



Back to School: Help Your Child with ADHD Succeed In and Out of the Classroom

By Deborah Phelps

After a summer of swimming, sleeping in and riding bicycles, returning to school can be both an exciting and stressful time for parents and children alike. Children have to adjust to new teachers, new friends and new environments. All of these changes, coupled with re-energized daily routines that accompany the school year, can be intimidating for any family; but parents of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may have unique challenges. With a little extra preparation and communication, parents can help their children with ADHD thrive in and out of the classroom.

As the mother of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, who was diagnosed with ADHD at age 9, and a school educator and principal for over 30 years, I am familiar with the concerns a new school year can bring to parents of children with ADHD. Even as I watch Michael prepare to compete in Beijing for this year's Olympics, I can recall how his ADHD posed challenges when the new school year began.

With adequate preparation, going back to school can be an exciting and positive experience for children with ADHD. It's important to build a support team and begin a dialogue with your child and his/her teachers to create a platform for success – before your child even walks through the classroom door. Throughout the school year, I recommend communicating frequently with teachers, encouraging social interaction and working with healthcare professionals to encourage your child's continued success.

Following are some tips to help you “make the grade” at the start of – and during – the new school year:

Create an Environment for Learning

Teachers play an integral role in the development and performance of their students. Reach out to teachers before the new school year to discuss how to work together to create an optimal classroom environment. Additionally, parents can provide insight into areas in which their child excels, or skills that could be improved with extra attention.

Questions you may want to ask teachers include:

- Is there a place in the classroom where my child can sit to minimize distractions?
- Can we set up a system for frequent communication and feedback on my child's performance outside of the usual report cards and parent-teacher conferences?
- How can we get important notes and long-term assignment sheets sent to us directly?
- Can my child have a textbook in which he/she can highlight important facts and information directly in the book?
- Do you recommend a specific assignment book for your class?

Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to observe and provide feedback on the behavior and progress of your child, so it's important to stay in regular contact with them. Make

sure to set up regular meetings or establish another means of communication for updates and feedback, such as e-mail or a notebook that can go back and forth from home to school.

Encourage Strong Social Relationships

As you may already know, making friends can be difficult even without the challenges that come with ADHD. Parents can usually see the impact ADHD has on their child's academic development, but the condition can also affect a child's ability to make and maintain strong social relationships.

Friendships are essential in establishing and building confidence, so do not overlook the importance of encouraging your children with ADHD to socialize with children who have similar interests.

There are many ways to help children with ADHD foster new and old friendships. Be creative – find opportunities for social interaction at school and beyond. Many children with ADHD play better with younger children; while some exhibit more appropriate behavior when playing with older children who can be role models.

We found that Michael excelled when he was challenged in an athletic setting. Explore what may be offered in volunteer organizations, community clubs or sports programs. If parents are able to be part of these activities, even better; it provides you with an opportunity for observing your child's behavior and progress.

Consult Your Healthcare Professional

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, behavioral modifications combined with medication management may help your child with ADHD increase his/her attention span, improve focus and decrease distractibility in and out of the classroom.

It's important for parents to visit with their child's healthcare professional prior to the start of a new school year to discuss their treatment and identify if dosage adjustments may be needed. More information about working with your healthcare professional can be found in [From the Expert by Patricia Quinn, MD.](#) (active link to From the Expert column)

ADHD Doesn't Stop at the Classroom

In addition to medication, parents can help their children with ADHD by establishing structure in their afternoon and evening routines. Help children with ADHD complete their homework more efficiently by creating a distraction-free study environment, and schedule a regular time for them to complete their assignments each day.

Also, parents can make sure that their children have healthy snacks available before beginning their afternoon routine and encourage them to take breaks from assignments that require extended concentration to help reinvigorate them for their next project. Engage younger children with ADHD by asking for their help with creating a tasty pre-dinner treat, which can teach them how to follow directions and build new skills.

It's imperative to remember that the need for ADHD symptom management doesn't stop when class is dismissed. Behavioral modifications combined with medication may help manage your child's ADHD symptoms throughout the entire day.

I hope these back-to-school tips help you and your family transition with ease from summer vacation to the school year.