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Neurodiversity and Learning Strengths- Students with ADHD

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Some of these kids will have formal diagnoses of attention deficit & hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with hyperactive or impulsive actions or inattention. These are incorrectly labelled as 'deficit disorders' but are more accurately variations of the range of human experience with advantages as well as obstacles. There are many factors that may play an important role in inattentiveness or hyper-activity, including sleep deprivation, lack of physical care or exercise, neurochemical imbalances, fear & worries about school. There are many other ways to support these kids that do not always involve medication.

One strategy is for young people to know their learning strengths & how their brain works to help focus them & increase academic results.

These kids are like belly buttons.

It has taken more years of clinical psychology than I care to mention to finally realise that these kids are like belly buttons. Some are 'innies' & others are 'outies'. We notice the 'outies' a lot more than the 'innies.' That's because they are louder.

The 'innies'

'Innies' are dreamy people who can appear not to listen & are more likely to obtain a diagnosis involving inattentiveness. They have short

attention spans for regular events & hate doing boring things.

When some 'innies' try to concentrate, the level of activity in their frontal lobes decreases. Their brain turns off when it should be turning on.

In terms of learning, 'innies' often struggle with:

- Organising -can start but not finish things
- Time management & estimation
- Prioritising & sequencing
- Focusing & shifting attention
- Sustaining effort

The 'outies'

'Outies' often gain diagnoses involving hyper-activity or impulsivity. Being an 'outie' can be like owning a sportscar fitted with the brakes that would struggle to stop a scooter.

'Outies' often struggle with:

- Controlling their impulses
- Managing when things are quiet & settled
- Shame & feelings of having revealed too much about themselves

One of the strongest, long-term predictors of well-being & resilience for both 'innies' & 'outies' is to help them be successful in school. Unassisted or unsupported, their long-term prospects can be worryingly bleak.

Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage

Neurodiversity gives humans a survival advantage through increasing flexibility & adaptability. We are not born to all think the same way. Our collective neurodiversity is a neuro-advantage.

These kids have energy to burn. They turn the volume up to eleven & keep it there. They wake up early, ready to fly. Others heroically hold it together all day long & then collapse into meltdowns later in the day or evening.

We often think about mindful calming as a process of slowing & calming. For some of these kids the more quickly experiences happen, the more able they are to focus & be engaged. Despite this, they are often mentally tired. It is a tough combination being tired & restless at the same time. The accelerator pedal is close to the floor, but it takes a lot of work to keep the steering working.

Neuro-advantages

In a world where people are often casually off-hand, these kids are exuberant enthusiasts.

Hyperfocus means that they can focus on a task for hours on end, tuning out everything around them. Of course, this can interfere with sleep at times.

Helping them to see the value of their laser-like focus & then knowing how to broaden their thinking & to think creatively is a great neuro-advantage.

I admire the courage & bravery of these kids. Many of them will stand up for what they believe in & have a strong sense of justice. The obstacles they face in life mean that with support, they will become highly resilient.

Generally, they have a sensitively attuned sense of empathy & loyalty to people that they trust & who trust them.

How Parents Can Help

These kids live their lives on the edge but that's where the interesting things happen.

Neurodivergence tends to run in families and is often expressed differently in boys & girls. While neurodivergence bestows advantages, it can be hard work being non-mainstream. We need to celebrate differences while also helping them to fit in. We need to be careful to protect against an increased risk of depression & deprived sleep. At times their tendency to hyper-focus means they may ruminate on gloomy thoughts.

I have written about parenting these tricky kids in my books. The long-term aim is not for parents to manage these kids but for them to manage themselves.

Highly reactive young people need more positive life events. They need teachers & parents who are the antidote to the negativity they receive.

Living with these kids is challenging. Some don't settle & they don't sleep for long. For some, the completion of an hour of homework takes 4 hours with screaming. They live in messy rooms, write work projects in erratic handwriting & have chaotic life schedules. Parenting them is like trying to hold on to a squiggling salmon.

Learning strengths can help to direct their efforts towards their areas of strength. Complete the analysis of learning strengths at www.mylearningstrengths.com & use the free letter to create a conversation about building on the identified strengths. Discuss these with your child's teacher(s). A full report is also available outlining strategies, strengths, & possible future career areas.

Spatial reasoning

Often an area of learning strength as they can often think more powerfully in images than in long strands of words. Using visuals rather than words, drawing, colouring, trail making, join the dots are some ways they can settle. Creating schedules with different colours for different activities can be helpful.

Increasing this learning strength will also promote their ability to 'read' other people.

Perceptual and motor skills

Careless or clumsy? While these kids can be quite physical, they can also be quite accident prone. Developing this learning strength through sport, rock wall climbing, martial arts or high intensity training benefits their learning.

These kids often prefer to do things rather than sit back & reflect on things. Their high-octane energy levels mean they are usually keen on physical activities & sports.

Individual sports will suit some of them more than team sports where higher levels of people smarts & verbal negotiation are required.

Dance, table tennis, badminton, martial arts movements, rapid tai chi, finger movement games & standing or walking will usually help these kids to focus or settle.

Computer games such as Pokémon GO, Wii Fit Zumba Fitness, Dance Dance Revolution & Fitness Boxing may also be helpful.

Some will seek out sensations if they feel distressed, others will avoid closeness & will react powerfully if someone invades their personal space, & others will use physical means to distract themselves. Knowing their preferences in advance is incredibly advantageous.

If there are difficulties in handwriting, spatial skills, fine motor development or sensory perception, further assessment may help.

Concentration and memory

Most of these kids underachieve at school because of variable concentration. However, they are able to develop vice-like focus on things that fascinate them,

Exercise will help some. Others will benefit from reminders on smart phones & devices to keep track of time & to remind them to complete or shift to different activities or tasks.

They need consistency but also need stimulation to pay attention. The aim is a state of relaxed, alert stimulation.

Their heightened stress hormones decrease immunity & activity in their hippocampus often resulting in memory problems.

Binaural beats, puzzles, memory quizzes, doodling, knitting, fidget spinners are some ways of help these kids focus & learn.

Planning and sequencing

Even with strengths in this area, these kids often take a crisis management focus to life. They seem to seek out adrenaline. The moment is what matters to them.

Organisational skills are often poor & they struggle to follow through. It can be better to have several tasks or activities on the go at the one-time to increase variability (& stimulation).

Take a load off these kids minds by giving choices, "*Would you like to do ... first or ... first?*" If they refuse those, add another option & repeat, "*So would you like to do ... (new option) or or ... first?*" Outline the options & let them make decisions.

Help them develop the art of writing things down, making to-do lists & making notes. Creating project planners that outline each step towards an outcome & prioritising the steps helps them to use this learning strength to actively create success.

Have them keep a folder with a separate section for each subject & make sure everything that goes into the notebook is put in the correct section. Keep subjects colour coded.

Lego blocks, chess, backgammon, badminton, table tennis, Sim City, Minecraft, Monument Valley will help these kids to learn.

Thinking and logic

Developing this learning strengths in a great advantage for both 'innies' & 'outies'. They are able to think clearly & logically but almost invariably they act before they think which leads to learning problems. We need to have strategies for helping them have their actions align with their intellect. As outies are often dramatic & conflict seeking some will love the 'cut & thrust' of debates & philosophical disputes. 'Innies' may prefer discussions about ethical approaches to social issues.

Forensic sciences may interest some, logic puzzles & ethical dilemmas can all help develop this learning strengths. Chess is the best game for improvement of strategic & logical thinking. Code Hero, Portal & Portal 2, The Legend of Zelda -Kingdom of Tears are great strategy & thinking type games.

People smarts.

A common misunderstanding is that neurodivergent kids always have poor interpersonal skills. This is not true. Some are highly tuned into others, pick up on the feelings of others accurately & are deeply sensitive.

Girls with attention issues can become prone to rejection sensitivity & become anxious & lose confidence in their own judgement in social settings. Boys may be more likely to express this by becoming oppositional. For these kids moods & negativity are highly contagious. Be the antidote.

An accepting peer group is essential for these kids to develop people smarts.

Cynicism & sarcasm are destructive forces in these kids' lives. Never use them.

Some of these kids have interpersonal problems because it is generally not helpful to say to other people everything you think. Their energy & impulsivity can be seen by others as rudeness & thoughtless.

Games such as Slenderman, Flappy Bird, Tap the Frog & Ant Smasher help students to recognize their emotional reactions to different experiences & develop awareness about the physiological component of emotions.

Learning 'people reading' & conversational skills is a major long-term advantage.

Language and word smarts

This learning strength can be developed through theatre sports, acting & debating. The intensity of life for some of these kids means they seek calm & refuge in graphic novels. Others write & illustrate diaries & notes. I suspect that all great poets & quite a few songwriters are neuro divergent.

Word games, crossword puzzles, find the word games, graphic novels, wordle are just some of the activities that develop this further.

Some neurodivergent kids become avid readers as it helps them to understand mysteries in their personal world.

Number smarts

Relate numbers to activities- distance, speed, force, impact. You will often get further in this area assisting the active kids to develop trails, jumps & skate ramps than by talking about numbers abstractly. Try to include a physical option outdoors wherever you can.

Estimation games, measurement activities, surveying, mapping, sudoku will all help these kids to focus.

Computer games such as Farming Simulator are good for stretching number smarts. It allows players to work as a farmer who raises livestock & grows & sells crops to earn money. Players can control farm machinery & breed animals in the game.

In summary too many of our neurodivergent kids with attention issues conclude they are not clever & can't succeed at school. This is not true. It takes some time & planning to create a clear learning success plan, but the payoffs are substantial.

Careful thought about helping them identify & build learning strengths makes a major long-term difference to their lives.

At school they may need extra time on tests, a quiet room, oral clarification of tasks & assistance to focus on important issues.

Of course, the strategies mentioned in this paper don't only apply to young people. They may also help some adults.

Next steps

Schools could ask parents & students to complete the assessment of learning strengths & use this as a basis for collective planning over the next term. This could also be integrated with career planning for senior students.

Schools could also consider hosting professional development sessions on neurodivergence & learning strengths to consider ways of building on the strengths of all students.

It is essential that we regard neurodivergence as a strength rather than as a deficit & applaud, support & build the strengths of all of our wonderful young people.

I am inspired by the work of Prof Amanda Kirby & Liz Keable & recommend their work to you. Both generously share their research on linked-in.

I also value my discussions with Kerry Gilmore & Jess Duff who helped in preparing this paper & I express my gratitude to them.

More information

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Andrew's website

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 45,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

Linked in

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On face book:

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Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

Unlocking Your Child's Genius
Tricky Behaviours
The A to Z of Feelings (Bad Apple Press)

Book for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning (Hawker-Brownlow).

