

Web-Based Radio Show

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ADHD

The Role of Emotions


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Hi, this is Dr. Greenspan coming to you from our web-based radio show. Thank you for joining us this morning.

We've been doing a series on children with attentional problems and we know that children with special needs as well as those without special needs all can have attentional problems. We've covered many elements. Today we're going to focus on the role of emotions and how they play a significant part in attentional challenges as well as in learning to pay attention. We've written about this elsewhere, and talked about this other times, too, so this won't be comprehensive, but it will give you many of the important principles and you can also refer to our other web radio shows on this subject as an addition.

We all know that children with attentional problems can sometimes pay phenomenal attention to something they're very, very, very interested in, where the positive emotions or the pleasurable emotions or the level of interest or excitement, or motivation, as we might call it, whatever term we choose to use, is very, very high. So, even the most inattentive child, if he or she is on the way for their favorite ice cream, will be very attentive to getting that ice cream. If there's a favorite new computer game they want to purchase, or a new dress or new toy or new doll or new necklace, not only is that not forgotten, but it may be a source of irritation as you get reminded constantly. "Mom, you promised..." or "Dad, you promised to take me to get that 'XYZ' today." So, surprisingly, this focused attention, persistence, follow through, even nagging, on certain elements, yet the homework – what do you know? "I forgot to hand it in." or, "Gee, I didn't realize I had homework," or "Homework? What's that?" So, we see certain areas where the child is very inattentive and that can be most areas, yet we see selective areas where the child is extremely attentive. We can draw, often, in conclusion, we can look at "What does the child really, really enjoy? What are they interested in?" and see that when there is good, focused, solid attention, and the child is paying attention, it's in the




area where they're highly, highly motivated. Even with children with severe special needs, children diagnosed with autism, we'll see a child who wants to go out the door to go outside to really persist, come back to the door, pull on the door, take Mommy or Daddy, pull their hand to the door, and yet it's very hard to get that child involved in playing with a dolly or playing with an action figure or repeating a sound or trying to say a word, and yet going for the door and trying to open the door, and trying to get you to open the door, get you to help them is a persistent, focused activity, showing a lot of attention and even a follow through.

Sometimes we use that to help the child become more organized so we may put our foot by the door and pretend not to be able to open it, and the child takes our hand, puts it back to the door, we may even point to Mommy because maybe she can help the child, go get Mommy, bring her to the door or the Daddy, you know, trying to help Mommy to help too. And the child is orchestrating an organized activity: to open that door. May even say, "Op-, Op-!" even if it's a nonverbal child until the motivation: to try to open the door. So even children with severe special needs challenges and language challenges, we may get focused attention on a high affect where the motivation level is very, very great and that tends to harness and organize the child's attentional capacities.

In general, we see a variety of patterns. Where the task is difficult for the child and the child doesn't feel able to master the task, let's say it's a child with more typical language development and social skills but has been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD but has trouble with math. You'll see that child take the "ostrich approach" to math. This means, math avoidance; they bury their head in the sand. Math homework is forgotten, it's not handed in, during math the child's mind is wandering, looking outside, or if the child is active with ADHD, they'd be getting up, fidgeting, and wandering around the room more.

Yet, the same child, if they love artwork or drama or music or a certain sport during gym, or they love to hang out with a certain friend during recess, you don't see any of those behaviors during those favorite activities. The same could be said for reading for certain children. If reading is difficult and not a source of pleasure or pride or self-esteem or competency or sense of internal mastery, it's the old 'head-in-the-sand' approach: avoid, avoid, avoid at all costs. Or, become irritable, become very active, become highly distracted while focusing on other things or other activities during that difficult task – the reading task or the writing or the math. Writing is a fairly popular one for avoidance because it involves fine motor skills and focused attention and a lot of concentration often, so it is very, very difficult for many, many children. The key to recognize is these patterns involved are emotions – the negative emotions including lack of pleasure, humiliation, and embarrassment, anger that someone wants me to do




something that I don't want to do, and they all evoke psychological mechanisms that increase the lack of attention.

Now, of course, a child with attentional problems finds it easier to become inattentive, just like a person who is not very gifted on the dance floor or the tennis courts, when we're nervous, we become even less gifted. The child who's a highly coordinated dancer or highly coordinated with their tennis athletic skills, even when they're anxious or even when they want to avoid, they'll still be pretty darn good at it. Maybe not at their peak performance, but they'll still perform reasonably well unless they make a conscious choice not to.

So, in a general sense, the weaker your skill level for an area; the weaker your confidence in the area, the more your negative emotions, embarrassment, anxiety, fear of failure, anger at having to try and not wanting to do it, the more these types of feelings will precipitate a worsening of the area where you're already vulnerable. The related general principle is that all children seem to gravitate towards things that are easier for them to do because that brings them pleasure and satisfaction. It's not that some children are simply motivated students and they are "good" children and some children are "bad" students and don't listen. What you'll find is the children who do their reading or do their writing or math often find it pleasurable because it's easy to master, source of satisfaction, source of competency, a source of internal pride, and a source of self esteem. Children who find it difficult, they can't quite get it, they don't understand it easily, it increases their inattention, increases their mind wandering. Not because they do that deliberately or even consciously often, it's just a natural tendency of children to avoid things that are difficult, gravitating towards things that are easy. So, eating ice cream, when it tastes great, is easy. Eating your carrots and peas or your broccoli when it doesn't taste good, isn't easy. All children show that tendency to avoid.

In academic areas or in school or in developing certain social skills, again, that principle holds up. So, when we have a program, this is a tangent, but when we have a program to help kids become competent at reading or at math, we're not only increasing their math and reading competency, we're increasing their sense of mastery, and therefore, pleasure, and therefore, their motivation for future learning. They'll want to be learners. Until we help them find learning fun because it's something that they can do, and all children want to do things, they want to master things, even if they claim they don't, even if they claim they don't. Even if they claim, "Why do I have to?" and "I don't like that." So, we have to help them.

Same is with the, actually, with peer relationships. Some children find the social skills more difficult and having friends more difficult. You have to give them more




practice, not less, so they find it “a piece of cake.” Then, all of a sudden, they love having friends because its fun; it’s easy. The general principle here, though, with attentional problems is you’ll see the ostrich approach or avoidance of one type or another with children when they’re doing tasks that require a lot of attention, therefore, not receiving a lot of pleasure and mastery, and yet, you’ll see the converse when they are on the way to get ice cream or on their way to the toy store for their favorite toy or their favorite dress or favorite necklace, etc.

So the point is that we see attention varying. Motivation and affect plays a very big role in this. Again, it doesn’t explain why some children have attentional problems. That’s a more complicated issue that we’ve gone into in the past but it shows why you get fluctuations in attention and also how to help some children begin mastering their attention.

The question then becomes, what is the mechanism by which this occurs? Why do emotions play such a big role and what is their role in the development of normal attention or healthy attention? What is the role in the development of coping strategies when you’re helping a child improve attention? What is the role in making the inattention even more difficult for a child? We’ll come back to that in just a second.

Now, the question is, why do emotions play such a big role and how does this come about? We talked before that in early infancy, really in the first hours and days and months of life, we see that it’s the emotions that help a baby pay attention. That baby turns right to look for Mommy’s voice because it’s a pleasurable voice with a big smiley face. The baby can’t yet see what makes up the whole face, but it can see that bright, big mouth moving, hears a sound that feels so good, and the baby looks and searches for it. That’s the beginning of paying attention, the baby looks to the left, up, and down to find that lovely voice. On the other hand, if Mommy’s voice is tense or shrill or anxious or monotone, we won’t see that same degree of focused attention. If Daddy’s voice is pleasurable and warm and lulling, you’ll see the same thing, but if Daddy’s voice is harsh or ‘look at me’ or anxious or demanding, we may see the baby turn the other direction or looking away at an object. If the baby is hypersensitive to sound, we can’t find the right rhythm or right tone, we may see the same difficulty. If the baby is under active to sound, or we don’t have enough energy in the caregiver’s voice, we may see the same pattern; we’ll see aimlessly wandering eyes or staring off at a light rather than at the voice. If the baby has the beginning of autistic spectrum disorder, where it’s hard for them to connect their emotions or their affects as we have talked about before, to their motor skills such as turning and looking, we have to be especially compelling with our voice and give the baby extra practice or else the baby just stares off into space or aimlessly wanders with their attention and their looking and their turning.




So, from day one, we see that the emotions help organize what we call the motor planning or the motor skills, but also helps organize what the baby is seeing and hearing. The baby is looking towards a pleasurable sight or sound, is coordinating sight and sound because of their affect or their positive emotions. So, it's organizing the senses, connecting it to their motor response, such as looking, and we begin seeing how emotions or affects, as we can technically call them, organize the nervous system and different parts of it. Seeing, hearing, moving, it also helps organize taste and smell and touch and eventually movement in space and eventually a purposeful action. When we see the baby reaching to Mommy's mouth to take the rattle out or to reach for the bright red toy in Mommy's hand, that too is because of desire or interest or intent.

So, our emotions are the organizers from the get-go, from day one. The more challenging a child's ability to process, or take in the sights or sounds, the more challenging for other reasons it is for a baby to pay attention, the more important the emotions become in orchestrating and harnessing that capacity, more practice the baby or child needs.

Now, we talked before how as a baby moves up the developmental ladder from just simply attending to engaging with parents with a big smile, to that exchanging lots of sound and facial expressions with smiles and looks of surprise and looks of annoyance and other expressions and gestures such as reaching and taking and giving back. As the eight or ten month old is involved in these back-and-forth interactions, with lots of different gestures of the kind we just described, it is again, harnessing that child's attention, the more what we call circles of communication, the more back-and-forth we get, such as exchanging a little toy or making sounds, the longer the span of attention. Now, the baby's interest is only one component. The baby's ability to get into these back-and-forth interactions is another component.


Another important feature happens as the baby becomes capable of back-and-forth interaction, they progress from what we call the catastrophic reaction to emotions, such as the fight-or-flight reaction where the baby either avoids or flees or shuts down, which is more than just a fight-or-flight, just kind of shutting down the whole nervous system almost, as we see in some failure to thrive babies, or you see this back-and-forth interactions. The baby who can do back-and-forth interactions is becoming a communicator, is not only attentive, but negotiating. They want a toy, they don't just yell and scream or go into a tantrum with anger as part of the fight, or they don't just sort of flee and shut down or flight or if they can crawl, run away, or walk and run away, they're negotiating, they're interacting to sustain your attention. But the baby who only has the fight-or-flight reaction or the shutting down reaction is basically inattentive. So, that transition from all-or-nothing responses to our emotions to these back-and-forth



interactions and negotiation response with our emotions is a critical step in sustaining attention even in the face of strong feelings. The stronger our feelings or the stronger the emotion or the stronger the affect, the more tendency we have to go back to the earlier pattern, the global response, which we'll call the catastrophic reaction, characterized by the fight-or-flight or the shut down, the more interactive the child, the more back-and-forth a child is capable of harnessing, the less likely they are to use these global reactions even in the face of strong emotions. But, again, the practice toddlers have and preschoolers have in staying interactive, in staying engaged with caregivers, even during intense emotions, the better and better their attention will be in the face of strong feelings.

So, as the emotions get strong when we go back up to our child trying to do a math problem, or trying to write something out to practice penmanship, or write a sentence, or even a little paragraph if they're in fourth or fifth grade, the more that goes on, and the stronger the emotions, if there's strong humiliation and embarrassment and fear of failure, strong negative emotions, the more tempting it is for the baby to enter into the fight-or-flight reaction or the catastrophic reaction where they become very inattentive. The more the baby is capable of maintaining and sustaining interaction in the face of interactions in the face of strong emotions, even if they're fearful of failure or feeling unsure of themselves, the more likely they are able to sustain their attention. So, here not only the emotions in a general sense, but the way the emotions get transformed through our different stages of what we call functional emotional development plays a strong role in how well the child sustains emotion even in the face of strong feelings, sustains their attention, I should say, even in the face of strong feelings. Now, once the baby progresses to shared social problem solving where they can have many back-and-forths in a row while solving a problem and then to the use of ideas, where they can verbalize how they feel. Then, where they can connect the ideas together and logically say why they're angry or sad or feeling bad or feeling embarrassed, then as they move up the ladder, into gray area thinking and eventually reflective thinking, where they can say, "Gee, I'm angrier than I should be today. As they progress through these higher stages of emotional development, we call it transforming the emotions to higher and higher levels, the more they're able to do that, which is very, very important to them, the better they're able to sustain their emotions and the more they can do that in the face of stronger and stronger emotions, which requires lots of practice with a partner, a teacher, caregiver, friend, somebody who helps them stay engaged and interactive in the face of strong emotions by becoming soothing at those times rather than throwing fuel in the fire, the better their attention becomes.

The more they regress to the catastrophic emotions, the worse their attention becomes. So if you have a child with attentional difficulties to begin with, where that's




the area of vulnerability, we've got to strengthen their emotional coping capacities, so even in the face of strong, negative emotions, they can sustain back-and-forth interaction, which sustains attention, and they can get into gray area thinking and reflective thinking and sustain it even in the face of strong emotions. The more they can do that, the better their attention will get. The more they go back to the catastrophic reactions, the worse their attention will become.

In just a moment, we'll discuss some strategies for promoting this. So, how do we promote and help the child master the emotional component that contributes to their attention difficulties? Again, I want to emphasize that we're not postulating here or suggesting here that the emotions are the primary cause of attention problems or the primary solution, but we need to look at how all factors in the child's personality and the way their nervous system works; the way their mind works, plays a role in contributing to something as complex as paying attention. The emotions are certainly important because, as I mentioned before, we'll see very different attention patterns when you're going for that favorite toy or ice cream versus doing your math lesson or writing an essay.

So, here's a set of principles that will help us in using our insights about the role of emotions. Now, remember, the more catastrophic the child's emotional reactions, the more inattentive, the more ostrich-like or the more aggressive or active they'll likely become. The more interactive they are, the more problem solving their orientation, the more they sustain their engagement with others, and the more they'll be able to maintain their attention no matter how difficult it is for them.

1. The first principle is, when practicing all the exercises we've mentioned in prior shows to improve the basic skills like motor planning and sequencing and modulating sensations and just basic coordination, it's very important for the child to enjoy those activities so they do them. There, the principle is 70%-80% mastery. So, you create games, you make it fun, even though you're doing things that are difficult like standing on a Kooshball. This may be difficult for a child with poor coordination. But, you make it fun, you make it a game where the child can win points, points lead to prizes, it's not a bribe, it's just making it a fun activity where the child is in a win-win situation. They're winning because they're improving their skill, and two, they're winning because they're getting points, which has immediate satisfaction for them and they're enjoying themselves with Mom or Dad or a sibling or a teacher or someone who's helping them.

Children need to be 'winning' or mastering the skills 70%-80% of the time. So, we have to break it up into small enough steps so that they can do it. If they can't yet, for example, copy a complex shape like a square or a diamond, but they can do a line, with difficulty, but they can get it 60-70% of the time, you start with just a simple line, then




you add another connecting line which maybe they can do 60-70% of the time. Now, you have two lines intersecting on a page. Eventually, that may become a rectangle or a square or a triangle or a diamond, but that may be many months later. Take it step by step so each step has 70%-80% mastery, at least 60% mastery or else the child gets frustrated and what do you get? You get the ‘ostrich’ or you get the... we need another metaphor for when the child is running away or getting aggressive. Let’s say you get a tiger or a lion, but a disorganized one. If you don’t want a tiger or a lion or you don’t want the ostrich, or you don’t want the crying hyena, then you best try to create that sense of mastery 60, 70, 80% of the time.

This is true whether it is with reading, writing, math, making friends, interacting with other children, learning to sit at the kitchen table, learning to eat with a spoon or a fork, enjoying the bathroom rather than avoiding it, trying to potty train, whatever it is, try to create that 60, 70, 80% of mastery for each step along the way.

2. The next principle is, always simplify the steps, make the steps smaller when you’re not getting that sense of mastery. In other words, the ‘tortoise and the hare’ approach to life. The tortoise will get there even if the steps are smaller and slower. You need constant progress, don’t be afraid to shorten and tighten the steps a bit. That’s principle number two, related to principle number one.


3. The more inattentive a child is, the more you want to help the child learn to pay attention as part of a relationship, not as just sitting at a desk and focusing alone. Make it interactive help that child become a two-way communicator, help that child describe what they’re doing, what they’re having trouble with, help them articulate if they’re verbal, their feelings while they’re doing it. Make it an interactive experience. In other words, have many circles of communication which itself, even though it’s not the task at hand like penmanship or math, is fostering attention because of the back-and-forth interaction, “I can’t do this, this is frustrating, this is hard.” “Well, sweetheart, what makes it so hard?” “Well, because my hands won’t do what I want them to do, my mind shuts down.” “Oh, I know, sweetheart, I had similar problems when I was little.” That conversation is practicing attention. It’s on a conversation, not on solving the math problem or figuring out how that word sounds, but it is a form of attention, and it will help, eventually, get to the place where they can figure out how to read or how to do their handwriting a little bit more effectively. So, keep a conversation going, keep the child engaged, and get more back-and-forth interaction while you are trying to master the task at hand.



4. Look for the foundation skills that are missing, the ones we've talked about in prior shows. Work on those. So the child finds the primary task easier, and do that in the pleasurable, fun way we talked about before.

5. When the child becomes catastrophic in their emotions, enters into the shut down, fight-or-flight reactions, becomes the ostrich, the angry hyena or the aggressive hyena or the angry tiger. When that happens, counter balance, technically, counter-regulate. Don't throw fuel on the fire, instead, be soothing, be organized. It's not a time for trying to teach, it's a time for 'let's calm down.' Get the child back through soothing, through activities the child may enjoy like rhythmic activities or firm pressure on the back or arms or some vestibular work where the child is in the swing or jumping, something where the child can get reorganized and regroup and get refocused. Once the child is calm, then you can talk about what happened and try to strengthen the child's interactive abilities.

6. The next principle is, for the child who goes into the fight-or-flight too easily or doesn't show the ability to tolerate more intense emotions, give the child gradual practice with more intense emotions. In pretend play, or just in play with Dad or Mom, throw in a little conflict in the play. You can tease the child gently, "I'm going to beat you at this computer game, and I'm going to beat you at this card game or this board game." "Ahh, it's my turn to win, I got you!" That may be too overwhelming for the child. The child may turn away and stop playing with you or may get angry at you. So then, lighten up a little bit. Do it just a tiny bit and then do it a little more and then a little more and so the child tolerates more intense affects and more intense feelings including feelings of victory or winning or also feelings of loss or losing or not being able to master something as well as they would like to. Again, let the child win most of the time, but let them experience the full range of human emotions from disappointment and sadness. So, we don't want disappointment or sadness or even a temporary sense of failure to throw the child into the catastrophic reactions, but for this, they need practice, practice, practice with an empathetic parent who can sooth and bring them back as soon as they experience some of these negative emotions. So, help the child become a poet of their feelings, describing their feelings, but also experiencing the feelings and expressing them and expressing them subtly not through just words, but through their facial expressions. This occurs through back-and-forth interaction and negotiation around all the feelings of life: disappointment, sadness, humiliation, failure, as well as success, victory, pleasure, excitement, surprise, novelty, and the like. As we do this with children, across all activities, and we improve, our relationships with children they are attention will improve as well.




7. Also, the next principle is, look at the family, look at the stress level and the anxiety level of the family. Anxiety always causes children to be more catastrophic, less attentive because anxiety tends to disorganize us. So, if we're anxious for the child to succeed, and we're more worried about the child failing than the child is, we're putting a lot of 'pressure' on the child before the child can handle it, not on a 21 year old in college, but on a seven year old beginning hard work at school. The child picks up our anxiety level. Instead of being like, "Oh gee, this math looks like fun!" and go to simpler levels until the child masters it, instead you say, "Oh, you don't know it, how am I going to get you into college?" If our reaction is that, the child's going to pick up the anxiety.

If there is marital distress or conflicts with siblings that go beyond the expected level of rivalry and feisty competition, which is healthy, that, too, can create a source of anxiety. If parents aren't there and the child's so worried about keeping them involved because they're working too hard or Daddy's coming home at 8:00 to put them to bed and not seeing much of him during the week, or Mommy's coming home at 8:00 and not seeing them much during the week, then that can be a source of anxiety also, and contribute to an attention problem. Again, it's not the cause of one, you may have a very attentive, studious kid who's more prone to being sad or depressed because they're not seeing enough of their parents or just turns off their reactions entirely. For children who are prone to inattention, that can be another source. So, look at the family dynamics, look at the stress level in the family, look at the anxiety level in the family, and on the contrary, look at the nurturance and the ability for the family to have long interactions, long conversations, and long play periods in a highly relaxed, soothing way. There's nothing better than a soothing, relaxed partner who hangs in there with you and you keep cooking and keep going and having long, long, long conversations.

8. The next principle is eventually, help your child identify the situations where their attention is better, where attention suffers, and help them identify their own emotional triggers. This is for the reflective child. It is hard to do this before a child is ten or eleven years old. As a child is progressing there, you can help them, coming together with earlier ages, with just simple emotions and simple reactions. As they become partners with you, identifying with this, they can be the ones who suggest coping strategies.

9. Next principle: whenever possible, have the child be the boss or the child be the leader in the problem solving. "Gee, how are you going to remember to get the homework in?" Maybe use a visual chart with diagrams and pictures in the child's room which is checked periodically or certainly checked in the early evening the night before. Maybe a little book where the child works with the teacher at the end of the day to make sure that they've jotted down all the homework assignments and then they put it up on



their little bulletin board or chalk board at home as soon as they got home, not then that they shouldn't then run out and play and have some fun, they should get out in the afternoon as long as they return to it in the evening and see what they need to do.

10. Also, another principle is, even if children have attentional problems and it takes them a long time to do their homework, we don't want homework filling up their time. Peer friendships, play time, time with Mom and Dad, and in some sense they take priority. So, the homework should be limited in time, certainly in the kindergarten and preschool years, no more than half an hour on sort of fun-like activities related to hard work, school work, and other activities to be shoring up these basic skills we've been talking about. But, then, as we get into the early grades, no more than 45 minutes a day, and then there's fifth and sixth grade, no more than an hour a day. If more time is needed, a little bit of time on Saturday, a little bit of time on Sunday, but you don't want it to get out of balance because being at school most of the day, we need time for them to play with peers and develop those skills and you need time for Mom and Dad, you need Floortime and hangout time, and working on the fundamentals we're talking about. So, keep balance in the child's day and don't let school become too overwhelming a force because what it will lead to is more catastrophic reactions, more ostrich-like or angry hyenas or mean tigers. We don't want any of those three. So, a balanced approach to life.

Those are some of the principles and we'll talk more of this in future shows and thank you for joining us today.