Classroom Adjustments: ADHD

| **TIMECODE** | **SPEAKER** | **CONTENT** |
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| 00:00:00:00 | ALEX | Hi. My name's Alex, I'm nine years old and I'm in Year 4. |
| 00:00:07:11 | SERPIL | How would you describe ADHD? |
| 00:00:10:05 | ALEX | Hmm. It's an annoying thing. |
| 00:00:11:17 | SERPIL | It's an annoying thing? |
| 00:00:13:03 | ALEX | Mm-hm. |
| 00:00:14:03 | SERPIL | Why is it annoying for you? |
| 00:00:15:13 | ALEX | I have a lot of trouble listening to people, and I get distracted very easily. Sometimes, I'm running around uncontrollably just making random noises. |
| 00:00:24:13 | SERPIL | That's Alex. Just like any boy his age, he loves playing dodgeball and two square. He's got some very clever tactics to help him manage ADHD. Hi, I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll discuss some adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with ADHD to participate on the same basis as their peers. We'll hear more about Alex's personal experiences with ADHD and meet his mum Katya. You'll also hear from a school principal and a child psychologist who both specialise in ADHD and have some excellent suggestions for adjustments you can make in the classroom. |
| 00:01:16:04 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | Hi. I'm Emma Sciberras. I'm an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at Deakin University. In attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, that's a condition that's characterised by high levels of inattention and hyperactivity and impulsivity. And for children with ADHD, they have a lot of difficulty with everyday aspects of life like academic functioning and getting along with others. There are other conditions like oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. They can also go alongside with ADHD, or they can occur by themselves. |
| 00:01:47:10 | SERPIL | What about in terms of the student's education? What sort of impact is it likely to have on their learning? |
| 00:01:54:06 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | The impacts are really varied. For example, in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, we see huge impacts on academic progress. So, much lower scores in reading and maths. We see more difficulties following rules in the classroom, paying attention to the information the teachers are delivering. There can be difficulties in the playground. So, they're associated with social difficulties too. So, it can have that impact on the friendship and social aspect of school also. |
| 00:02:23:12 | SERPIL | So, how can teachers turn this around? What kind of adjustments could they make? |
| 00:02:28:11 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | So, I think the first step is understanding the individual student. That individual child's strengths and weaknesses. And also trying to get an understanding of what some of the trigger situations might be for these young people. So, I think an individualised approach is essential. |
| 00:02:45:06 | SERPIL | Even if you're personalising adjustments, are there some common triggers that teachers should look out for? |
| 00:02:50:14 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | Transitions can be a difficulty. So, transitioning from one task to another. And that can be quite difficult because it can often take them a bit of time to get into an activity. And when that then changes to another activity, that can cause a bit of anger and frustration, but, also, transitioning out into the playground. |
| 00:03:09:00 | JENINE | To make those transitions run as smooth as possible. Just simple little things. If a child has a familiar item that they can take from the classroom into the art room or into the music room, if that makes the transition a lot more successful, then it's worthwhile doing that. |
| 00:03:26:09 | SERPIL | That's Jenine Pallant. She's a school principal and specialises in enabling students with ADHD to achieve their educational goals. |
| 00:03:34:19 | JENINE | With a student with ADHD, the child would find it very difficult to sustain attention for long periods of time. They might find it very difficult to follow instructions. So, work would need to be broken down into smaller segments for them. It would be very important to have the child speak to the teacher of their understanding of a particular task, because a child could quite often say yes, they've understood, when, in fact, they haven't. So, it's really important to have the child let the teacher know what they think is expected of the task before they start work. It's also very important that all the work is scaffolded. So, it's broken down into smaller steps and the child has an understanding of how much they are meant to achieve in a particular lesson. |
| 00:04:18:21 | SERPIL | When it comes to ADHD, teachers can play a vital role in students' lives. Jenine says the value of a teacher-student relationship can't be underestimated. |
| 00:04:30:02 | JENINE | They really need to understand that they're valued and wanted and cared for. And so relationships with staff are very important because you never know - you might be the significant person in that child's life that's actually going to make a difference for the child. It's really important to remember that all behaviour is communication. So, if the child is acting out, if they are angry, try and work out what it is that the child is trying to tell you because they may not have the language to be able to express themselves. |
| 00:05:01:12 | SERPIL | So all behaviour is communication, but it can be difficult to interpret the message the student is trying to send. School principal Jenine says the key to understanding is to observe and take notes. |
| 00:05:15:07 | JENINE | It's also important for a teacher starting out in a classroom with a child with ADHD to have a checklist - the ABC chart, where there's the antecedent, the behaviour and the consequences. So that the teacher can actually pinpoint any problematic areas that the child has. So if they're getting a particular behaviour at a particular time every day, then they can look at what adjustments they can make at that time to make the transition or make that learning period much more successful for the child. |
| 00:05:46:20 | JENINE | One thing that's a strategy that I've used over the years, many, many times that's worked really well, is giving the child two choices. So, not demanding that they do one particular thing, but giving them two choices, two options, and what the consequences will be for either of the choices that they make and then walking away. Take-up time is really important.  These children have got far more energy than what any teacher on the planet would have. They will argue and continually argue. And if the teacher turns around and tries to win the argument, it's not going to end well. So, it's really important for the teacher to remember don't buy into the argument, to say what they need to say, give them the two choices. |
| 00:06:39:14 | SERPIL | Jenine recommends giving clear boundaries and fair consequences. |
| 00:06:44:05 | JENINE | As a general activity I would do at the start of each year with a class, I would always start talking about the rules and the rights in the classroom. And I would list them up in the classroom. If you're putting in consequences for the student, they have to be fair, they have to be reasonable, and you have to be able to follow through. Otherwise, the whole system is going to start falling apart. It's really important that the student knows that you are going to be fair and you are going to be consistent. |
| 00:07:18:03 | KATYA | Hi. My name is Katya and my son, Alex, has ADHD.  So, a lot of hyperactivity, excessive talking prompted having a psychologist assess him because I felt uncomfortable with some of his behaviours. It was just a really lack of self-regulation. There was a lot of outward emotion. |
| 00:07:40:08 | SERPIL | How does ADHD affect Alex at school? |
| 00:07:44:07 | KATYA | Alex's ADHD has an impact on not so much his learning at this point, but more on his behaviour in the classroom. He's distracting his classmates. He will fidget quite a lot, has difficulty sitting still during tasks. |
| 00:08:01:13 | ALEX | I'm good at school. I just get distracted very easily. |
| 00:08:05:10 | KATYA | When too many things are asked of him at one time, he gets angry and frustrated because he sort of doesn't know which task to manage. He can hear people talking at him, but he can't work out what to do first. And we see it at home all the time, and it results in a meltdown. So, I think that's something his teacher is aware of, and all teachers should be aware of with kids with ADHD - just one thing at a time.  If you say, "Go to the garage, get your shoes, bring them back here, put them on, and then let's go to school," they can't do that. You needed to say, "Go to the garage and get your shoes." And then once they've come back, "OK, let's put them on." And then after those steps - "Let's go to school." |
| 00:08:50:12 | JENINE | A lot of classrooms now do open-ended tasks, and they're incredibly challenging for children because they're too open-ended. So, tasks really need to be broken down very specifically for the child. If the child has a worksheet, a very simple way of helping the child with the worksheet would be to highlight, say, the first five questions on the worksheet and ask the child to complete those because a child looking at a whole worksheet can be quite overwhelmed with the amount of work that's on there. But if it's broken down into smaller parts, it gives the opportunity for more success for the child without them feeling quite anxious. |
| 00:09:28:01 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | I think the other thing that can be helpful is using things like sprints. Thinking about a 10-minute or a 20-minute kind of sprint of work activity where you kind of make it really exciting and engaging and you're like, "OK, you've got 10 minutes and I want you to get everything down that you know about airplanes," for example, and it's a bit of a race. That can be a really fun and engaging way to not only motivate them, but I think it also builds on that teacher-student relationship which is really crucial in helping children to engage and succeed at school too. |
| 00:09:59:06 | SERPIL | Katya explains that Alex's teacher helped him work through an open-ended task with a novel twist. It started with the question... |
| 00:10:06:24 | KATYA | What is this book about? Just looking at the cover and reading the blurb. And he sat there for 20 minutes and wrote nothing. And she came over and sort of kept saying, "Alex, come on, you need to write something." Everyone else had written four or five sentences. There was nothing written. And she thought, "I'm sure that he knows something about this book, and I'm sure he has some comment to make." So, she gave him an iPad and some sort of voice-to-text app was used and said, "Talk into the iPad and tell me what you think about this book." And he came up with 15 sentences. And so the iPad magically wrote down what Alex had said and the job was done. So, she was very cleverly able to get from Alex the requirements for the lesson without him having to handwrite it. And it turns out that the writing was the barrier and that was what we picked up that writing is actually a big challenge for him.  So, I think they really need to be quite creative with how that information is withdrawn from the child to get them to show that they understand, the lesson has been understood. |
| 00:11:07:19 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | I think also using devices flexibly to take photos of things too because, again, it can be really difficult for students to get through the process of writing everything down that they need to, and taking photos of things and then having that as a record of what they needed to take away from that lesson. Online timers and schedules and things like that can be helpful too. |
| 00:11:30:06 | SERPIL | Like most young people, Alex is a big fan of technology and devices, especially when they help him to complete his schoolwork. |
| 00:11:38:19 | ALEX | Well, instead of me having to write, he would let me type 'cause writing is sort of stressing for me. My handwriting is really not that good. |
| 00:11:49:00 | SERPIL | So, why is writing stressful for you? |
| 00:11:52:05 | ALEX | My hand gets sore after a while. |
| 00:11:54:11 | SERPIL | So, you get fatigued, you get tired? |
| 00:11:56:17 | ALEX | Yeah. And my handwriting is really messy. And sometimes it's even hard to read. I enjoy typing. It's much easier. And instead of writing, it's really easy to read what I type. I'm a fast typer and I'm really good at spelling. |
| 00:12:20:16 | SERPIL | Alex certainly is a great communicator. He tells me he's already completed a novella and is in the process of writing the sequel. School principal Jenine says assisting students with language to express themselves can be really helpful in the classroom. |
| 00:12:37:24 | JENINE | Language itself is a vital means of communication. And that's something that our children lack, particularly when it comes to emotional language. So, we spend a lot of time working with the children on developing emotional literacy with them. So, the children learn how to express themselves. They learn how to identify their feelings, how to recognise the feelings of others in a situation as well. |
| 00:13:03:01 | SERPIL | Jenine Pallant also recommends the use of visual communication. |
| 00:13:07:17 | JENINE | Things such as having a visual timetable up so that the child knew what was happening at each session at the start of each day. It would be important to run through the day with the child so that they'd be prepared for any changes. If anxiety is going to impact upon the child, you want to lessen anxiety-provoking situations. |
| 00:13:26:21 | SERPIL | So, structure and routine, minimising visual overstimulation and giving opportunities for time-out if required. They're sort of key adjustments? |
| 00:13:36:23 | JENINE | There are other things that can be put in place quite simply in the classroom as well. So, I would always give the opportunity for the child to have an energy break if they needed to. So, the child would understand that this is not a break, not time-out, because it's not that they're having trouble or in trouble, but this is an opportunity for them to get out. Maybe just go and throw a few hoops with a basketball. We have one child at school who would run down and touch a gum tree and run back to class, and that was enough to give him an energy break. It's just giving them the chance to burn off a bit of that nervous energy and be able to get back into the classroom and, hopefully, settle down and concentrate again. |
| 00:14:14:24 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | And so if there's a lot of focus on trying to get the children to stop moving, for example, it can just be a form of negative feedback the students are receiving. And, really, if they're fidgeting a bit in the classroom and moving around a little bit, that really is probably not interrupting the classroom that much. So, allowing for a little bit of activity and a little bit of movement and understanding that that can actually be helpful. |
| 00:14:35:17 | JENINE | What they need is to be told what it is that they're doing that's right when they are doing something that's right, and what it is that they need to be doing. I would always ensure that there were sensory toys that the children could use if they needed them. Actually, a fiddle toy is a great way of calming down children too. So, if you have bubble wrap that the children can squeeze and twist. If you have headphones if they're being distracted by other noise in the classroom. And it doesn't necessarily mean that your classroom is noisy if a child's using a set of headphones. It could be a particular noise in the background that a child's struggling to ignore. |
| 00:15:14:09 | SERPIL | Sensory toys come in all shapes and sizes. Alex always has something special with him to help him focus, but you would never know. |
| 00:15:24:04 | ALEX | Yeah, I have this velcro thing. |
| 00:15:26:05 | SERPIL | So, you've got a piece of velcro sewn underneath your school shirt. What's it for? |
| 00:15:31:23 | ALEX | It's sort of a fidgety thing. |
| 00:15:35:13 | SERPIL | And how does that help you? |
| 00:15:37:13 | ALEX | It helps me sort of focus, I guess, if I'm fidgeting with something. |
| 00:15:41:11 | SERPIL | So, rather than touching things all around the classroom... |
| 00:15:43:23 | ALEX | Yeah, I'd do that. |
| 00:15:45:10 | SERPIL | Another subtle way to assist with focus is to acknowledge and reward positive behaviours. |
| 00:15:52:00 | JENINE | A child could have a little chart on their desk and, you know, if the teacher catches them making a good choice, they could just go quietly and say, "I'm really pleased. The way you shared your pencils, that was really kind of you. I'm giving you a tick." And so they can get a reward with a token system. Sometimes, you have to keep changing the reward at the end. So, I have had people who say, "Well, token systems don't work because they're not motivated to use it anymore." It's not that the system is not working. It's just that the motivation, the reward at the end needs to be changed. |
| 00:16:24:23 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | So, I think in terms of rewards, thinking about things that are natural and that aren't over-the-top. And it might even be extra computer time in the classroom, for example. |
| 00:16:37:09 | SERPIL | In the broader classroom environment, Associate Professor Emma Sciberras recommends thinking about seating positions and visual distractions. |
| 00:16:46:10 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | Having the student positioned in a place that is close enough to the teacher so there can be those subtle discussions around the work that they're producing. Not sitting next to the door, for example. If people are going in and out of the classroom, that can be really distracting. Or little things like sitting next to a rubbish bin. When people are going to the rubbish bin often during the classroom, they can all just be little distractors. So, minimising those things wherever possible is beneficial.  And I guess for younger children too just thinking about the layout of the classroom and the things that are around them and how much visually stimulating information is around them. Because some classes can be quite busy, and for children with attentional difficulties, that can be quite distracting and can get them off-track. Thinking through some of the strategies that can be used as a whole-of-class approach is important so that it doesn't appear that it's only that particular child that's receiving particular strategies. I think, also, thinking about subtle ways that some of this can be included in the classroom. So, just as an example, when we were talking about transitions before and how that can be a difficult thing, even having like a little sticker on the desk that outlines some key things to think about when transitioning from activities can be something that the student can have a look at and have as a visual reminder of the next steps. But it's not something that's made a big deal about, I guess, by the teacher, but it's something that they've talked about beforehand and it's a little note that they might have next to them. |
| 00:18:09:20 | SERPIL | And how often should the teacher be reassessing the adjustments, particularly as the child's getting older? |
| 00:18:16:04 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | So, thinking about brief ways that they can communicate about different strategies whether it's by a paper diary or emailing and making that brief and to the point. Also thinking about meetings that can occur between key school staff and parents at least once a term really is a way to take stock of the strategies that have been tried, some of the things that have been helpful and some things that might not have worked so well.  And I think those kinds of meetings are also helpful for parents to be able to come forward and say, "Hey, we've been trying this particular strategy at home, and this has been really helpful." And so it provides an update to the school about new things that they can try. |
| 00:18:51:21 | KATYA | Regular meetings are very important between parents and teachers. We'd had a very lengthy appointment at the start of the year and said, "Look, this is what has worked in the past. This is what hasn't worked." It was her suggestion to get a sensory box. So, we put that together and it was her suggestion also to sew the velcro on the inside of Alex's T-shirts. She said that she's seen that work before very well and I think that that's been very, very successful with Alex. |
| 00:19:16:05 | SERPIL | So it's a good idea to set up an easy communication channel with parents for updates between face-to-face meetings. Associate Professor Emma Sciberras also recommends introducing adjustments individually, rather than making a bunch of changes all at once. |
| 00:19:35:12 | EMMA SCIBERRAS | There might need to be a bit of a trial and error type of approach. So, they might just focus on a few key strategies. I think it's really challenging to try 10 strategies at once. So, I think trying a couple of key strategies and seeing how they work and then building on them from there. |
| 00:19:49:23 | SERPIL | Alex's mum Katya agrees. |
| 00:19:52:08 | KATYA | Really, to try and view them as a whole person and to view the child, not the behaviour. That really is my mantra. ADHD is an incredibly frustrating condition for the child and for the parents and for the siblings and the friends. It goes a long way just beyond the child and it impacts a lot of people. It probably takes a little bit of trial and error for each child. And it's not just saying ADHD kids should always be at the front or always at the back. I think you need to work with the family, explain what you're doing as a teacher that you're going to experiment. |
| 00:20:25:10 | SERPIL | While school principal Jenine Pallant urges you to celebrate the small wins. |
| 00:20:30:22 | JENINE | Success isn't always a big thing. Success can be little things. |
| 00:20:35:21 | SERPIL | And Alex has three simple pieces of advice. |
| 00:20:39:18 | ALEX | The teacher should be very patient with them. Don't really treat them differently to everybody else. |
| 00:20:45:03 | SERPIL | And what else? |
| 00:20:46:16 | ALEX | Try and get them to be as focused as possible. |
| 00:20:58:04 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
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