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**A White Paper: ADHD Students**

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**1. Abstract**

This study examined factors that motivated and supported academic achievement for students diagnosed with ADHD. Students with ADHD often struggle academically and do not graduate from high school, largely due to ADHD-related symptoms of (i) impulsive and careless behaviors, (ii) social alienation from peers, and (iii) disorganization. The results showed that all students in the study had been at risk of academic failure due to impulsivity and social withdrawal, but all were ultimately successful in high school. Students attributed their academic success to (i) the development of an internal locus of control, (ii) the growth of coping skills and strategies, (iii) consistent involvement and support from their parents, including the entire family’s ability to adapt to and manage stress, and (iv) the positive influence of at least one caring teacher. The results showed that all students in the study had been at risk of academic failure due to impulsivity and social withdrawal, but all were ultimately successful in high school. Students attributed their academic success to (i) the development of an internal locus of control, (ii) the growth of coping skills and strategies, (iii) consistent involvement and support from their parents, including the entire family’s ability to adapt to and manage stress, and (iv) the positive influence of at least one caring teacher.

**A White Paper: ADHD in Students**

**2. Introduction**

 Over 1.9 million school-age children in the United States are affected by a condition with symptoms so severe that over 29% of them leave school before graduating from high school (Ahmann et al., 2018). "Avery," a composite created by the researcher, is one of these students. Fifteen-year-old Avery, an eighth grader at the local middle school, is described as bright, intelligent, disorganized, and impulsive. Held back in kindergarten for developmental reasons and again in third grade largely due to impulsivity, Avery is still trying to overcome a reputation for being out of control. Easily distracted and with a limited attention span, Avery has a low tolerance for frustration. His few friends are often angry with him. Other students do not like having him as part of their cooperative work groups.

Each school year has been an academic struggle for Avery, who barely passes, in part because he forgets to write down assignments, complete them, or even turn them in after finishing them. Frequently frustrated and often feeling that everyone is against him, Avery challenges his teachers and regularly ends up in the principal’s office for shouting out in class or making inappropriate comments. He does not intend to break rules or cause trouble; it just always seems to happen. The medication he takes helps somewhat, but he does not like taking it and does not want other students to know about it. He wants to go to high school next year, but he is unsure if he can make it that far. He is also afraid of the transition. He says, “If I’m barely making it in middle school, how can I handle high school?” The truth is, Avery does not feel like he belongs or fits in at school or anywhere else.

Avery" is a composite of students familiar to this researcher. For children like him, including tens of thousands diagnosed with ADHD, the effects of frustration, punishment, rejection, failure, and confusion over the years are cumulative and devastating. Research has shown that students diagnosed with ADHD are at a significantly higher risk for academic failure. The study indicates that students with ADHD are three to seven times more likely than the average student to drop out of school.

Academic and social failure for students with ADHD is often persistent and cumulative, making it extremely difficult to remain in school and graduate (Anastopoulos et al., 2018). Students with ADHD typically struggle with concentration, organization, and remembering to complete academic tasks. They often have difficulty with peer relationships, tend to be socially immature, and may be unable to determine how to behave in social situations or adjust their actions based on feedback. Their relationships with adults are frequently strained due to argumentative behavior and impulsivity.

Despite all of these challenges to academic success, a surprising 65 percent of students with ADHD do manage to graduate from high school, and many graduate with strong grades (Anastopoulos et al., 2021). The ability to overcome such significant difficulties raises an important question: How do so many students with ADHD successfully complete their kindergarten through twelfth-grade education despite the many obstacles, including negative experiences at school?

While much of the current research has focused on student dropouts in the general and minority populations, including those with and without ADHD, there has been less emphasis on identifying the factors or conditions that encourage students with ADHD to remain in school. Wolin and Wolin (1993) advocated for research on the positive influences in students' lives, suggesting that researchers should study individuals who have successfully overcome negative barriers. This study follows that approach. The ability of certain students with ADHD to persist in school, especially when the school environment is often their most overwhelming challenge, appears to be complex (DuPaul et al., 2017). The persistence of these students raises the question: What factors encourage students to stay in school and succeed despite the challenges presented by the symptoms of ADHD?

**3. Problem Statement**

Over 1.9 million young children suffer from ADHD, the symptoms of which place them at high risk of dropping out of school. However, despite repeated and ongoing social rejection and academic failure, 1.2 million of these students will earn their high school diploma. Many of these students will also go on to attend college or vocational school, some continuing to experience ADHD symptoms and challenges. A review of the literature shows that while research in this area exists, there is still limited understanding of the factors that contribute to academic success for adolescents and young adults with ADHD, specifically, the role of locus of control, coping ability, and adult support. A clear understanding of what supports and motivates students with ADHD to succeed academically is lacking. There is also insufficient insight into the individual traits or protective factors that promote their academic achievement (Dvorsky et al., 2017). This study sought to answer questions about the influences that students with ADHD perceive as academically supportive.

**4. Literature Review**

ADHD is an increasingly common neurological condition that causes or worsens many learning, social, and emotional challenges for both students and adults. ADHD is estimated to affect 3 to 5 percent of all young children, with some studies suggesting a prevalence rate of 10 to 20 percent.

Between 1.59 and 2.1 million students in the United States are diagnosed with this condition, according to the American Psychiatric Association (Ewe, 2019). The core symptoms of ADHD related to impulsivity include hyperactivity, impulsiveness, and lack of persistence. The core symptoms related to inattention include distractibility and cognitive sluggishness or slowness in performing perceptual-motor speed tasks. Some individuals may also exhibit a combination of inattentiveness and impulsivity.

ADHD is characterized by core symptoms related to attention regulation, activity level control, and impulsivity. Key traits associated with the condition include significant difficulty achieving academic success, even in the absence of learning disabilities; displaying defiance, aggression, and other antisocial behaviors; and experiencing peer rejection. Statistically, these characteristics place individuals with ADHD at high risk of dropping out of high school before graduation (Jansen et al., 2019). Estimates vary slightly, with some studies indicating that between 35 and 40 percent of students with ADHD leave school early without earning a diploma. The challenges faced by students with attention deficits, particularly when accompanied by hyperactivity, have been well documented in recent literature. This is especially evident in what Aust (1994) describes as the overwhelming social, emotional, and educational consequences of having ADHD.

Research shows that one reason children with ADHD are difficult to raise and educate is that, from a young age, they often display excessive behaviors in both frequency and intensity, such as temper tantrums and clinginess. Parents report that children and adolescents with ADHD require significantly more supervision and monitoring than their peers without ADHD.

Children with ADHD are reported to be physically uncoordinated and have a higher incidence of problems such as accidental poisonings and serious physical injuries due to their impulsivity (LaCount et al., 2018). Older children with ADHD often develop additional behaviors such as verbal and physical aggression, lying, defiance, stealing, truancy, and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and conduct or oppositional disorders. An eight-year follow-up study on the academic outcomes of children diagnosed with ADHD found that over 29 percent had been held back at least one grade, more than 39 percent had been suspended at least once, and over 10 percent had been officially expelled from school.

Learning is often significantly affected by ADHD. Twenty-five percent of children diagnosed with ADHD have communication or learning disabilities. Nearly half of students with ADHD exhibit behavior patterns associated with conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. Studies show that as children with ADHD grow older, their symptoms often worsen, partly due to years of social, emotional, and academic failure (Lefler et al., 2021). The onset of adolescence can bring new and unexpected challenges. Adolescence in the United States, even without a condition like ADHD, can be a difficult time for both the adolescent and their family. For most young people and their families, the teenage years are typically a combination of turbulent and calm periods. For children with self-regulation difficulties, however, the challenges of adolescence, combined with impulsive and defiant behavior and weakened social connections, can create barriers that they have never been able to overcome.

More than 49 percent of students diagnosed with ADHD fail at least one grade level in school, and more than 29 percent never complete high school. For those students with ADHD who do remain in school, it is often difficult to maintain appropriate behavior and complete academic tasks (Malmqvist, 2018). School is a struggle for these students, and one of the most significant academic challenges they face is the inability or difficulty in becoming and staying organized. Studies have also shown that students with ADHD frequently have trouble taking responsibility for their behavior, a common trait that Rotter (1966) identified as an external locus of control. In addition, students with ADHD are often distracted and may make inappropriate comments at home or in the classroom. As a result of these behaviors, they may repeatedly frustrate or alienate teachers, peers, and parents. In turn, these students often feel unsupported by educators at school.

Life at home with a family member who has ADHD is often stressful. For parents, the ongoing pressure of raising a child with ADHD can lead to a reduced ability to parent effectively. This diminished capacity may create another obstacle for the student, resulting in a lack of support at home (McCoach et al., 2020). According to family systems theory, the family plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing certain attitudes and behaviors. Parents who feel overwhelmed by the demands of raising a child with ADHD may begin to focus inward, neglecting the needs of the child. Stressed parents are also more likely to raise stressed children compared to parents who are not under such strain.

This is not to suggest that family life causes ADHD, as research shows that ADHD is a neurological disorder. However, in examining the factors that support academic achievement in students with ADHD, research indicates a connection between a parent's ability to cope with stress and the child's ability to manage stress (Mochrie et al., 2020). How students recover from repeated discouragement in academic settings and how they stay motivated to graduate from high school is the focus of this study, which explores academic success through the lens of key constructs such as locus of control, coping skills, and adult influence. Information regarding the successful adaptation of these students to stressful life conditions will contribute to the body of knowledge on preventative interventions for students with ADHD, as well as for other students in high-conflict environments.

**5. Recommended Solutions**

Intervention during the kindergarten or preschool years is a critical component of future academic success. The development of an internal locus of control and the strengthening of coping skills should begin as early as possible (Mohammad Hassani et al., 2018). Students often struggle unnecessarily due to a lack of support from school staff in several areas, including relationship building. In the early years, students with ADHD need intervention in the form of education about their condition. This kind of education can reduce social difficulties and prevent the lasting impact of harmful social labeling. Direct, targeted intervention for students with ADHD appears to be essential (Moore et al., 2017).

Immediate, focused intervention appears to be essential. As demonstrated by data from this study and others, students with ADHD are often unaware of the impact their behavior has on others and are typically not intentional in their actions, especially in their early years when interventions can be most effective.

Beyond the need for education about the disorder, interpersonal support in preparing for the challenges of raising a child with ADHD is essential. Parents must be regularly reminded of how important their role as consistent and supportive caregivers is. They need to understand the critical importance of their involvement (Pinho et al., 2019). Parents also need encouragement about the possibility of positive outcomes as they cope with the ongoing stress of raising a child. Additional support from school counselors is important, including general education about ADHD, information on available resources, and practical help with organizing home and school routines when needed. Recognizing the significant impact of living with someone who has ADHD is essential in establishing effective support and intervention plans.

The issue of medication and its appropriateness should be discussed early in a child’s academic journey. The effectiveness of medication is critical. The immediate and positive impact of properly administered treatment highlights the potential risks of delaying medication for children with ADHD (Sacchetti et al., 2017). Medication can help students listen, learn, and form and maintain friendships. The ability to succeed in school and connect with peers often leads to increased self-esteem for the student. A loss of social support and personal confidence during the period when parents are deciding whether to pursue medication may take years for the child to fully recover from.

Adults who work with students, especially key figures such as teachers, should be regularly reminded of the impact their attitudes, words, and actions have on students. Educators who demonstrate care and concern can leave a lasting positive impression. Those who do the opposite can have lifelong negative effects. Teachers who have successfully supported and motivated at-risk students, including those with ADHD, should be encouraged by their school districts to share their instructional methods and classroom strategies with other staff members as part of ongoing professional development (Safer, 2018). Schools must also take daily, proactive steps to eliminate bullying, including teasing and verbal abuse. For students who lack a supportive home environment, the consequences of negative interactions at school can be especially harmful.

Adult professionals who behave negatively toward students require intervention from their supervisors. Such intervention may include retraining, performance monitoring, or consideration of a different role. Supervisors who allow professionals to remain in positions of authority and influence over children must also be held accountable for any unacceptable behavior (Scheithauer et al., 2017). Adults who are unable to manage misbehavior or oppositional behavior without becoming emotionally reactive should not be working with young people. The long-term negative impact of such behavior by adults, who are paid to nurture and guide children throughout their K–12 years, can be deeply damaging.

**6. Conclusion**

The factors that support academic success for students include their coping abilities, an internal locus of control, and a growing determination to succeed as they mature (Weyandt, 2017). Some students experience a lack of peer support throughout their entire K–12 education. Schools often fail to adequately prepare students for academic success in the early years. Students have reported being in classrooms with teachers who mock, belittle, humiliate, intimidate, shove, or hit them.

More information about ADHD is now available to schools than was accessible when these students were in elementary school. A study should be conducted to determine whether teachers and school counselors are currently better equipped to meet the needs of students with ADHD-related symptoms.

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