

YOU CAN'T COMPETE WITH A CAT IN THE PLAYGROUND OR A DOG IN THE HOUSE

F i n t a n O ' R e g a n



During a recent school visit I witnessed a year 6 student with ADHD called Tom fling a chair across the room after an altercation with his teacher.

Unfortunately, the situation did not improve. After being sent to the Head's office Tom became more aggressive and swore at the Head Teacher. This resulted in Tom being excluded for the rest of the day. Incidents like these are not uncommon. However, it does occur to me that when something like this happens a teacher may need to reflect on their practice. I am certainly not condoning the behaviour of Tom, but I do wonder if the teacher had acted differently, whether the outcome could have been different.

It all started, when an obviously bored Tom, looked out of the classroom window and saw a cat strolling through the playground. He shouted this out to the teacher who told him to ignore the cat and get on with his work. Within seconds, 28 pairs of additional eyes were straining to look at the feline distraction.

This disruption to the whole class made the teacher extremely annoyed and he demanded order. The teacher mandated that everyone look down and return to their work. Ignoring this request, Tom stood up and shouted, "Sir, he has got a red collar on." At this, the teacher lost his temper and shouted, "Sit down right now!" Tom screamed back, "you can't make me!" Things went from bad to worse until a chair was thrown and Tom was sent from the room.



Situations like this happen every day and there is always a balance between effectively managing a class, and strategically managing individuals.

This is why behaviour management systems cannot be rigid, but need instead to be fluid or flexible. Within the SF3R behaviour management training programme that we offer schools, structure, flexibility, rapport, relationships and resilience can provide teachers with a greater understanding of how to maintain this balance without losing control of situations. Although there will be some occasions when no compromise can exist, flexibility is often the key to managing tricky situations.

In the scenario involving Tom above, what lessons can we learn? To begin with, you can't ignore a cat in the playground. It's like a wasp flying around the classroom. You have to acknowledge it and deal with it.

One suggestion would be to have everybody get up to look at the cat through window. As it is unlikely that any cat will stay in an open space for very long, the object of interest will soon disappear. If the cat decided to remain in the playground, no doubt the students would soon get bored and return to their studies. If the students were still overexcited the teacher could perhaps set aside a couple of minutes to ask the whole class who has a cat at home and their names before returning to their work.

So how does this apply to the home environment, especially during the current COVID-19 situation, when parents are expected to try and support their children for teaching and learning?

Most families will have designed or been advised to lay out a series of structured options for the day in terms of assignments and breaks.



However, for children with ADHD keeping to this structure will not be easy and the key word is **flexibility** in terms of reacting to situations as and when they arise.

Focus on quality and not quantity. Most schools are realistic about how much they expect parents to achieve during online lessons, especially if you have a child with ADHD who is likely to be highly distractible and will be overactive.

The most important issue will be to take care of yourself in order to take care of them. If the most important three words are “location, location, location” when buying a house then most important issue will be “patience, patience and patience” in trying to support your child with ADHD.

This is easier said than done. As a result the focus should be on “mood” and not behaviour. It is all about management of mood and you will need to consider 3 key moods and these will be as follows:

- **Yours**
- **Theirs (the child with ADHD)**
- **The others (siblings and partners)**



By far **the most important one of these will be your mood.** Although it might not be your first priority you will need to plan and protect your own mood in order to best meet the needs of your child.

In order to start the process of successful mood management consider the following:

1. Structure the day as much as possible in terms of getting up at a set time in the morning and maybe try to have the day divided up into 4 Sections: Morning 9-12, Afternoon 1-3, Early Evening 4-7 and Late Evening 7-10 (dependent on ages). Within these sections then design a series of 20 to 40 minute segments especially in the morning and afternoon sections (dependent on the age of the child) in terms of learning tasks and activities. Obviously build in times for meals and some relaxation but try to leave the bulk of leisure time for the evening sections.
2. Within this system design organised movement breaks either inside the house or within the allowed restrictions outside. These can be a mixture of aerobic activities or games and include playing or walking the dog, if you have one. There are a host of ideas of ideas on the internet but don't forget those Othello boards and cards packed away in cupboards.
3. Be mindful of screen time, either TV or computer, as too much of either is not advisable. Use sparingly in amongst the other options mentioned above. The parent should be in charge of the remote control.
4. Don't get frustrated if things get difficult and disillusioned if things don't always go well. It's not about the management of behaviour, it's about the management of mood. Think mood, not behaviour, and engage the other members of your family to help to support you, on behalf of your child, and not become the focus of the issues themselves.
5. Communicate with others, family, friends and school if and when possible. Encourage the children to speak to grandparents and aunts, uncles as well as their regular contacts. Let's talk and not text or email. It's the best form of communication.

