

“Joe forced me to become a better teacher”

Robin Launder recalls the pupil who compelled him to quickly get up to speed on ADHD – and the lessons he learned in the process...

Joe came to my class in the middle of year 6 – a funny, lively and charismatic boy who loved trains, geography and Man United. He was also a boy who had ADHD. And I very quickly realised that I was out of my depth.

His behaviour was a whirlwind of disruption. I was exhausted by the end of the first hour, let alone the first day.

That night I decided to do my research, and find out what works and what doesn't for students with ADHD. I knew I needed a strategic approach – and given how demotivated I felt, it was obvious what the first strategy had to be.

STRATEGY 1

Depersonalise

I had to manage my own emotional responses. Being able to manage myself was a prerequisite for being able to manage Joe, and to do that I knew I had to depersonalise his behaviour. I coined a phrase, a mental mantra, that I'd repeat to myself in order to stay emotionally neutral: “*This is Joe's ADHD*”.

It worked. Whatever the behaviour, be it chatting, shouting out, picking up other students' belongings, asking me inappropriate questions or whatever, I'd repeat my mantra and keep my cool – and my professionalism.

STRATEGY 2

Seating plan

I initially seated Joe in the middle of the classroom. That was a big 360° mistake, because it placed Joe at the centre of every possible distraction.

The next day he was at the front with me. Now, with his back to the class, his attention instantly improved. Having him close also made it easier for me to keep him on task.

STRATEGY 3

Standing plan

Some students with ADHD also benefit from a standing plan, since sitting for long periods of time can be difficult for them. For Joe, however, standing breaks were another route to distraction, so I avoided them. To compensate, I built movement into Joe's day, getting him to hand out and collect in work, clean my whiteboard, run messages. It helped.

STRATEGY 4

Vary it

The trick to sustaining Joe's attention was variety from one lesson to the next, but also variety within lessons.

Silent working, pair work, group work, cooperative learning, card sorts, quickfire quizzes, hot seating, project-based work, videos, multimedia use – shifting

between these and other approaches helped to keep Joe engaged and learning.

STRATEGY 5

Chunking

Joe's least favourite activity was writing. The longer the assignment the more he disliked it, and the more he disliked it, the more challenging his behaviour became.

What helped was 'chunking' – breaking the work down into meaningful blocks of learning with short-term goals. It allowed for minimal breaks, gave me an opportunity to check his understanding and made the work seem less daunting.

STRATEGY 6

Nudges

We all need a little nudge sometimes to help us modify our behaviour. With Joe, the more explicit that nudge, the better.

To control classroom noise, for instance, I used a traffic light poster. Red, no talking; orange, hushed paired work; green, open discussion. Prior to Joe joining my class, to get student silence it was enough for me to say 'We are now in red'. But that didn't work for Joe.

What did work, though, was something I now call the 'triple-tell approach'. I would:

1. Explicitly point at the

red rule

2. Get all the students to look at the red rule

3. Read out the rule in full: 'Red means no talking'

The triple-tell approach gives three routes into the brain, and so amplifies the message.

STRATEGY 7

Routines

Students with ADHD benefit greatly from routines. The thing is, though, those routines can take a very long time to become, well, routine.

The 'You tell me' approach helped. Instead of reminding Joe of what any given routine entailed, I would get him to remind me. If the class were about to go to the school library, for example, I would get Joe to tell me the routine for doing just that – the what, the when and the how. I'd turn it into a bit of a game, seeing how much he

could remember. It's another explicit nudge, of course, but this time a preparatory one.

STRATEGY 8

Descriptive praise

All students need praise, but students with ADHD need it even more – not least because they're less likely to get it. For Joe, I praised his effort, his progress and his approach (how he did something). In other words, I used descriptive praise. My focus was his academic work and his behaviour, including his ability to remember and adhere to routines.

STRATEGY 9

Reach

Joe rarely completed homework, despite an end-of-day routine where we would check that all his homework was in his planner. I therefore enlisted the help of his mum, and together with Joe's input we created a set of home-based routines to get the work done.

Initially there wasn't much progress, but we eventually got there. And we got there because of the next strategy.

STRATEGY 10

Persistence

Persistence gets you to where you want to go.

But there's another reason, beyond the obvious, why my persistence helped Joe. It helped because it gave Joe two important messages – it told him that I believed in him, and that he was worth persisting with.

If you believe that your teacher believes those things about you, then ADHD or no ADHD, you will make progress.

But I also made progress too. Which leads me to my last strategy; one that I've taken with me since my time with Joe.

STRATEGY 11

Be thankful for challenges

Joe challenged me (I'll never forget that first hour!) and in the process he forced me to become a better teacher. Not a perfect teacher, not the best teacher – just a better teacher.



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