

Six Things You Must Check Before Using Medicine for Attention Deficits

There is more than one way to help someone affected by attention deficits. Specifically, before families and schools turn to medication solutions, they should consider **options of first resort**. Even if medication is needed, these options will significantly enhance a person's chances for improvement and satisfaction with change.

Unfortunately, ADHD is such a broad diagnosis that it fails to describe the diverse cognitive deficits that may lead to that diagnosis. ADHD can impair someone's ability to focus, learn, maintain self-control, or succeed in social situations. Success in these areas of life relies on a set of thinking skills known as **executive function**. On this website you'll find a variety of articles to describe the key elements of executive function, and for those interested in a deeper understanding of the **eight pillars of cognitive capability**, I recommend my book **No Mind Left Behind**.

Executive function defines a more specific framework of cognitive deficits, highly relevant to 21st century students. It's unlikely that a person will have difficulties in all areas of executive function, but it's more than likely that a child with significant impairment in one area will be affected by problems in other areas as well.

Those who have attended my lectures or read my newsletters are familiar with the concept of an **ecology of attention**. The essential idea here is that attention needs the right kind of environment in order for it to thrive. We tend to think of attention as existing inside a person's brain, and that's why we think of an attention deficit disorder as a brain disorder, best treated by medication. But it's more useful to think of attention deficits as a problem between a person and his or her environment – that's the ecology that needs to be supported and sustained for focus to occur.

If we assume that there is a correct level of attention that every child should achieve, many of us will be sorely disappointed! Attention varies from one individual to another, as do the ecological requirements for sustained attention. Every classroom has somewhat unique requirements because the minds of students and teachers always vary. That's why student performance may vary from one year to the next.

Clearly, this presents some challenges for schools and families, but in the 21st century it's simply unreasonable to believe that young people can build executive function through self-discipline alone. We need a new model of what it means to be focused - and a new approach to building an environment that helps a child stay focused. This brief article and **six questions** are a first step toward considering that objective.

1. Is There Enough Energy and Stimulation for Learning to Occur?

Quite often, we misconstrue boredom as poor focus rather than seeing the root of the problem – insufficient stimulation. This does not mean having to do cartwheels and somersaults in front of the classroom, but it does imply the need to strategically use **tone and tempo** as a means of priming young minds for retention. I discuss this type of teaching method at length in my

workshops: vocal volume, rhythm, body language, and facial expressions are key elements of maintaining an atmosphere that fosters attention. Sometimes, we medicate kids whose problem is better understood as a mismatch between their attention and the baseline energy of a particular setting. Although not all children require a high stimulation environment to be successful – many do. Think about what makes someone a great athletic coach; not only do you have to be knowledgeable, you also have to be able to command someone’s attention, motivate them, and hold them accountable in a constructive manner. These skills are valuable in many areas of kids’ lives.

2. What is the Child’s Learning Style?

A second critical concern is knowing a child's learning style. For example, children with kinesthetic learning styles are at particularly high risk for being labeled as academically challenged when they might actually do well if their learning orientation were sufficiently engaged. There are several different types of learning style assessments available online (LdPride.net), and more in-depth assessments, typically administered by psychologists. These assessments provide a framework for understanding both learning differences and the kinds of intervention/instruction needed to address those differences. Learning style tests are also a good way to educate students about themselves. Potentially, they teach students how to advocate for themselves as learners – a particularly critical skill as students transition to life after secondary school.

3. What is the Child’s *Executive Skills Profile*?

An executive skills profile assesses a child for each of the eight pillars of executive function: **Initiation, Attention, Flexibility, Working Memory, Organization, Planning, Self-monitoring, and Emotional Control**. By understanding more precisely where help is needed there is a significantly better chance of shaping focused interventions. Why waste resources trying to fix something that doesn't need help, when another aspect of cognitive performance may be in desperate need of rescue? The executive skills checklist on this website will give you an immediate idea of how to assess the eight pillars, and a longer checklist is available in **No Mind Left Behind**. In some cases, students will need a psychological evaluation to fully assess executive skills – but make sure those evaluations include detailed instructions for *how* to help a problem. Generic or vague advice is not acceptable.

4. Are You Using the Voice of a Coach?

A valuable, but less discussed aspect of working with attention deficits and behavior problems is the role of voice – specifically, the **voice of a coach**. Every adult has the potential to produce this kind of voice, but most of us don’t acquire it without practice. Instead, when we want to be emphatic or make an important point we resort to the voice of a “boss.” Kids are experts in discerning the difference between the voice of a boss and the voice of a coach, and their receptivity to what we are saying changes accordingly. Some of the basic differences are that a boss can be hierarchical, or even condescending. A coach can have high expectations, but by definition stands behind a child and accepts responsibility for both “wins” and “losses.” Those

differences in attitude come through in small changes in vocal tone and body language, and we may need scripts to help us at moments of stress and frustration so that we keep communicating in the constructive persona of a coach.

5. How Badly Does the Child Want to Learn?

It's very difficult to help someone who does not want to be helped. One of the first questions that needs to be answered during an intake evaluation is how badly a child or adolescent wants to change his or her behavior (which may include improved grades). It's easy for someone to say he or she wants to improve, but another thing to be willing to do the work necessary to make that goal a realistic possibility. Sometimes a person can't honestly answer that question until they know what the plan for improvement is, and what their individual role will be. Also, we shouldn't forget that ***most people like being successful***. Where young people are hesitant to commit to improvement, it's often because they doubt their chances at success. That's why improvement is always more likely when goals are broken down into small, achievable steps. When someone truly does not care about learning, it's a safe bet that they need help for an emotional problem more than they do for attention deficits.

6. Is There School-Wide Support for Educating the Child?

Finally, the best laid plans will yield few results if all relevant members of a school community are not in agreement about the plan. In my talks, I discuss the value of vertical integration with respect to executive skills awareness. Everyone, including head of school, learning support staff, and teachers should have an understanding of the language of executive function, and how it is enhanced. By middle school, students should have ***learning profile portfolios*** that include data about their learning style and executive skills. Teachers should have easy access to those profiles as a means of knowing how to provide strategic support. Some of the best schools have a great variety of programs and resources available, but far less in the way of a guiding theory. Executive function is a great framework for thinking about the tools and techniques needed to enhance academic performance.

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