

ADHD COUPON PROGRAM

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The ADHD Coupon Program is designed to develop increased independence and self-monitoring skills in ADHD students, along with increased motivation for self-control and increased attention to critical work habits. This program has been used successfully with ADHD elementary and middle school students, in small special education classrooms as well as in the mainstream setting when the mainstream setting is staffed by special education personnel in addition to the classroom teacher. It is most successful when used in conjunction with the ADHD General Guidelines (see separate article).

The ADHD Student

ADHD students are often impulsive. They might speak out without waiting to be called on, they might start their work without waiting for the directions, and they may throw something at a classmate before fully realizing that this behavior is not appropriate for a classroom. ADHD students are slow to get started on their work and they take frequent breaks from their work. They are easily distracted by noise and extraneous activity around them and they are often distracted by their own tangential thoughts. ADHD students are often forgetful, they are impatient with directions and step-by-step procedures, they lose track of their things, and their materials are often completely disorganized. ADHD students are restless while sitting and listening. They have trouble sitting still for long periods of time, they have trouble sitting properly in the chair, and often they are moving their hands or feet. It is difficult for ADHD students to listen for extended periods of time and difficult for them to concentrate while reading. Their writing often lacks organization and math is full of careless errors. ADHD students can be very intelligent, as measured by IQ tests, but their performance in the classroom suffers from the problems listed above, so they are often frustrated by how difficult it is and how little they accomplish for their efforts. They are always being told what to do. They are more often corrected and reprimanded for their poor work habits. They more often disrupt the class, annoy their classmates and suffer low social status. They are often behind in their work. They more often lose privileges and are left out of rewarding activity. ADHD students can become chronically discouraged, develop low self-esteem, fail to keep up academically, suffer social rejection, and as a result they can develop emotional problems and behavior disorders.

The Coupon Program Procedure

ADHD students are under responsive to verbal direction. Often they require multiple reminders before following through on a direction, and then they forget half way through what they were supposed to do. They have to be told so often to listen in class, to pay attention, to keep working, to raise their hand, to sit still, that they are susceptible to developing increased dependence on staff while neglecting to develop their own habits of self-sufficiency. It's true that ADHD is an executive function disorder, but we don't want to compensate for executive function problems by supplying an executive secretary. An "executive secretary" can be very useful, but if that leads to greater dependence we are only adding to the problem. Instead, we want to use a system that builds independence. The Coupon Program does indeed require staff assistance, but it leads to the development of better work habits and the ADHD students feel more

successful as a result of their own efforts (rather than the efforts of the staff). When the program has been used consistently and in conjunction with the **ADHD General Guidelines** many ADHD students have able to function more independently in the classroom, and eventually they no longer required the coupon program.

There are three types of coupons in this program, two goal sets and one recognition set (the coupons are listed at the end of this article). One goal set is for elementary school and another for middle school. These coupons identify a specific short-term goal. The recognition coupons are for any grade and they are used to spontaneously reward the students for specific accomplishments.

It is important to remember that ADHD students can, (i.e., they are able to) demonstrate all the appropriate work habits that were listed earlier as areas of difficulty. They can do it if they only have to do it for a short period of time (the coupon goals have a fixed time period, the end is in sight). They can do it if they remember to do it (the coupon is a visual reminder of what they have to do, for how long, and how close they are to accomplishing their goal). They can do it as long as they don't have to be perfect, mistake free (the coupon is set up to give them two chances and it shows them how many chances they have left). They can do it if they are motivated (each coupon has an incentive value if it is completed).

Set up

Prior to a situation where performance needs to be more closely monitored, the ADHD student should be provided with a coupon and the coupon should be set up. Sometimes, for example a time has to be filled in (to indicate when the coupon period is over). Other times a student has to pick an option (e.g., to listen quietly for 10 minutes or 15 minutes).

The coupons should be used strategically. It is tempting to fill the entire period and entire day with coupons. This is a short-term program and we want the ADHD student to practice something and achieve success within a short period. A longer period can be too discouraging at the outset. Also, successful application of independent work habits eventually degenerates to poor work habits if the period is too long. Then the ADHD student learns nothing new about work habits and reinforces the old and ineffective work habits. Something that works well for the short term becomes completely ineffective if used in a long term way.

Pick just one thing at a time to work on. Do not use more than one coupon at a time, and while the coupon is in effect stay focused on that behavior while ignoring the other work habits that also need improvement. If you work on everything at once, nothing will improve. If you provide correction about all the other things that need to improve you will be distracting the ADHD student from the goal and the coupon will become meaningless. Let the coupon convey the important message (not you) and keep the focus simple and clear (remember, you are working with someone who has trouble with focus). Be selective. Choose something that is important in the particular situation and choose something that you believe the student can accomplish with moderate effort. Save the more difficult coupons for later in the program, after the student has achieved success on the lower levels.

Reminders

There is a place on the coupon to indicate reminders. When the ADHD student requires a reminder during the coupon period (the reminder must pertain to the coupon goal, not some other behavior) a mark is put in the first reminder box. If a second reminder is required within the coupon period a mark is put in the second box. The third reminder box is labeled "try again." If this box is marked, the coupon is discarded and no award is made. The reminders are helpful because 1) no one is perfect (and no one wants to play a game that can only be won with perfection) and 2) the reminders increase motivation when the student is close to reaching the goal ("I have one more chance left, but I'm almost there"). We cannot explain to anyone how to concentrate, how to control their impulsive comments, how to continue working without a break. We can give them suggestions, but they have to figure out for themselves how to do it. Our responsibility is to make it possible (see ADHD General Guidelines) and to cause the ADHD student to focus on it. The ADHD students become more focused on it when they are close to their goal and running out of reminders.

Incentive system

The coupon program must be used in conjunction with an incentive system. Some classes have a point system, while others have a ticket system. Some classes have no routine incentive system but something can be created for selected students. Each coupon lists a specific number of tickets that can be earned if the coupon is successful. A successful coupon should be stored in a collection envelope and later the coupons can be cashed in for tickets or points or whatever the class earns. An unsuccessful coupon is simply discarded with the message, "try again later." There is no record keeping. The coupons are the record. When enough accumulate the student should cash in for the incentive and start working on the next goal. It is never too late for a student to start earning coupons. Every coupon will go toward the next goal. The program doesn't conclude at the end of the day, starting over the following day, it runs continuously and goals can be reached anytime throughout the day.

The tickets or points should give the student access to a privilege or some other incentive that is made available to the class. If nothing is routinely arranged for the class, then something should be created for the ADHD student. A student on this program should have many coupon opportunities throughout the day (but not too many). If less than 6 opportunities are provided, the program is not being run properly and there will be no effect. If more than 15 opportunities are provided the program is too saturated and it loses the short-term focus.

Recognition coupons

Recognition coupons are used to reinforce the independence skills created with the goal coupons. We expect ADHD students to apply more effective work habits because they've practiced them with the goal coupons. We want to see these skills even when there are no goal coupons provided. We want the ADHD students to recognize when they are successfully using these work habits, we don't want the moment to go unnoticed, so we provide a coupon that tells them they've been noticed. Furthermore, the coupon tells them exactly what has been noticed and a small reward is attached (a specific number of tickets earned). Eventually we want the ADHD student to

graduate from the goal coupons entirely. For this to occur, we need to supply an abundance of recognition using the recognition coupons.

Beyond the coupon program

We expect ADHD students to move beyond the coupon programs and onto more naturally occurring forms of reinforcement (praise from the teacher and parents, achieving success on a particular assignment, etc.). The ADHD General Guidelines, however, need to be routinely maintained. Once students have been successful for a long enough period of time we expect their identity as learners to shift in a more positive direction, and with a more positive identity comes more internal motivation (see **Identity Shaping**) and greater independence and individual responsibility.

Qualifying conditions

Some students have attention deficits because they have other disabilities that make it difficult to stay focused. These students would not necessarily benefit from this program until their other needs are fully addressed (and when their other needs are fully addressed they may not need this program). Some students, the more extreme motor restless and impulsive type, cannot achieve success with this program without the assistance of medication. This does not mean the program should not be tried, but it will have limited results in some cases.