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ADHD Conference Exhibit Booth

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Understanding ADHD and Rethinking Challenging Behaviors

ADHD and Related Concerns Conference | October 5-6, 2026

Empowering Educators. Inspiring Learning. Putting Kids First.



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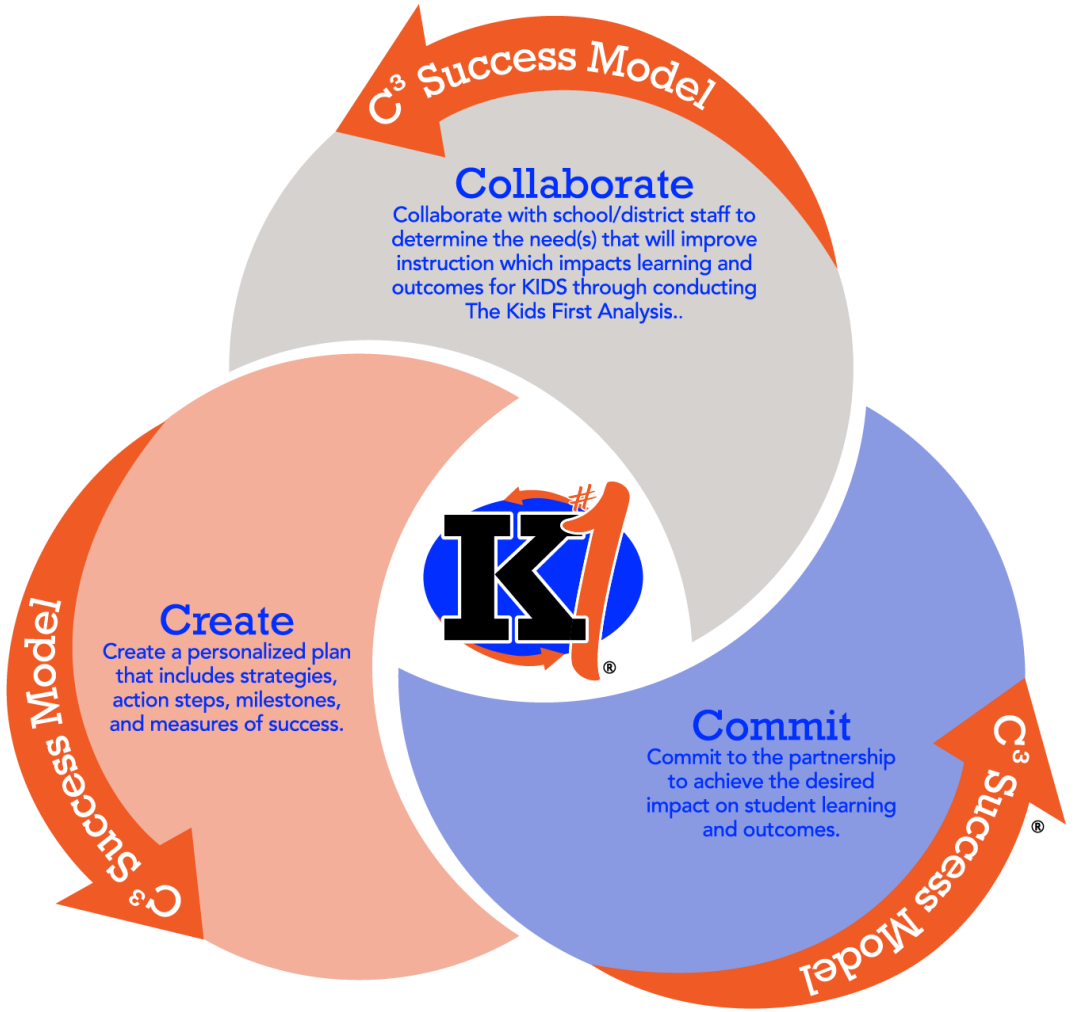


Session Outcomes

1. *Describe how ADHD affects executive functioning and behavior.*
2. *Recognize how executive functioning challenges may appear as challenging behavior.*
3. *Identify lagging skills that may be contributing to a student's behavior.*
4. *Apply practical strategies that support regulation, executive functioning, and independence.*

Think – Pair – Share

Think about a child with ADHD. What behavior leaves you frustrated or confused?



Understanding the ADHD Brain

Brain Differences

The ADHD brain follows a typical pattern, just on a different timeline.

- The prefrontal cortex, the brain's "manager," matures later. In one study, about 3 years later (Shaw et al., 2007).
- Chemical messengers like dopamine work differently, which affects focus and motivation.
- The brain leans toward what is interesting or urgent right now.

What This Means

- Self-regulation may look younger than the student's age.
- It's a difference in development, not a choice.
- Distant rewards and deadlines may not motivate.
- Interest and urgency help the brain engage.

What is Executive Functioning?

The mental skills that help us to turn intention into action.

Executive functioning helps us…

- Hold information in our mind while we use it.
- Start and organize what we need to do.
- Pause and control our actions and reactions.
- Adjust and keep going when things change or get difficult.



ADHD is More Than Attention

ADHD can affect how students manage their thoughts, actions, and emotions.

Managing Thoughts

- *Remembering*
- *Planning*
- *Organizing*
- *Focusing*

Managing Actions

- *Getting started*
- *Stopping and thinking*
- *Following through*
- *Managing time*

Managing Emotions

- *Handling frustration*
- *Adjusting to change*
- *Managing reactions*
- *Recovering and moving on*

When Demand Exceeds Skill

When the demand is greater than the skill, behavior fills the gap.

1. *The demand: “Write a paragraph about your weekend.”*
2. *Skills needed: plan, get started, and stay with it.*
3. *If a skill is lagging: he can’t figure out where to start.*
4. *What we see: doodling, wandering, “This is dumb.”*

What Might Be Underneath?

Read

Read each behavior card (blue frame)

→

Discuss

Talk about which skill(s) might be involved

→

Match

Pair each behavior with one or more skill cards (orange frame)

→

Explain

Be ready to share what led to your match

There may be more than one reasonable match.

The goal is to think about what might be underneath the behavior.

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Reframing Through an ADHD Lens

WHAT WE MAY ASSUME	WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING
“She’s lazy.”	She can’t get started on her own yet.
“He’s not listening.”	He couldn’t hold all the steps in mind.
“She’s being defiant.”	She can’t shift gears when plans change.
“He’s doing it on purpose.”	He acted before he could stop and think.

Behavior Is Communication

Before we respond to a behavior, we get curious about it.

What do I see?
Describe the behavior, not the student.

When and where?
Look for the task, time, or setting that sets it off.

What is the need?
Name the skill or support the student needs.

Skill Deficit vs. Performance Deficit

With ADHD, many behaviors that look like "won't" are really "can't yet."

Skill Deficit: "Can't Yet"

- *The student doesn't have the skill or can't use it consistently.*
- *Often looks inconsistent: fine one day, not the next.*
- *Respond by teaching, modeling, practicing, and supporting.*

Performance Deficit: "Won't"

- *The student has the skill and can use it reliably.*
- *Chooses not to use it in this situation.*
- *Respond by building motivation, relevance, and reinforcement.*

What Are Lagging Skills?

Lagging skills are skills that haven't developed yet. "Kids do well if they can." (Ross Greene)

Managing Thoughts

- *Keeping multistep directions in mind*
- *Organizing time and materials*
- *Shifting from one task to another*

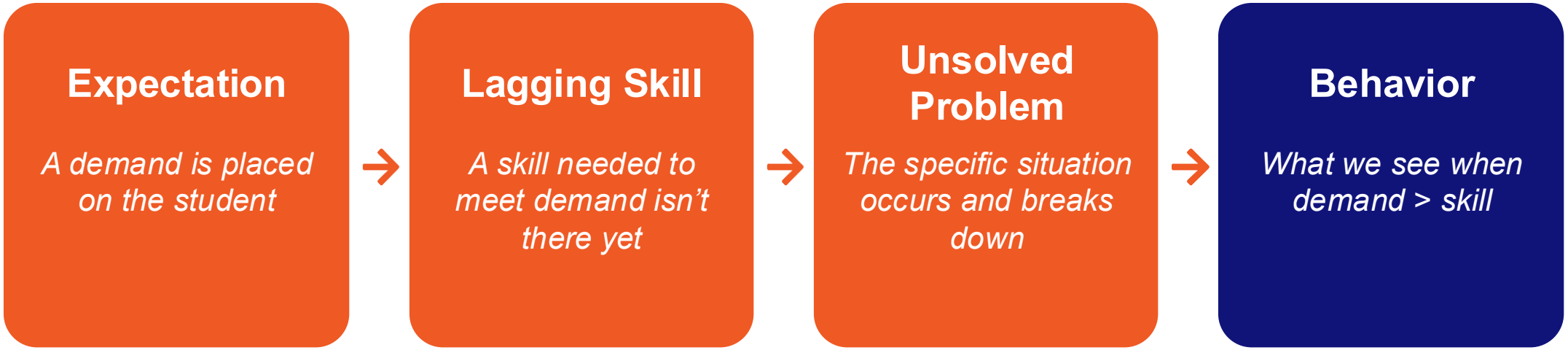
Managing Actions

- *Starting nonpreferred tasks*
- *Pausing before acting*
- *Sticking with effortful tasks*

Managing Emotions

- *Handling frustration and mistakes*
- *Coping when plans change*
- *Calming down after being upset*

How Behavior Happens



Write unsolved problems specifically:

"Difficulty starting the independent writing task in ELA," not "Defiant during ELA."

Finding the Lagging Skill

1. *Name the behavior in observable terms.*
2. *Notice the pattern: when, where, and during what task?*
3. *Identify the expectation the student is struggling to meet.*
4. *Ask: Which skill is lagging? That is the skill we teach.*

Behavior Detective

Behavior Detective: Your Investigation

Each group investigates one case. You have 4 minutes, then we share out.

1

What behavior do you see? Describe it in observable terms.

2

Which executive function(s) might be involved?

3

What lagging skill(s) could explain the behavior?

4

Share out: name one executive function and one lagging skill.

Case 1: Marcus, 4th Grade

Setting: Classroom

Ms. Carter gives three directions: take out your math notebook, copy the problem on the board, and solve it with a partner. Most students get started. Marcus sharpens his pencil, digs through his desk, and asks for water. Ten minutes later, his page is blank. When Ms. Carter checks in, he shrugs: “I don’t get it.”

Investigate

- What behavior do you see?
- Which executive function(s) might be involved?
- What lagging skill(s) could explain it?

Case 2: Aaliyah, 7th Grade

Setting: Classroom

Aaliyah walks into science and finds a substitute and a new seating chart. When asked to move, she says, “This is stupid,” and refuses. The substitute repeats the request in front of the class. Aaliyah raises her voice, shoves her chair, and puts her head down for the rest of the period. Her teacher says she’s usually fine in this class.

Investigate

- What behavior do you see?
- Which executive function(s) might be involved?
- What lagging skill(s) could explain it?

Case 3: Jordan, 2nd Grade

Setting: Home

After dinner, Dad says, “Go get ready for bed: bath, pajamas, brush your teeth.” Twenty minutes later, Jordan is on his bedroom floor building with Legos, one sock off. When Dad reminds him, Jordan says, “I forgot!” When Dad says the Legos are done for tonight, Jordan screams, cries, and throws a piece across the room.

Investigate

- What behavior do you see?
- Which executive function(s) might be involved?
- What lagging skill(s) could explain it?

Case 4: Mia, 10th Grade

Setting: Home

Mia has had two weeks to finish a history project due Friday. Every time her mom asks, Mia says, “I’ve got it handled.” At 10:00 Thursday night, she opens the assignment, realizes she needs poster board and printed photos, and starts to cry: “I’m so stupid. I can never do anything right.”

Investigate

- What behavior do you see?
- Which executive function(s) might be involved?
- What lagging skill(s) could explain it?

Responding with Understanding

Respond to the Skill

Support the student today while building the skill for tomorrow.



Reduce the Demand

AT SCHOOL	AT HOME
Post steps where students can see them.	Use a picture checklist for routines.
Chunk tasks and check in after step one.	Give one direction at a time.
Preview changes before they happen.	Give a 5-minute warning before transitions.
Use timers to make time visible.	Set mini-deadlines for big projects.

Teach the Skill

Executive functioning skills can be taught like any other skill.

How to Teach It

- Teach when the student is calm, not in the moment.
- Focus on one skill at a time.
- Model it with a think-aloud.
- Practice during easy, low-stakes tasks first.

Example: Marcus Learns to Get Started

- Teach a start routine: read the steps, circle step one, begin.
- Post the routine on his desk.
- Prompt: “What’s your first step?”
- Notice it: “You got started on your own!”

Matching the Strategy to the Skill

Managing Thoughts

- *Keeping multistep directions in mind*
- *Organizing time and materials*
- *Shifting from one task to another*

Managing Actions

- *Starting non-preferred tasks*
- *Pausing before acting*
- *Sticking with effortful tasks*

Managing Emotions

- *Handling frustration and mistakes*
- *Coping when plans change*
- *Calming down after being upset*

Responses That Backfire

INSTEAD OF…	TRY…
Taking away recess for unfinished work	Chunk the work and build in movement
Lecturing in the moment	Use fewer words now; talk later
Correcting in front of peers	Redirect quietly and privately
“Just try harder.”	“Let’s figure out what’s in the way.”

Support Emotional Regulation

A dysregulated brain can’t learn. Regulate first, then teach.

Before

- *Learn the early warning signs and triggers*
- *Preview changes*
- *Practice calm-down tools when calm*

During

- *Stay calm and lower your voice*
- *Use fewer words*
- *Offer a space to reset*

After

- *Reconnect before you correct*
- *Talk through what happened*
- *Problem-solve together*

Build Independence

1. I do: Model it with a think-aloud.
2. We do: Practice it together.
3. You do, with a visual: checklist, timer, or schedule.
4. You do, with a prompt: “What’s your first step?”
5. You do, with a self-check: “Did I finish every step?”
6. You do it on your own. Celebrate it!

Reflection and Wrap Up

Reflect and Commit

Choose one prompt and complete it. Then share it with a neighbor.

Stop

One thing I'll stop assuming…

Wonder

One thing I'll start wondering…

Try

One strategy I'll try this week…

Please provide feedback to our team!



ADHD Conferences

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Works Cited

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Thank you!