *one* problem. Give it one or two months and then identify the next problem.

**Do not give up!** Everyone has moments when they fall backwards as they try to reach their goals. -Everyone from straight-A students to the CEO of a major company. This is a natural part of life. The key for anyone to be successful, however, is to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep moving. You’ll see positive results very soon!

Stay tuned to future e-zines for more specific strategies that can help you achieve success in school. Good luck!