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**DEVELOPMENTAL AND
BEHAVIOURAL PAEDIATRICIAN
DR RAUN MELMED HELPS
US TO BETTER UNDERSTAND
AND NAVIGATE ADHD.**

Paying attention is all about being mindful – being able to live in the now and appreciating the wonder of the moment. This is a real challenge for children with attentional problems or when Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is diagnosed.

What do we mean when we use the term ADHD? Children with ADHD have trouble paying attention to activities that don't fully engage their interest. They may act without thinking about consequences and thus repeat behaviours which have ended up poorly before. They act impulsively, with little regard to the future (forethought), and rarely do they learn from the past (hindsight).

They are sadly unaware of social cues because of distractibility, and consequently, have a difficult time reading social situations correctly or being cognisant of the behaviour of others in the classroom and on the playground. Interestingly, children with ADHD can concentrate on activities of their own choosing. They can play videogames for hours. Repetitive, uninteresting tasks are more challenging!



They have difficulty filtering out distractions and selecting what is most important to pay attention to. They might see details but miss the big picture. They may have trouble starting or finishing tasks. Though they understand rules, they may fail to use the rules to guide their behaviour.

Others might be restless and have difficulty sitting still. They appear to be in constant motion. They may interrupt, blurt out comments and have trouble waiting their turn. Kids with attentional problems have high energy levels and are constantly on the go, as if driven by a motor.

The presence of these symptoms is not enough to nail down a diagnosis of ADHD. In addition to having the symptoms, they must also be hurting or failing because of these challenges in at least two settings, such as at home, at school or with friends.

Many children are impulsive and inattentive without undue impact on their school performance and social interaction. If that is the case, they might well have attentional issues, but they do not necessarily have ADHD. Let's not trivialise that diagnosis!

The diagnostic process should entail an assessment of a child's strengths and weaknesses – basically an in-depth description of the child. Treatment follows and interventions are prescribed according to each child's unique profile. We could call that prescription by description!

Educational accommodations can help with school performance, and behavioural strategies can effectively manage behaviour at home. In certain circumstances, medication might be considered. Dietary interventions can be helpful, the most important one being the need for a good breakfast, high in protein. A good night's rest is imperative.

Most children do better with routines. Keeping schedules for daily activities, such as meals, homework, sports and even leisure time, helps. Reward positive behaviours rather than punishing negative behaviours. Identify a specific behaviour you want to change and come up with the specific positive skill you'd like to replace it with. In that way, you can help your child replace a negative behaviour with a positive skill.

Be specific with praise. Avoid platitudes such as: "You are such a good girl, you're a great kid." Rather be specific! "I like the way you read the room."

"I like the way you stopped and thought." That will provide much needed and very effective positive reinforcement.

DON'T FORGET THE FUN!

Have fun with your child. Incorporate physical exercise into afternoon homework routines and take fun breaks from homework. Stay off your phone and model good listening skills, really listen to what they have to say. Let children learn about their problems.

Anticipate problems: if your child has a challenging time in any specific situation, pre-learn the skills necessary to succeed socially in that context – such as practising ST4 (which I explain further on)! If something is likely to bother your child, or if he will be in a novel situation that might be stressful, again ST4!

Children with ADHD often feel rejected by adults and even peers within the environment. "My teacher is so mean," a boy might say.

"My teacher doesn't like me," a girl might say.

"My friends always pick on me," kids with impulsivity might say. The ability to recognise their own power in being able to turn things around is a key intervention.

What about the child's role? Including any individual in their own treatment programme will surely enhance the possibilities of a successful outcome, and the same is true for children with attentional concerns. Certainly, children need to know what is expected of them. They need to learn to read their own signals and impulses, when to put on the brakes, when to slow down and when to let off steam. They basically need to learn how to be mindful.

I wrote the book: *Marvin's Monster Dairy: ADHD Attacks* with that goal in mind. It describes tools that children themselves can use to address their challenges. First is the ST4 process and then the use of a camera. Both are designed to enhance mindfulness and self-awareness. Giving children the tools for changing a situation that is uncomfortable for them engages them in the treatment process, and assures them we are on their side and we do understand the challenges they are having.



TIPS AND TOOLS

THE ST4 PROCESS WORKS AS FOLLOWS:

- Let your child know how to take charge of his/her body.
- Children can learn the power they have to control their bodies – their arms and legs and what comes out of their mouths. That is empowering.
- Let your child know you are going to teach him/her a special code, which s/he can keep secret if s/he wants
- Explain to the child what a ‘formula’ means. Kids might have heard of water being H₂O or oxygen being O₂. Use those as examples.
- Let them know they need to slow down and **STOP** what they are doing – that’s the **S** in **ST4. ONE S**.
- Now they need to **TAKE TIME TO THINK**.
- Count the Ts – that’s 4, right?
- **SO ONE S AND 4 TS.**
- That’s why we say **ST4**.
- Draw that formula or code.
- Create stickers with **ST4** emblazoned on them.
- Make badges.
- Put them on backpacks, on folders, on the school desk, on the bathroom mirror!
- Sometimes it can be helpful to tell the teacher about **ST4** – it can be used in the classroom as well.
- The teacher can simply point to the sticker or drawing on the child’s desk.
- Keeping it secret will help the kid develop a positive relationship with the teacher, while at the same time avoiding any unnecessary humiliation.

THE CAMERA EXERCISE IS SIMILARLY DESIGNED TO ALLOW CHILDREN TO DEVELOP PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS INTO THEIR OWN BEHAVIOUR:

- Explain how we view the world through our eyes.
- Eyes are really very similar to cameras – they both view the world through a lens.
- Just like phone cameras and movie cameras, when we look through the lens of our eyes, we can see things both near and far.
- We can pretend that by using our eyes like a video camera, we can film the room and the people around us.
- We can zoom in and out – just like the zoom on a video camera.
- Together with the child, look at something very small close at hand – such as a fingernail.
- Now look at a point far way – such as a tree in the distance.
- Practise zooming in and out from each point.
- Let the child pretend to be up on the ceiling filming/observing everything below, for example, what’s going on in the classroom or at the dinner table. Or even while getting ready in the morning.
- That’s a novel way of learning how to “read the room”, see what other kids are doing and what the teacher is doing.
- We can watch ourselves in the morning when we are getting ready for school... see what we are doing in the classroom and how everyone acts around the dinner table.
- Then we can understand what we should be doing.
- Soon we’ll all be doing the right thing!
- Try it and make it fun.

To realise and appreciate the inherent beauty of each child is the goal. To lead them gently, not by pulling, but by a gentle nudge of the elbow, along their own path to the self-realisation that they are beautiful and gifted, regardless of any faults or foibles. So how is that done? By letting them know, with specific praise for specific actions, that they are accepted unconditionally, while at the same time teaching them the tools necessary to navigate the vicissitudes of life.

Let children with attentional problems and ADHD know they are not alone in their struggles. They need to know they are just as smart as other kids, just as funny and creative, just as loveable and likely to succeed. A focus on the positive will go a long way to bolstering self-esteem and confidence for a group of children who often suffer enormously because of being constantly berated.

Labels aren't necessary, but self-awareness and awareness of challenges are. If we can name it, we can tame it. Teach kids about the power within them to be able to take charge of their own body! That's precisely the point of ST4 and the camera activity.

“To realise and appreciate the inherent beauty of each child is the goal.”

Of course, this will not take place overnight, but learning coping tools early and reinforcing them often will go a long way. If we can do that without being patronising and, all the while, improving self-esteem, then we surely must be on the right path. Tools will foster a sense of competency, an ability to identify strengths, and the development of coping strategies.

Treatment of attentional problems is a multimodal endeavour. Learning organisational skills, managing behaviour, learning social skills, making accommodations are all important. But, wouldn't it be wonderful to allow the children themselves a modicum of control over their own selves? To become mindful?



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the Extended Family; and a series of books addressing mindfulness in children, including *Marvin's Monster Diary – ADHD Attacks* and *Timmy's Monster Diary: Screen Time Attacks!* *Harriet's Monster Diary – Anxiety Attacks* will be released in the second quarter of 2019.