

Strategies for Well-Being: Back to School for the Child with ADHD

Written by Forward Times Staff
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A recent study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that the number of children who received prescriptions for drugs used to treat ADHD continues to increase.

However, the authors noted that their research did not track whether the drugs were actually used, only that they were prescribed.

Ritalin, the drug most often given to adolescents, and other ADHD drugs like Adderall account for most of the ADHD drug prescriptions between 2002 and 2010, but the researchers noted use of these medications is stabilizing and being replaced by newer drugs, such as Vyvanse and Focalin.



In line with much of the controversy surrounding this issue, the considerable increase in the number of prescriptions for ADHD drugs is due to a higher number of diagnoses.

The most important thing is to get the diagnosis right!

If your child has been properly diagnosed, and was on medication at the end of the last school

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year, there are some considerations as you prepare for him/her to prepare for the start of school.

Was your child off of their ADHD medications during the summer break? If so, you may want to restart it at least a week or two before school starts to get back the routine of taking their medicine each day. This is especially important if your child is taking a drug like Strattera, which can take two or three weeks to even begin working.

Otherwise, the start of school is not a really good time to make any big changes in your child's treatment regimen. Your child will already be faced with new teachers and classes and perhaps a new school and new friends. It may help to give your child a few weeks to adjust to the new year before making any changes to their medication, especially if you are considering stopping their medicine altogether.

It seems that back-to-school time always sneaks up. Before you know it, the summer is over and school is starting again. Helping your child ease from the lazy days of summer to the structured days of fall is important. If your child has ADD / ADHD, transitions can sometimes be difficult. Many children experience mixed feelings about restarting school. School may create feelings of excitement, but it can also create some anxiety, especially if previous school experiences have been frustrating.

No one knows exactly what causes this behavioral disorder. A brain injury may be behind some cases, and environmental and genetic factors could be to blame as well.

In particular, family history seems to play a significant role: 25% of close relatives of those with ADHD may have it too. And for people with a family history, it's possible genetic makeup could increase the odds of one's getting it by as much as 50% to 80%. Take dads, as an example. At least one-third of all fathers who had ADHD in their youth have children with ADHD.

In addition to your child's ADHD medication, other issues to think about as your child goes back to school can include:

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Is your child getting enough sleep? Many children with ADHD do not sleep well, which can contribute to hyperactivity, irritability, and a decreased attention span, which many parents may think to blame as a side effect of their ADHD medication or simply on their ADHD.

Does your child need extra help, even as their ADHD medication is helping most of their ADHD symptoms?

If so, then you might ask your pediatrician to fill out an Other Health Impaired (OHI) form from the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) to get extra special education services in school or request that the school evaluate him/her under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

It's important to set the stage for the teacher to see the child as an individual, separate from whatever previous ideas or information they have. It has often been helpful for parent and child to write individual personal letters to teachers as a way to communicate this information. Many families have found letter writing to be a wonderful process that brings the child closer to his or her teachers on a more personal level – a level that facilitates more personal connections between teacher, child and parent. The letter is a chance to present the child as an individual, not just a child with ADHD.

As a parent your letter should include a description of your child, identifying which subtype of ADHD he or she has and specifying the characteristics of that subtype that your child displays. You might also describe what treatment is being used; the people on the treatment team; the treatment itself; including information about behavior plans and medications currently in use and any that have been discontinued. Describe the strategies that you and previous teachers have found to be helpful, such as advance warnings about schedule changes or touch prompts. Also specify techniques that have not worked or even backfired. Include other personal information: your child's likes, dislikes, hobbies, strengths, weaknesses and accomplishments.

Letters such as these enable children to educate their teachers about themselves and their ADHD, rather than waiting for the disorder to manifest itself in a negative context, and they tend to evoke an empathic response from teachers. Try to help your children identify, in his/her own words, what ADHD is, how it affects them, and what helps them to learn best in class.

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This early and open communication among children, teachers and parents has several benefits:

1. It decreases the time it takes for a new teacher to work effectively with the child.
2. It presents the child as approachable, likable and easier to connect with.
3. It begins the process of open communication.
4. It provides an opportunity to empower children to deal with their ADHD. They can get an early start in advocating for themselves, which will serve them well throughout their school years and beyond.

The most important aspect of preparing your child for school is to decrease anxiety and to increase your child's sense of competence. Because most children with ADHD have struggled in school academically, behaviorally, and/or socially, approaching the first days of school can feel overwhelming for children and parents alike. For some children, easing into routines at home for sleep, meals, and after school activities (including homework) can be helpful a week or more before school starts, with the goal of helping the child prepare for these routines and avoiding battles during the early days of school. It's important to emphasize academic strengths and favorite activities, but acknowledge anxieties, as well. Most children do not want to talk about school but will appreciate their parent's acknowledgement of the effort that is involved.

Remember, I'm not a doctor. I just sound like one.

Take good care of yourself and live the best life possible!

Please be aware that this information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician. It is neither intended, nor implied, to be a substitute for professional medical advice.

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