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Dr. Hallowell

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF LIFE



Their Beautiful Minds

Dr. Edward M. Hallowell

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— Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.

It is time, long since past due, to follow a strengths-based paradigm as we understand children's minds, especially the minds of those children who struggle to learn. It is time to reject the pathology based model of disabilities, disorders and diseases and replace it with a more comprehensive and neurologically capacious model that emphasizes talents, interests, and strengths as well as the obstacles that get in the way of their developing.

Priscilla Vail, a dear friend and educator who died too young, understood these children so well. She spent her career working with them in various independent schools. She didn't invoke fancy diagnostic labels and she eschewed the disparaging medical terms. In her book, *Smart Kids with School Problems*, she simply called them "conundrum children." They had talent, but they struggled to do school well. "They are not looking for the easy way out," Priscilla used to say. "They are looking for the right way in." It is high time for us to help them find their various right ways in.

School Success = Life Success

I went to high school (Phillips Exeter Academy) with a child who struggled academically. He was several years ahead of me. He recounted his time at Exeter in the following words:

I simply accepted the conventional wisdom of the day. I was a struggling student, therefore I was stupid. I was such a poor student, I needed five years to pass the three year foreign-language requirement; and in my fifth year at Exeter



in my second “senior” year, I was taking Math III for the second time (I had already taken Math II twice).

I was such a weak student, I passed Latin I with a D and flunked Latin II; then I switched to Spanish, which I barely survived. . .

I wasn’t diagnosed learning disabled or dyslexic at Exeter; I was just plain stupid. I failed a spelling test and was put in a remedial spelling class because I couldn’t learn how to spell. I still can’t spell. I was advised to see the school psychiatrist!

This advice made no sense to me then and it makes no sense to me now but if you were a poor student at Exeter, you would develop such a lasting sense of inferiority that you’d probably be in need of a psychiatrist one day. . . .

The name of this struggling student is John Irving. He went on to become one of the world’s foremost novelists and one of Exeter’s most illustrious alums.

The crucial point is that John Irving is no anomaly. You all have heard the stories of the legions of famous people who struggled in school. One of the great myths many parents buy into is that school performance predicts performance in adult life. It does not. Albert Einstein struggled in school Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman, William Faulkner, Edward Albee, and Ernest Hemingway didn’t even graduate from college. James Carville, David Neeleman (founder of JetBlue), Clarence Page (Pulitzer Prize winning columnist), and Sharon Wohlmut (Pulitzer Prize winning photo journalist) all have attention deficit disorder.

And yet, in most schools, and in the hearts and minds of most adults and even children, smart vs. stupid is the gradient upon which a student’s mind and general worth gets measured. If you get good grades, you are smart. If you don’t, you are either stupid or lazy or both. This primitive and inaccurate notion dies hard. While we try to kill it, using all the science we have to refute it, it continues to kill the spirits of millions of children and adults every year.

If it were true, if smart vs. stupid were the best test of a person’s merit and ability to contribute to society, then fine, measure it, and let those who score low suck it up and get used to life at the bottom of life.

But it is not true. How tragic that the worship of this golden calf costs us a great chunk of our most valuable resource: the spunk and verve of our children.

If getting top grades does not predict living the best kind



of life, then what does? With what alternative ought we to replace the golden calf?

Essential Attitudes Developed in Childhood

The predictors of living the best kind of life are not the grades but the attitudes developed during childhood. Attitudes like: confidence, enthusiasm, a strong interest in something, optimism, the ability to persist in the face of disappointment, the ability to ask for help when you need it and give help when it is needed, spunk, a sense of humor, courage, ambition, the ability to take responsibility and to do the right thing when no one is looking, these are the attitudes that actually do predict doing well in life.

And, great good news, everyone can develop these attitudes. Unlike top grades, which necessarily are reserved for just a few, every child can develop the positive attitudes named above.

Tragically, our current methods of “helping” children who struggle in school make it all but impossible to develop these attitudes. Using our pathology based model, when we diagnose and treat these children, we often inadvertently instill the most dangerous learning disabilities. By far, the most dangerous learning disabilities, what truly holds people back in life, are not ADHD or dyslexia.

The dangerous disabilities are fear, shame, loss of hope, broken confidence, shattered dreams, and a feeling of being less than.

Those are the disablers. Without meaning to, teachers, parents, doctors and other professionals instill these disablers every day in the name of helping children.

The model I advocate is a model that identifies talents and strengths first and foremost, and only then looks at what is getting in the way of developing those talents and strengths. As a psychiatrist who specializes in treating so called learning disabilities like ADD and dyslexia, I do not see myself as treating disabled children but rather as developing champions. I see every child who has ADD or dyslexia as a champion in the making. It is up to me, and all the other adults, to make sure the champion emerges, just as John Irving’s parents did all they could to make sure the champion emerged, with the help of certain angels like, in Irving’s case, his wrestling coach, Ted Seabrooke.

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Mining for Gems

I know whereof I speak. I have both ADD and dyslexia myself, and I wouldn't trade either for the world. This is because I have learned, in my nearly 30 years of practicing psychiatry, that these "disabled" children are anything but. I think of them as "magnificently minded."

I have learned that embedded in the learning problem, embedded in the challenged mind, there are precious gems. It is my job, our job, to mine them. It is simply a fact that most people who possess great talent also face great challenges. Think to yourself of the highly talented people you know. How many of them struggle with depression, or an anxiety disorder, or substance abuse, or bi-polar disorder, or ADD, or dyslexia? In fact, it is difficult to find a highly creative person who does not struggle with one of those conditions. But if all they feel is the presence of the negative and never hear about the positive, then they begin to become just the negative.

So it is time to reject the model that emphasizes what's wrong, disabled, disordered and diseased and replace it with a model that emphasizes what's right, what's good, what's strong. In that context, it becomes far easier to work on the problems, simply because the child and the parents are doing so in a context of hope and enthusiasm. Instead of feeling like a disabled child in need of treatment, the child can feel like a champion in the making, a member of the society of the magnificently minded. That switch in emphasis, I have learned, makes all the difference in the world.

If your child is struggling in school, take heart. His or her learning problem is likely a marker of talent. Sure, there is a struggle. Sure, you worry. Sure, you hate to see your child work hard and get poor grades.

But you can take steps to mine the gems. Be sure you are working with a professional and a school which can help you develop the talent, not just address the problems and struggles. You need to do both simultaneously, develop talent and address short comings but in an atmosphere that is free of shame and fear and full of hope and positive energy.

This is not spin doctoring. This is the truth. This is the method that works the best. The conundrum children Priscilla Vail wrote about are some of our most talented children. But they need special help. Otherwise their

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talent can go to waste and they can lead lives of chronic underachievement. They usually can't unwrap their gifts on their own. They need a great teacher, an angel of a coach, a parent who never gives up on them and works as their advocate. They need to know that at least a couple of people believe in them no matter what.

The Power of Sustained Love

The good news is that today we have more ways of unwrapping these children's gifts than we have ever had before. From medications, to exercise-based treatments, to neurofeedback, to nutritional remedies, to specialized coaching and tutoring, to mindfulness training, we have a vast and potent armamentarium from which to draw.

But I am here to tell you, based on 30 years of real life-in-the-trenches experience, the most potent treatment of all, bar none, is love. Especially love sustained over time. Nothing comes close in its power to bring out the best in a person.

If you have a conundrum child, a member of the society of the magnificently minded, you might feel that I am writing a fairy tale.

You might feel that your child is cursed with a terrible disadvantage. Before you go there, let me warn you that that kind of thinking risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your child needs you to believe in him or her no matter what. John Irving's story, and the legions of others I could tell you about are not fairy tales. They are true.

The power of love sustained over time always leads to improvement. It can be painful to go through the many struggles, but if you keep at it, gradually you will see the champion begin to emerge. Gradually you will see your son or daughter take flight and lead the great life he or she was meant to lead.

It is an heroic journey, both on the part of the child and the parents. And don't forget the special heroes called teachers and coaches. It won't happen overnight. There is no quick fix. But work with a doctor and a school that "gets" your child, sees the sparkle, values the positives, and you will find your way to a magnificent life for your magnificently minded child.

The most potent treatment of all, bar none, is love.

Dr. Edward Hallowell

Dr. Hallowell is a child and adult psychiatrist, NY Times bestselling author, world-renowned speaker and one of the world's foremost authorities on ADHD. As the author of 20 books, former faculty member at Harvard Medical School, the founder of the Hallowell Centers (based in New York City, Boston, and San Francisco) and an adult living with ADHD, He has worked with people living with ADHD and mental-health issues for more than 30 years.

Dr. Hallowell has been prominently featured in the media, including Oprah, CNN, PBS and NPR, BBC, 60 Minutes, The Today Show, Dateline, Good Morning America, the Harvard Business Review, Washington Post, and the New York Times among others. He is a charismatic speaker, combining his vast academic knowledge and clinical experience with his incredible understanding of ADHD, human nature and the struggles children and adults face in today's world.



ADHD FOR TEACHERS

10 Tips on the Classroom Management of ADHD

The following tips on classroom management of ADHD were presented in *Driven to Distraction*. They are revised, updated, and reprinted here because we have heard from many teachers that they have found them to be very helpful. These techniques will assist all students, whether they had ADHD or not, but they are especially helpful for students who have ADHD.

Teachers know what many professionals do not: that there is no one syndrome of ADHD, but many; that ADHD rarely occurs in "pure" form by itself, but rather usually shows up entangled with several other problems such as learning disabilities or mood problems; that the face of ADHD changes with the weather, inconstant and unpredictable; and that the treatment for ADHD, despite what may be serenely elucidated in various texts, remains a task of hard work and devotion.

There is no easy solution for the management of ADHD in the classroom, or at home for that matter. After all is said and done, the effectiveness of any treatment for this disorder at school depends upon the knowledge and the persistence of the school and the individual teacher.

If the teacher can master the following tips, teaching students with ADHD should become much easier and more effective. These students can transform over the school year. They can change from being your most frustrating students to your most rewarding.

These suggestions are intended for teachers of students of all ages. Some suggestions will be obviously more appropriate for younger students, others for older, but the unifying themes of structure, education, and encouragement pertain to all.

1. First of all, make sure what you are dealing with really is ADHD. It is definitely not up to the teacher to diagnose ADHD, but you can and should raise questions.

2. Ask the student what will help. This obvious step is almost always overlooked. We adults are usually so busy trying to figure out by ourselves what is best for these students, what we should be to or for them, that we forget to ask them what they think will help. These students are often very intuitive. They can tell you how they can learn best if you ask them. They are often too embarrassed to volunteer information because it can be rather eccentric. But try to sit down with the student individually and ask how he or she learns best. By far the best "expert" on the how the student learns best is the student himself or herself. It is amazing how often their opinions are ignored or not asked for. In Addition, especially with older kids, make sure the student understands what ADHD is. This will help both of you a lot.

3. Remember that ADHD students need structure. They need their environment to structure externally what they can't structure internally on their own. Make lists. Students with ADHD benefit greatly from having a table or list to refer back to when they get lost in what they're doing. They need reminders. They need previews. They need repetition. They need direction. They need structure.

4. Make frequent eye contact. You can "bring back" an ADHD student with eye contact. Do it often. A glance can retrieve a student from a daydream or give permission to ask a question or just give silent reassurance.

5. Go for quality rather than quantity of homework. Students with ADHD often need a reduced load. As long as they are learning the concepts, they should be allowed this. They will put in the same amount of study time, just not get buried under more than they can handle.

6. Monitor progress often. Students with ADHD benefit greatly from frequent feedback. It helps keep them on track, lets them know what is expected of them and if they are meeting their goals, and can be very encouraging.

7. Seek out and underscore success as much as possible. These students live with so much failure; they need all the positive handling they can get. **This point cannot be overemphasized: these students need and benefit from praise.** They love encouragement. They drink it up and grow from it. And without it, they shrink and wither. Often the most devastating aspect of ADHD is not the ADHD itself, but the secondary damage done to self-esteem. So water these students well with encouragement and praise.

8. Suggest to the student that they write little notes to themselves to remind them of their questions about what is being taught. In essence, they can take notes not only on what is being said to them, but what they are thinking as well. This will help them listen more effectively.

9. Stress preparation prior to coming into class. The better idea the student has of what will be discussed on any given day, the more likely the material will be mastered in class.

10. Always be on the lookout for sparkling moments. These students are far more talented and gifted than they often seem. They are full of creativity, play, spontaneity, and good cheer. They tend to be resilient, always bouncing back. They tend to be generous of spirit, and glad to help out. They usually have a "special something" that enhances whatever setting they're in. Remember, there is a melody inside that cacophony, a symphony yet to be written.

Adapted from **Answers to Distraction**, Edward M. Hallowell, M.D. and John J. Ratey, M.D., Pantheon, New York, 1995

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