

# Success in Class with ADHD and SPD

Workaround strategies for helping your child stay on top of things. **BY CAROL STOCK KRANOWITZ, M.A.**

**D**OES YOUR CHILD HAVE ADHD and sensory processing disorder (SPD)? ADHD occurs in the wiring of the front part of the brain—the child’s “thinking” brain. ADHD interferes with your ability to pay attention, focus on what is going on around you, stick to challenging mental tasks, and make and carry out plans.

SPD occurs in the back part of your brain—your “action” brain. This is where millions of sensory messages from inside and around your body connect with one another, so you can act efficiently and effectively throughout the day.

If you have SPD, sensory messages get jumbled, as if there is a traffic jam in your brain. What you touch, hear, see, smell, and taste may not make sense. You may be clumsy and uncoordinated. Raindrops, a tippy chair, or screeching tires,

which other people barely notice, may make your child feel irritated, confused, and infuriated, and you may not know why. SPD affects your “prethinking”—and, like ADHD,

makes it difficult to attend, focus, stick to tasks, and carry out plans.

About 40 percent of people with ADHD also have SPD. Kids with both conditions may feel out of sync with the world much of the time. Regrettably, much of the world doesn’t understand how the double whammy of the two conditions makes it hard for kids to organize perceptions of what is going

on around them and, thus, what they should do in response.

At school, kids with ADHD and SPD can grasp complex information and express their thoughts verbally. They can read and write. But they are often clumsy and disorganized. The causes of these symptoms vary, depending on the child. Some individuals need more time to accomplish a task because their cognitive or sensory processing is slower than their peers’. Some need a quieter, dimmer room because sights and sounds distract them. Some need more space because proximity to other people makes them uncomfortable. What can help?

**> Paying attention.** When parents and teachers become aware of their kids’ SPD and ADHD, they are able to recognize and address the underlying reasons for disorganized behavior.

**> Appropriate therapy.** Occupational therapy using a sensory integration approach, OT-SI, for example, benefits kids diagnosed with SPD and ADHD.

**> Learned willfulness.** When students diagnosed with these conditions are made to see that they are not helpless, they can take responsibility for developing their talents.

Here are some tips that have worked for kids diagnosed with both conditions. You might try one or more of them to bring about success at school:



## Get a Jump on the School Day

Justin Wayland, who contributed to my book *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, is diagnosed with SPD and ADHD. When he was in middle school, his mom used to have him jump on the trampoline (100 jumps) before eating breakfast, to wake up his body. After his stint on the trampoline, he was ready to navigate through the day. Without it, he was spacey and “all over the map.”

Jumping stimulates your body and your brain, and enables the five sensory systems (proprioceptive, vestibular, tactile, visual, and auditory) to connect with one another. When many sensations are working together, your brain becomes available for learning. Furthermore, jumping feels good, and it’s fun!

## Make a Beeline to Class

Moving quickly and efficiently from class to class is a challenge for many kids with ADHD and SPD. Justin found that noisy corridors overloaded his

auditory system, and his body shut down to protect itself. He wanted to fall asleep. Justin learned to make a beeline to the next class. He focused on moving rapidly and not allowing himself to be distracted by visually stimulating bulletin boards or classmates’ conversations.

Another accommodation Justin made (with the teacher’s permission) was leaving class a little early, so he could arrive at the next class before the halls got too crowded.

## Keep Stuff Organized

Karly Koop, another teenager with SPD and ADHD, found two solutions for staying organized at school. “I used a zippered binder with an

accordion-type file, and I filed my papers behind the correct tab in the accordion part of the binder,” she explains. “I kept everything safe by zipping it up. Later, on your own time and in your own space, you can get the papers out of the file and put them in the appropriate place in your binder behind the correct dividers. It is just too stressful to open and close the binder rings and try to organize all those papers when trying to get to your next class.”

Karly’s second tip is finding another home for books, since there isn’t enough time to go to her locker between classes. “First, make friends with the teachers! Then ask them if you can leave your book for that class in his classroom, if it’s not one that you need to take home. I find carrying a load of books all over school is hard for me.”

## Stay Calm and Attentive

Chewing gum helps a lot of kids with both conditions stay focused. The

mouth has a high concentration of sensory nerve endings, and chewing gum engages six of its eight sensory systems—the tactile, proprioceptive, gustatory, olfactory, auditory, and interoceptive senses. Interoception keeps us aware of what’s going on inside our bodies.

Cara Kosciński, OTR, author of the upcoming book, *Interoception: How I Feel—Sensing My World from the Inside Out*, says, “Chewing gum helps interoception. It makes you feel less hungry and thirsty, promotes digestion, and calms you down. The best part is that when you feel more relaxed, you focus and pay better attention in school.”

As the muscles and joints in your mouth and jaw work, chewing gum also activates your proprioceptive system, improves your speaking skills, and keeps you awake.

## Easier Writing

In middle school, kids have to write more. Writing is hard when you can’t express your ideas on paper due to small-motor-skill challenges. One solution is to learn a typing layout called the Dvorak Simplified Keyboard. It reconfigures the letters, so your fingers travel less and your hands are more comfortably positioned than in the QWERTY layout. All computers allow you to switch keyboards simply by plugging in one or the other as needed.

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD and SPD, he works hard to get through the day. His courage and grit are admirable. I hope that these school tips will help your child get “in sync” and take charge! **A**

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