

Learning From Those We Label With ADHD

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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, is a common learning disability that can have a variety of effects on a person, especially in a classroom setting. For my cousin Emerson, she struggled so much with self control, self-esteem, and labels (including self-labeling) as a result of the treatment she received in school. Once being diagnosed, everything changed for her, inside and outside of school.

Before being diagnosed, Emerson felt dumb, different, and frustrated all the time. She really emphasized that she felt as though her brain was physically broken because she had no control over her actions. There were times when she sometimes felt like she was watching herself in third person. She really struggled with listening, focusing, and gaining motivation during class and when doing homework. Fidgeting, talking, or moving around a ton and it got her in trouble very often. When in class, Emerson wanted to listen, she wanted to sit still and be quiet, but as soon as she thought of something she felt like she had to do or say it or she felt she would explode. Not being able to control what she did or said made her feel defeated, frustrated, and as though she was a failure. Her teachers never understood what was going on inside of her head. They often told her she was “bad” or that she had “behavioural issues” or “no filter”. She was always sent to the hallway or the office because she was too distracting for the other students or the teacher thought she was being disrespectful. One year, around grade one or two, Emerson was given her own cubby in the back of the classroom. She would be sent there to do her school work so she would not distract other kids and would have less distractions for herself as well. Constantly being separated from all the other kids for something she could not control made her feel so isolated and alone. This had huge affects on her social skills, especially with making friends in school. Not only was she always separated so she never gained the skills to make

friends, but the other students thought she was different so they often did not try to be her friend. Emerson struggled with anxiety from a very young age because of her ADHD and the lack of building social skills did not help this in any way. There was no support for her from the administration or teachers because they thought she was just acting in such a way because she wanted attention. Their solution was to send her into the hallway during important lessons so she would not be disruptive.

After being diagnosed, everything started to change. Teachers realized that she was not just “bad” and actually needed support and more attention. They began to care more and would go over to her desk during or after lessons to ask if she was doing okay with the concepts, and if not, they would actually explain it further now. She was given fidgets and rocking chairs to try and help as well. Emerson said in our interview that the most challenging part of ADHD was the “mental game it played” with her. It ruined her self-esteem from a very young age. After being diagnosed, this struggle did not go away and it was even more challenging to become motivated in school. Motivation was something she struggled with very intensely before as well. After noticing Emerson’s lack of motivation, the teachers began to start sitting down with her to talk about and make plans or schedules for assignments she was having trouble with. This was a game changer for her. The Covid-19 pandemic made school even more challenging for Emerson as her motivation and focus for school was as low as ever. Teachers stopped helping and supporting her as much during the pandemic because everyone was trying to navigate such new ways of school.

During the interview, I asked Emerson what is something she wishes teachers would do or wishes they had done to help her with her ADHD. She said, “elementary teachers, more so just all teachers in general, need to be taught how to help and work with kids with ADHD. They

need to make them actually feel accepted rather than different and hated because of how they are and what they cannot control”. She then explained to me that this is the reason she wants to be a teacher after she graduates, she does not want any other child to go through the trauma she had to. This was so inspiring to me as a person who is so passionate about advocating and supporting students with learning and physical disabilities in the classroom. I would love to be the teacher Emerson wishes she had but I know that there is a lot I will have to learn. I have already learned so much about what I want to implement in my future classrooms just from this interview.

One of my most important takeaways from my interview with Emerson is that my future classroom needs to be an inviting, welcoming, and safe space for anyone and everyone, especially the students who are struggling. It is so evident that a lot of students do not feel like they belong at school or in the classroom and this is something that needs to be changed as soon as possible. There are so many ways we can help students in this aspect. One way is to never compare students to one another. Emerson mentioned a memory about how in one of her elementary classes the best students of the class that day would get stickers. She really emphasized how much this made her feel degraded and she would beat herself up over it because she was never the student to get a sticker, no matter how hard she was trying. Instead of doing something like this teacher did, I would instead sit down with each student at the beginning of each month or week and set a daily goal for themselves, whether that is hand in their assignments on time or read 10 pages of a book a day. If they complete their personal goal they can get a sticker, but it would not be done in front of the whole class as to not make another child feel compared too. This way the child is not as worried about what others are doing but focusing and working on bettering themselves. In my future classroom I will also never tell a kid that they should act like another. In school, I was a good student, the teacher would always tell other

students to “act like Zoe, she is such a good kid”. This never affected me but I could always see how sad and defeated my classmates got when this was said to them. No child is the same, meaning they will not all act and think the same so we cannot be comparing their behaviours. Instead of using another child to show the classroom expectations, you as the teacher should be demonstrating them yourself.

I have always thought that sending a child into the hallway was never an adequate solution to their actions. If they are a danger to the other students then it is a different case but for students who keep talking or disrupting the class it does not do them any good to send them out of the classroom. It does not teach them anything and can be detrimental to self-esteem and mental health. It is very important as a teacher to think about why students are behaving as they do and not just assume that you know. It is important to talk to them and explain classroom expectations and why they may be getting in trouble. Communication with your students is vital for the success of you as a teacher and them as a learner. Even just by having one conversation you can figure out a lot about a student and find solutions. If you avoid the conversation, the behaviours will not stop. For Emerson, being isolated never helped her learn how to sit still or focus during a lesson. If the teachers had just talked to her and asked her why she could not sit still they may have found solutions so much earlier than grade five. If they had not assumed she was acting the way she was for attention, they might have understood sooner that she had ADHD and needed extra assistance and time. It is understandable why teachers so often send children into the hallway or to the back of the class. We have so much going on all the time with so many students and it may be the first solution that comes to mind in order to stop the chaos. I myself am guilty of this as I did it once at the daycare centre I work at. But I have learned that there are better ways to stop a child from being disruptive or “bad”. This could be by providing them with

fidgets or rocking chairs so that they can focus better. Providing them with support before the behaviour occurs is certainly more beneficial for everyone in the classroom than simply letting the behaviour occur and then yelling at them.

I have also realized how important it is to check up on each and every student regularly and make sure they are understanding the concepts being taught in class. We should be offering extra support for any student who seems to be struggling right from the beginning, whether they have been officially diagnosed with a learning disability or not does not matter. If we can do this then it can help a lot of students feel more welcomed and comfortable in the classroom environment. In these check ups we need to reassure them that as long as they are trying they are doing amazing. Letting the student know that we are proud of what they are doing and how far they have come is very important in their mental health. Reassurance is also great for improving motivation for students with ADHD, or any student in general.

Often times teachers will tell students that they are bad or loud or cannot control themselves and when the students are constantly hearing such things about themselves, they start to believe it too. This can be really hard on a student's mental health and their grades. Emerson mentioned that one of the hardest things about ADHD was dealing with her mental health. Constantly telling a student negative things about them will only make this struggle even harder. When students begin to believe the negative things people say about them, they just assume they will not be able to accomplish anything or succeed, so they stop trying and just accept it. Not only will this bring down their grades and quality of their work, but the teacher may also become more frustrated that the student is not trying, not realizing what they have done. I believe it is our job as educators to encourage students to be their best selves and lift them up and give them the opportunities they need to succeed in school. This means finding something positive to say to

students rather than always being negative towards them. When having a conversation about why a student is not doing well in the class, do not bring them down but give them opportunities and suggestions on what they can do to improve. We have to have patience when working with struggling students as well. Patience is so important because if they see you get frustrated it may make them self-conscious and frustrated as well. Even as a student who found school relatively easy, when a teacher would get annoyed by me asking them to repeat something it made me feel stupid and like a burden. I cannot even imagine how it might make someone feel when they are struggling even more.

I understand that having a child with ADHD in your class may mean more work for you as the teacher but I do not think that gives any teacher the right to neglect a student the help that they need. I think it is so important that we put in the extra effort to help a student. At first I think it may definitely be overwhelming as a teacher trying to navigate how to help the student but as both you and the student begin to figure out what works and what does not, it will become much easier. I took a class about recreation and persons with disabilities and I learned that even if you just spend one extra hour planning for a student with a disability, it could change their lives. In my opinion, One extra hour of work a week is completely worth it if the student benefits in even the smallest way. My interview with Emerson just reinforced this when she said the extra time the teachers spent with her after her diagnosis helped drastically with her school work and confidence a bit as well.

Something that I never considered before talking to Emerson was that sometimes the extra help was almost embarrassing and made her feel different. To avoid this I will not call out their name loudly in front of the class but instead maybe just go up to their desk and help them there or before class even starts I can let them know that if they need help with something they

can come after class, after the other kids have gone if they would like. I will give them options of how they would like to receive my help and support so that they can choose the most comfortable way for them. If they prefer that no one else knows about them needing extra help I may offer to do a zoom call after school when they get home. This way we would be sure that they do not miss out on recess or something fun at school. Struggling should not be treated as a consequence, we should not deprive them of their fun in school because fun is “less important”.

I have learned so much from this experience and it will forever affect my teaching strategies and classroom atmosphere for the rest of my career. It is so important that we make every child feel welcomed, loved, and supported in everything they do. We need to communicate with our students and try to find out what works best for them as a team. We need to put in the extra time for the students that need it. It may be hard at times for both the student and the teacher to communicate but with practice it will get better.