

Ask The EXPERT

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My fourteen-year-old son is very bright, and when he's able to do homework on the computer he gets A's. But his handwriting is impossible to read and his coordination is terrible. The stress of taking a test in a classroom setting, combined with his handwriting difficulty, makes every pop quiz a nightmare. Is there anything that an occupational therapist can do to help him? He takes medication to control his tics, but he still has pronounced physical tics that often involve his hands, arms and legs.

An Occupational Therapist (OT) could approach this in two different ways. One way is to work with the school and the district to provide your son with a portable note taker/word processor to use during classes. These devices are commonly used, are inexpensive and portable. The OT could also work with his teachers to help them put quizzes, and other in-class assignments on a disc. This would be a very reasonable accommodation under the IDEA federal education legislation or Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act which both require that a child receive the help necessary to be included in and benefit from a public education.

An OT could also help your son learn some relaxation techniques that he could use when he feels himself getting stressed in school. These techniques can help him get through many stressful experiences during the school day. An OT could also evaluate the underlying causes of your son's handwriting difficulties and may be able to help him to develop somewhat better handwriting. This will depend on the evaluation.

My daughter is only ten but I can already see a repeat of my own "bad study habits." She has trouble concentrating, is easily distracted and gets frustrated very quickly. Her TS tics are not particularly severe, but her ADHD is already having an impact on her in school and socially. Is there anything I can do to help her focus on the task at hand? It took me years to learn how to be organized. I'd like to spare her some of the problems I had when I went to school.

There are many organization strategies. The key is to have an OT work with your daughter to find those that are most useful to her—that fit in with her classroom activities and your home environment and

schedule. For instance, some people work well with electronic reminders that can be programmed into a wristwatch, a pocket PC or a personal organizer device. Some can give a vibration signal instead of a more public auditory signal and can remind the user to pay attention during lessons, do math homework, etc.

A routine after school can be very helpful, but hard for someone with ADD to institute and keep to. Adults with ADD can also work with an OT to learn individual organization strategies and to help them to practice long enough to develop new habits. A list with a pen to check off each item when completed helps some people. A personal reward schedule may help. For instance, "I can't call my friend until I finish my math homework". Doing homework in smaller segments often helps and the hardest for busy parents—calm encouragement to work it out on your own. You KNOW she can do it—communicate that to her.

There are no "quick fixes" and it may help to have someone to talk to in school. Find out if there is a resource room teacher or just someone who understands the stress and frustration of ADD, and of being a child, that your daughter can go to when needed.

My son is a nice kid but he has a temper and it's getting worse. I think it's related to how frustrated he gets because it takes him much longer to finish school assignments. He feels angry and depressed and says that he's "stupid" but I think that his tics just make it hard for him to read, study and organize his time. Are there any techniques that could help him?

The OT could help with study and organization habits and strategies as with the child above. In addition, I've found that organizing a small group that can be supervised by the OT can be very valuable in helping children learn how to use other strategies to interact with peers and to manage frustration and anger.

If your son can become involved in tutoring younger children or helping others his age in an area that is easier for him, this may help him see his own strengths and experience success. Finding that "just right challenge" is a key for occupational therapists—an activity that provides

enough challenge to promote growth, learning and mastery, but not so difficult that he feels frustrated and gives up. You are right that telling a child he is smart often does not make much of an impact on how the child feels about himself. He needs to see that he can be effective in something, and then that feeling can extend to other areas.

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