

Impulse-Control Strategies for Students with ADHD

Why do kids with ADHD call out in class or push in line? Poor impulse control. The solution? Clear expectations, positive incentives, and predictable consequences for good or bad school behavior.

by ADDitude Editors

For children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder who are ruled by their impulses calling out in class or pushing to the front of the line comes naturally. These kids live in the moment, undeterred by rules or consequences.

Lack of impulse control may be the most difficult ADHD symptom to change. Medication can help, but kids also need clear expectations, positive incentives, and predictable consequences if they are to learn to regulate their behavior.

Enforce Discipline at School

Lead your students in compiling a list of class rules. Include some that are difficult for ADDers, such as “Always raise your hand to ask for help.” Be sure to define each rule: What does it mean to “Use materials appropriately”?

In general, discipline should be immediate.

If one student pushes another on the playground, for example, have him sit out part of recess. A delayed consequence—such as after-school detention—doesn’t work for kids who have trouble anticipating outcomes.

Provide visual reminders to keep kids on track.

To spare a child the embarrassment of frequent reprimands, agree upon a secret gesture you’ll use to signal her to stay in her seat or to stop calling out. Some children benefit from a reminder taped to the desk. That, too, can be private; no one else has to know that “N.I.” stands for “No Interrupting.”

Encourage appropriate behavior with recognition and rewards.

This is especially important for ADDers, who get a lot of negative attention for misconduct. Acknowledge good behavior with specific praise, such as: “Edward, I appreciate how quickly and quietly you cleared your desk.”

Some older children are embarrassed by compliments—so give a thumbs-up or a pat on the back instead.

“Teacher, There Are Some Things I’d Like You to Know About Me...”

Clear, Enforceable Expectations

Write the day’s schedule on the blackboard, and erase items as they’re completed.

This gives ADDers a sense of being in control of their day. Provide advance notice of any changes to the usual routine.

Issue frequent alerts as the end of an activity draws near.

Give the class a five-minute warning, and then a two-minute warning, to ease the transition from one activity to the next. Devise a plan for students for whom change is especially difficult. Assign them to a special task, like collecting classmates’ papers, to help them maintain self-control.

Use a daily report card.

This tool allows a child’s teacher and parents to monitor academic and behavioral goals—and gives the child a chance to earn rewards. Each day, the teacher records whether the goals were met, and the child takes the report card home to show his parents.

So what can parents do at home to enforce the appropriate behaviors learned at school?

Rewarding Positive Behavior

Be explicit about how your child is to behave.

Instead of telling her to “be good” at the playground, tell her to “wait in line for the slide, and don’t push.”

Hold your child accountable for his actions.

Keep punishments short and appropriate, but let them remind your child that he is responsible for his own behavior. A good rule of thumb for time-outs is one minute for each year of a child’s age.

Discourage a problem behavior by “charging” for each infraction.

This strategy rewards your child for not engaging in an inappropriate behavior, such as interrupting your phone calls.

How it works:

1. Determine, roughly, how many times a week your child interrupts you during a phone call, and fill a jar with slightly fewer quarters.
2. Tell your child that these are hers to keep at the end of the week, but that you will remove one each time she interrupts a call.
3. As the behavior begins to diminish, reduce the number of quarters you put in the jar at the beginning of the week.

Special Rules for Special Occasions

Go easy on minor missteps.

If your child spills milk because he’s pouring it quickly, help him clean the mess, talk to him about the importance of being careful, and move on.

Anticipate potentially explosive situations.

Children with ADHD need consistency and routine, but the unpredictable will sometimes happen.

Prepare your child for special occasions: Explain where you’re going, who will be there, what activities are planned, and how he should behave. Plan a way for him to signal you if he’s becoming overwhelmed, such as putting his hand in yours. (You can do the same if you sense a meltdown in the making.)

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