

# Coaching children with ADHD

Naomi Richards provides life coaching for children from the age of six who have behavioural and emotional problems. Here, she discusses her work with two children with a diagnosis of ADHD

It was never my intention to work with children with ADHD, so when a parent asked me to help their child with his social skills I thought, why not? How different could it be to work with a child who was a bit more energised than the average child? I had a lot of energy and patience, so I was sure we would be just fine. I'd had some basic training in how ADHD affects children and so I believed I was aware of what this child might need help with.

John (not his real name) was 11 years old. When he took a seat in my home, he found it difficult to sit still. He seemed distracted, and I felt as if he didn't want to be there. When I spoke with him, he found it incredibly difficult to focus on the conversation. When I asked a question, he would volunteer heaps of information – some of it not relevant to the answer I required. I had to say, 'Hold on, let's slow down, do you think you have answered my question?' I could also see he was not comfortable sitting still, so I realised we would have to change the way the session ran. He was fidgety and looked around the room rather than giving me eye contact.

A person with ADHD has difficulty filtering out all the information coming into their brain, so they are easily distracted and have a tendency to respond to a question before they have thought it through. In every coaching session, I have to assess a child very quickly and decide on the appropriate format and what will encourage the child to respond best. If it means having a session with a child walking round or standing up for some of the time, it is not a problem initially. And this is how my first session with John began. However, throughout subsequent sessions, and after discussing the importance of interaction and being at the same eye level, he sat on a chair for the whole 45 minutes. (I'm not saying that he did not fidget!)

## Agenda

So why did John's parents want him to come and spend some time with me? Well, his parents' agenda was for me to help him to do four things:

- 1 to focus on any conversation he is involved in (this includes showing the other person you are listening)
- 2 not to volunteer too much information when answering a question (ie know when to stop talking)
- 3 to have eye contact with other people, especially when having a conversation
- 4 to fidget less.

John did not have his own agenda. He agreed with everything his parents said. He wanted to change and he wanted me to help him. We talked about the benefits of the four points (the goals) and how we could reach them together. For me, coaching is a

team process. It is collaborative and requires work from both the coach and the child.

## Process

So how were we going to reach these goals? Well, we came up with some rules that would be followed during every coaching session we had together, and they addressed all four. The rules were:

Rule 1. He had up to a minute to answer every question I asked him (we used a stopwatch to keep him on track).

Rule 2. He had to look at me at least twice when he talked to me and also look at me when I asked him a question.

Rule 3. If he felt fidgety he could play with something at the table – but had to continue to follow rules 1 and 2.

Once we had these rules, we talked about the importance of social interaction and how we show others we are listening and paying attention. We talked about body language, facial expressions and key words that are used in conversation to keep the flow going. We had lively discussions in which I would ask him a question, he would answer in a short sentence (he had a limited 'response time frame', remember) and then I would ask another question in return.



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HEMERA/THINKSTOCK (POSED BY MODEL – FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSES ONLY)

We would practise for a whole 45 minutes, at the same time as discussing relevant subjects. As the sessions went on, we were able to dispense with the stopwatch. If he gave too much information, I would simply hold up my hand, like a policeman indicating 'stop'.

Coaching children with ADHD is not easy. The sessions are certainly fun and interactive but the results have to be measurable and the solutions have to be practised outside of the sessions. One way we can do this is to get the parents to 'buy in', or commit to, the process. After my sessions with John, I needed his parents to practise asking him questions, with him providing short answers in response. I also had to ask them to make sure he used his eye contact and positive body language skills. We would know John's goals had been met by the way he interacted with his parents and his peers. They would be able to notice the difference in his behaviour. After about a month, John was doing much better – it just took practice.

### Why coach?

So how and why did coaching work with this child? Well, he was committed to change. Coaching is about wanting to change, but to do so, a child, just like an adult, has to commit to the process and take responsibility for their actions. Coaching can be directive or non-directive, but because the problem is often not recognised by a child, coaching sessions generally have to be directive. This means I am pushing the conversation forward, asking questions and making suggestions. Not all children have the ability to think outside of the box, and in the case of ADHD, the life skills children need can be learnt, or at least controlled. But I do need the parents to buy into the process for coaching to really work.

### And drugs?

During the time I was seeing John, he was taken off his medication and there was a clear adverse effect and difference in his behaviour. He was less focused and did not want to talk to me at all. His parents put him back on a lower dose and he was still able to interact with me and take on board some of the rules. It was interesting to see the difference that the medication had on a child with ADHD.

I have worked with children who are on Ritalin or an alternative drug, and during the session when John was taken off it, it was impossible to coach him. A child has to be able to think through issues and be receptive to new ideas and thoughts.

What I love about coaching children – regardless of their genetic makeup – is that I am able to help them to find different ways to engage with me. Depending on the child, I can use worksheets, discussion, play a game or role play. I found role play really effective in cases such as these, as children with ADHD can get up on their feet and act out different situations, practise standing tall, show how they can look confident etc. I also like the fact that

coaching can indirectly give them a real boost of self-esteem. If a child can see that what we have discussed is working, then they will feel better about themselves – an 'I can do it' attitude will make them realise they are capable of making significant changes. If they can make one, they can make others in their life going forward.

### Working with Nathan


I remember working with Nathan (not his real name) who had an ADHD diagnosis and who found it difficult to make friends. He tended to stick with his parents' friends and other adults rather than his peers. His parents wanted me to work with him on his social skills and also get him to understand the rules of friendship. I saw him in term time so that he was able to practise new-found skills during our weeks apart.

We started off discussing the importance of having friends of his own age and the drawbacks of mixing only with adults. We then progressed to discussing his interests and the attributes we look for in friends. Having created a picture of the type of friends he would like to have, we discussed how to start a conversation, eye contact, body language. We talked about starting up a dialogue with a peer and what the next steps would be in becoming friends. I saw Nathan for quite a while until he had made a few friends and created a small social life for himself. Again, he was happier, as he had been able to make changes himself and found peers who accepted him for who he was.

Making and keeping friends is something that does not come naturally to a child who has ADHD, so they have to be taught how to make them. We think of making friends generally as an easy process, but it requires many different skills – ones that most of us take for granted: talking, listening, sharing, being polite etc. In this boy's situation, I needed the support of the parents to make sure their son was happy with the way his friendships were going and to get him to talk about any problems or situations he was finding difficult.

In summary, I cannot say that coaching any child with ADHD will work every time, but in my experience it is an alternative to behaviour therapy. Children with ADHD enjoy the liveliness of the sessions and because they are so practical, with a bit of concentration, they can listen, absorb and make positive changes in their lives. ■

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