

Strategies for Successfully Teaching Students with ADD or ADHD in Instrumental Lessons

Abstract: Teachers can easily encounter students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the instrumental lesson setting. Applicable to instrumental lesson settings in the public or private schools, private studios, or college studios, this article focuses on specific strategies ranging from the organization of the teaching studio to the instructional delivery that can help students with ADD and ADHD achieve their highest musical potential. By making small changes in studio arrangement/decoration, maintaining open lines of communication with parents, and understanding some key elements that can affect students' ability to most efficiently learn, instrumental lesson teachers can improve the learning not only of students with ADD or ADHD, but of all students.

Keywords: ADD, ADHD, learning, lesson, instrumental, organization, studio

Effective instrumental lesson teachers strive to foster success in all their students. Teaching students with special needs may require the teacher to make some changes for students to be most successful. This article endeavors to provide strategies for successfully teaching students with Attention Deficit Disorder in instrumental lessons taught by private teachers or school instrumental teachers.

A Brief Overview of ADD and ADHD

Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD, is a disorder characterized by a short attention span, trouble concentrating, distractibility,

and poor impulse control. Some children with ADD also exhibit hyperactivity, which adds extra energy to the characteristics of ADD. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, may be extremely fidgety, talk excessively, have difficulty completing quiet activities, and generally act like they have too much energy. Students with ADD or ADHD do not just experience challenges in sustaining attention; they actually need to be more engaged in what is happening, so teachers must keep the pace moving and the lesson interesting and relevant. Good instructional pacing and interesting lessons benefit all students, but engaging lessons are even more imperative

How can instrumental music teachers best support the learning of students with ADD and ADHD? Here are some studio-tested ideas you can try.

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Even in the private lesson, teachers must abide by this law and make modifications and accommodations where needed for students with ADD.

Strategies for Teaching

Most people with ADD are able to live fully functional and productive lives but may require adaptations or modifications to be successful. Adaptations are any adjustment in the environment, instruction, or materials for learning that enhances the student's performance and allows for at least partial participation.⁶ Modifications are used when the student is not able to complete the task in the same way as the rest of his or her peers because of the disability. A modification changes the standard of participation or the extent of what a test or evaluation measures.⁷

Adaptations and modifications together comprise accommodations, which encompass all the ways teachers make adjustments to help students learn best. Adaptations and modifications from what the lesson teacher typically expects of students may be necessary to most effectively teach students with ADD. An example of an adaptation could be teaching a student with ADD at a less distracting time. If the school choir rehearses adjacent to the band room and the sound bleeds through, an adaptation could be made

for students with ADD to help them stay focused during the lesson.

Attending, or paying attention, is the main issue for students who have ADD. For the most part, the ability to attend is increased if the material being presented is interesting and presented well, but children with ADD can still have trouble paying attention even with a very experienced and stimulating teacher.¹ The ability to discern between more important and less important information is another aspect of attending with which students with ADD tend to struggle.² The teacher's instructions might have to compete, for example, with marks on the wall or flickering lights for the student's attention. While the ability to sustain attention and ignore external or internal distractions is necessary for attending, people with ADD may experience difficulty keeping their attention fixed on one task for a length of time, whether or not distractions are present.³

For simplicity, the abbreviation "ADD" will be used throughout this article, with the understanding that these techniques and suggestions are applicable to students with ADD or ADHD.

ADD and the Law

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is geared toward students ages three through twenty-one. It states that no child in the United States can be denied a free and appropriate public education (see <http://idea.ed.gov/>). While this law does not apply in the typical private studio experience, it would apply in a private teaching setting in a public institution, such as a K–12 school or a university. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 bars discrimination on the basis of disability in all institutions receiving federal funding, which includes all public and most private schools, colleges, and universities. This national law protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on disabilities that substantially limit one or more major life activities, such as caring for oneself, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, performing manual tasks, and learning.⁴ Under Section 504 Subpart E 104.44a,

A recipient to which this subpart applies shall make such modifications to its

so the student with ADD does not have a lesson when choir is rehearsing. The requirements of the lesson are not changed, just the level of distraction. A modification, on the other hand, would change what is required of the student. A student with ADD who struggles to learn scales might be required to learn five scales while the rest of the students learn ten. Because the requirements changed for the student, that would be a modification.

Arranging the Teaching Space

Teachers should look for ways to make the teaching space as conducive to learning as possible and to do their best to eliminate distractions. Eliminating distractions helps all students, not just ones with ADD; most people encounter a lack of attention at one time or another. A student with no problem attending may find distractions in the studio to help delay the moment when he or she will be asked to play scales. The following suggestions for eliminating distractions in the studio should create a better learning environment for all students and a better teaching environment for teachers:

- **Clocks:** Consider replacing ticking clocks with digital or silent clocks. Students with ADD can become overwhelmed by the ticking of the clock and may be unable to focus on the music or find a correct tempo when hearing the tempo of sixty beats per minute beating aloud.
- **Phones:** Turning off the ringer or ring tone on all phones and checking messages between lessons can help avoid distractions. If the office phone has a flashing voice-mail light, teachers should try to position the phone so the light cannot be seen by the student. Teachers should avoid answering the phone unless absolutely necessary. Stopping to answer the phone during the lesson may result in a complete inability to gain the student's attention back after the call—who called and what the person wanted—and may wonder if the phone might ring again soon.
- **Windows:** In a lesson, a student with ADD might best be situated facing away from windows and doors. Birds, animals, the weather, cars, people, a parent arriving to pick up a student, airplanes, and just about anything else can be distracting.
- **Decorations:** While music decorations can make the teaching space look fun, teachers should remember that those items can serve as stimuli that might distract students with ADD. Teachers can consider storing the items and leaving out just a few, rotating the items when appropriate across the year.
- **Aromas:** Teachers should avoid eating in the teaching space as much as possible. A student who comes in after the teacher finishes a tuna sandwich cannot help but be distracted by the smell of tuna. Private teachers who teach from their homes should try to keep the door closed when cooking so the student is not distracted by the smell of chocolate chip cookies or whatever is for dinner. Air fresheners and candles should be avoided in teaching spaces because their aromas can be distracting, and they can affect students with allergies. Air fresheners that spray out a mist at regular intervals should not be used where lessons are taught because of the aromas and the distraction of the intervallic misting.
- **Managing Visitors:** To avoid distractions, teachers should have a policy for when students can knock on the door for non-emergencies. If the teacher begins lessons every hour on the hour, perhaps visitors could knock during the first five minutes of the hour. That avoids the abrupt end of a lesson when someone knocks with just a few minutes left in the lesson but still allows the teacher to be available to people who may need something quickly. Teachers who teach from their homes should have a procedure for arriving students that will not involve interrupting one lesson to unlock the door and let the next student in.
- **Noise from Others:** When teaching at home, educators should create a waiting area that is not right outside where teaching occurs. Family members should be reminded that the teacher is teaching and that they should not come in to talk during the lesson or have loud conversations

or arguments where they can be heard in the studio. Televisions and stereos should be situated where they cannot be heard in the studio.

- **Pets:** Teachers who have animals should be sure the pets are not in the studio during lessons. They can be a major distraction to students with ADD, and a number of students are allergic to or fearful of animals.

Communication with Parents

While school instrumental teachers should have access to students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to learn which students have ADD and what accommodations are needed, parents of students with ADD may or may not share their child's diagnosis with the private teacher. When gathering information about a prospective student, private teachers should consider asking if the student has any learning difficulties. Parents still may choose to refrain from mentioning ADD, but asking the question alerts parents to the fact that the knowledge would be helpful to the teacher.

There are many ways teachers can help parents support their children at home. Teachers should not be afraid to ask a student's parent to sit in on one or more private lessons. When the parent is present, the teacher can point out ways the parent can help with practice at home ("When you see Cindy practicing, be sure her hand position is correct. This is what it should look like . . ."). Students with ADD might have lapses in attention during the lesson or during their practice at home. If someone else can help remind them of things to bear in mind when practicing, practice time at home can be better spent.

A recommended resource to assist parents in supporting the learning of their children at home is James O'Froseth's Home Helper series. The Home Helper books guide the new instrumentalist through the basics needed to produce the first few notes on the instrument successfully with the at-home guidance of a parent or other adult "home helper" who can be present to support the student's

practice. The books, specific to each instrument, contain information about the instrument, assembly, and practicing in general but also includes boxes used for communication between the “home helper” and the teacher.

Parents can also support their children by asking questions about the music being performed or serving as an audience as each child explores different ways to play a passage. Videotaping the student periodically can provide a way the student can self-assess by noting ways he or she has improved or noting aspects of the music that still need to be refined. Parents can help their children recognize what they are doing well and offer positive suggestions for improvement. Teachers should offer suggestions to the parents on how to structure practice time so that it is in manageable chunks. For example, after school, the student could complete tone exercises, and after dinner, the student could work on a solo.

Even though there are reasons why having a parent present in the lesson can be helpful for students with ADD, the parent’s presence can also pose a distraction. Since every student is different, the teacher must weigh the pros and cons of having the parent present in the lesson in each case. The parent ultimately should be able to choose whether to attend private lessons with the student, but with honest and open communication citing specific benefits and concerns of the parent’s presence in the lesson, the private teacher can certainly make a recommendation to the parent.

Teachers should seek out occasions to speak to the student’s parent periodically. If possible, teachers should ask the parent to share ways to tell if the child is getting frustrated, what signs to look for so the teacher can be proactive instead of having to wait and react after the student becomes upset, or what techniques can ease frustration if the student does become discouraged in the lesson. Parents can also inform the teacher of the student’s strengths and interests. Knowing these things can help the teacher build a positive relationship with the

student. While this type of communication can be time-intensive, instrumental lesson teachers are in a unique position to make a significant difference in the life of the student through the one-to-one relationship of the private lesson or the small-group atmosphere of school lessons.

During the Lesson

Private or small-group lessons can be remarkable experiences for all students, but especially for students with ADD. The opportunity to learn one-on-one or in a small group with a teacher who is a master of the instrument can help the student achieve not only musical success but also improve self-esteem. There are many ways teachers can improve the learning environment for students with ADD during lessons:

- **Length and Frequency of Lessons:** Teachers should consider whether a shorter lesson time may be appropriate for students with ADD. One possibility is two mini-lessons per week. When setting up the lesson schedule, teachers should endeavor to find the best possible time of day to schedule lessons for students with ADD. Teachers may have to experiment with different options to see what works best. If the student is on medication to help the ADD, scheduling the lesson before the medication wears off may be best.
- **Structure of Lessons:** Teachers must determine whether it is best for the individual student to experience a similar routine at each lesson or whether it is more beneficial for the lesson structure to be varied from week to week. Some students with ADD thrive more on the predictability of the lesson, while other students may become bored. Since the structure of instrumental lessons is different from other classes the student has in school, the teacher might have to experiment with different lesson structures to find out what works best. For example, a common lesson routine might include tone studies, followed by scales, then etudes, and finally, solos. Sarah, a student with ADD, struggled to focus on tone studies right

away when she arrived at lessons because the slow tempo and deep focus on sound was too abrupt of a switch from the energy of traveling to the lesson. When her lessons began with scales, she was able to use her energy to play at a faster tempo, and the tone studies were used at the end of the lesson after she had settled down and was more focused—more akin to a cool-down than the traditional use of tone studies as warm-ups.

- **Create a Lesson Plan for Each Lesson:** Since the ability to focus on one task for a length of time will vary for students with ADD, having a plan of what should be achieved during the lesson can help the teacher keep the lesson moving and interesting for the student. Having clear and specific ideas of what could be covered in the lesson can keep transitions to a minimum and avoid any loss of momentum in teaching. When planning the lesson, teachers should consider several different ways of introducing concepts. For example, when teaching the major scale, the teacher could lead the student in playing each note of the scale away from notation by simply calling out each pitch, play the scale for the student (auditory), play the scale on the piano (more visual), show the scale notated, and teach the student how to construct a major scale, given a starting note, using either staff paper or manipulatives. These varying ways of introducing the major scale could be done all at once or in successive lessons, depending on the needs of the student.
- **Share the Plan with the Student:** In addition to having a lesson plan, Robert Lambeth, in his article “Adapting Studio Voice Instruction to Meet the Needs of the Attention Deficit Disorder Student,” suggested printing an outline of the activities planned for that day for the student to view during the lesson to help the student stay motivated and on track as far as what is to be accomplished in the lesson.⁸ He suggested asking the student to tell the teacher what is next on the list if the lesson starts to get off track, and he has the student check each thing off as it is covered to help the student see the progress being made in the lesson. Seeing a concrete list of what they

FIGURE 1

Beginning of Chromatic Scale Exercise (exercise would continue, adding one new note at a time)



have accomplished and getting to tell the teacher what comes next can increase students' self-perception.

- **Maintain a Swift Pace:** By keeping a swift pace during the lesson, the student with ADD is likely to stay more focused. Teachers should strive to break tasks down into simple, achievable steps, with any necessary explanations given in the briefest, clearest way. Speaking at length about a topic will most likely result in losing the attention of the student, and as much as possible, students should be led to experience the concept rather than receiving information through lecture. If the student is struggling to master a specific concept, the teacher can break the concept down into smaller steps for the student to achieve and agree to address the concept again at the next lesson, moving on to something else in the current lesson. For example, if the student is struggling to play a piece with well-planned breaths, the teacher and the student could work together on finding good places for the first few breaths and have the student determine good places to breathe for a small section of the piece for the next lesson rather than spending an extended period working out breathing for a large portion of the piece. The student and the teacher working together to evaluate possible places to breathe will help the student feel ownership as he or she explores different breathing options with the teacher guiding the process. The tedious skill of determining where to breathe is necessary for musical playing,

but spending too much time on the concept in one lesson could lead to lost focus. After spending a short amount of time on the tedious concept, the lesson focus can move to something very different, like working on double-tonguing or sight-reading a duet.

- **Create Opportunities to Focus:** Another suggestion by Lambeth was to have the student close his or her eyes when singing vocalises.⁹ That same technique could be used when having students play tone exercises, scales, or other exercises from memory. With the eyes closed, the student can avoid seeing things that are distracting. As an alternative to closing the eyes, Lambeth suggested having students focus on a particular point on the wall or imagine to whom they are singing or where they are singing.¹⁰ Without the visual distractions, students can place their focus on concepts like hearing tone quality or feeling relaxed finger technique while playing. Lambeth also recommended the use of “grounding exercises,” such as stretching or breathing exercises, as being useful with students with ADHD rather than jumping right into the lesson.¹¹ Besides helping with breathing and body use, stretching and breathing exercises can help the student calm down and focus, particularly if he or she is entering the lesson in a particularly stressed or rushed manner. If the student's energy level is soaring, perhaps using purposeful movement, such as acting out something in the music, could help the student use

the extra energy to improve the musical performance. For example, acting out the role of the goat in Arthur Honegger's flute work *Danse de la chèvre* could be a good way to channel the extra energy and learn how to more effectively perform programmatic music.

- **Record the Lesson:** Encouraging students to take notes in a notebook or record the lesson can help the student recall what was covered in the lesson, particularly if attention tends to wane at times. When the student is more focused, he can revisit the lesson and pick up where he began to lose concentration. Parents can review the recording of the lesson at home so they can assist the student in reaching his goals. By reviewing the recording at home, the parent can support the teacher's goals for the lesson without the possibility of distracting the student by being physically present in the lesson.
- **Break Large Tasks Down into Smaller Chunks:** In his article “Students with ADHD,” Carl Swanson suggested encouraging students to learn a piece in small chunks since looking at the entire piece can be overwhelming to students with ADD.¹² The approach of learning smaller sections at a time allows the student to master short-term goals on the way to long-term goals. When using this approach, the teacher should celebrate the smaller goals, even noting each goal reached on a chart so the student can see his achievements pile up. With one student, Amanda, the task of playing the chromatic scale was

overwhelming. By breaking the scale down into small chunks (see Figure 1) and offering a sticker for each chunk learned, Amanda was able to slowly and accurately learn the scale.

- **Take Time to Review:** Take a few minutes at the end of the lesson to review what was covered in the lesson. Questions can be asked about new concepts, such as new notes learned or new musical terminology, to be sure the student is clear on how to finger the note or what the term means. Keep a container or basket of general review questions or prompts, like “What is one new musical term you learned today?” or “What can you do now that you could not do when you came in to today’s lesson?” Another approach, which is more personalized, would be to write questions that focus specifically on new notes or concepts covered in that lesson in advance of the lesson or during the lesson. In either case, the student could be rewarded with a sticker or other age-appropriate reward for participating in the review.

Practicing at Home

It is helpful for all involved if the teacher can provide a specific plan for what the student should be practicing for the next lesson and be sure that plan is communicated consistently from week to week. A notebook or binder can easily be used, or the teacher can create a document that is customized for the student. The time and date of the next lesson should always be included in the same place so the student and parents will know when the lesson will occur. Specific page numbers, band compositions, and skills to be practiced should also be included as needed to help the student prepare for upcoming band rehearsals and assessment requirements.

When creating customized practice plans, the teacher should consider including opportunities for the student to self-assess, use technology, perform, improvise, and interact with others. A list of suggested activities could be included, from which the student could be expected to complete all or a certain number of activities.

Depending on the student, the activities could be created collaboratively by the student and teacher, or they could be a surprise from the teacher. For the former, throughout the lesson, the student and teacher could discover items that would make good activities for the week. For example, if a student is having trouble playing a band warm-up that is to be played from memory, maybe the teacher and the student would determine that the student should perform the warm-up from memory for at least one friend and three family members at some point during the week. If the activities are determined by the teacher, the student could anticipate finding out what would be on the plan for the coming week, like a scavenger hunt. Knowing that the teacher created the plan especially for the student can make the student feel special. Suggested activities that could be included on a practice plan for a high school flute student as activities from which the student could select might include the following:

- Come up with five different ways to play the opening phrase in your solo.
- Sight-read duets with another flutist for at least a half hour.
- Write lyrics for the A section of the étude you are working on this week.
- Come up with a title for the étude you are working on this week.
- Find three YouTube videos of flutists performing your solo. Write down at least one thing you like and one thing you do not like about their performance.
- Find a picture or piece of art in your home or scenery outside that is inspiring to you. Using the notes in the D major scale, improvise a melody inspired by what you see.
- Using colored pencils, indicate colors representative of the tone colors you think best represent the music throughout the second movement of your solo.

Journaling by the student and possibly by the parent should be encouraged as a way to reflect on successes, discoveries, and questions. For young

students or students who struggle with written expression, descriptive words could be provided (“Today’s practice was awesome/pretty good/really difficult . . .”), or students could circle smiley, neutral, or frowny faces to represent how that day’s practice went. Older students could be encouraged to respond to specific questions, such as “The best part of today’s practice was . . .,” “The most beautiful sound I made today was when I was . . .,” or “The most difficult aspect of practicing today was . . .” More mature students may be able to journal in a nondirected way, responding to the day’s practice in a narrative. Parents can journal in response to many of the same or similar prompts but can also include notes to the teacher including any discoveries they make having to do with occasions when their child seemed to be frustrated or confident while practicing or whether the student seemed interested or disengaged when practicing.

Teachers can consider recording examples of some of the music currently being studied for the student to use at home. This is almost essential with skills taught by rote, like scale-based studies. Some students easily learn by rote, others need to hear it many times, and others need to see the exercise notated in order to process it and successfully execute it. Many teachers teach students in the way the teacher learns best, but all teachers must stretch themselves to think about teaching concepts from all angles so all students can be reached. No one way of learning is the best.

Recordings can be fun for young students and can provide focus for their practice at home. Hearing the teacher’s voice introducing a scale and counting off to begin the exercise can remind the student of the lesson and can help the student learn to be his or her own teacher by bridging the gap between time with the teacher in the studio and the student’s own personal practice time. Recording separate parts of duets or making up accompaniments to go along with scales, études, or other exercises can make practice more fun and more focused for the student. Computer

Some Additional Resources about ADD/ADHD

- Adamek, Mary S., and Alice-Ann Darrow. *Music in Special Education*. Silver Spring, MD: The American Music Therapy Association, Inc., 2005.
- Coleman, Wendy S. *Attention Deficit Disorders, Hyperactivity, and Associated Disorder: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals*. 7th ed. rev. Madison, WI: Calliope Books, 2007.
- Froseth, James O. *Clarinet Home Helper: First Lessons at School and at Home*. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005.
- Lambeth, Robert. "Adapting Studio Voice Instruction to Meet the Needs of the Attention Deficit Disorder Student." *Journal of Singing—The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 54, no. 3 (January/February 1998): 17–24.
- Swanson, Carl. "Students with ADHD." *Journal of Singing* 64, no. 2 (November/December 2007): 217–21.
- United States Department of Education. "Part 104—Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Handicap in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance." Accessed February 20, 2013. <http://www.ed.gov/policy/rights/reg/ocr/edlite-34cfr104.html#E>.
- United States Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights. "Your Rights Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act." Accessed February 20, 2013. <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/504.html>.

accompaniments like SmartMusic can also help increase focus for students in their practicing by helping the piece sound more realistic with the accompaniment part included.

In Conclusion

One important thing to remember is that people with ADD live with the disorder every single day. Some days will be better than others, but teachers must remember that students with ADD always have to contend with its effects and that every student with ADD is different. Instrumental lesson teachers can rise to the challenge and demonstrate their excellence as teachers by working hard to create an environment that is conducive to learning for each individual student. And continue leaning yourself: Check out the Additional Resources for ADD/ADHD sidebar in this article.

Even if the behavior of the student with ADD is frustrating at times, teachers should focus on the student's positive attributes. Maybe the student comes to the lesson with a big smile and a friendly greeting every week. Parents want to feel like the teacher likes their child and is happy the child is there for his or her lesson, and students generally like to feel "liked" by their teacher. Teachers must not dwell on the trying moments of a lesson but need to look for the positive. After each

lesson, especially with challenging students, the teacher could take a moment to think of three positive things that happened in the lesson to grow in appreciation for the student's unique gifts and abilities.

With creative preparation, critical thinking, and effective delivery, the instrumental lesson instructor can find ways to best teach students with ADD while keeping lessons interesting and engaging for all students. Instrumental lesson teachers have the opportunity to provide students with ADD the structure and flexibility they need, since lessons can be one-on-one or in small groups. They can also be influential in teaching students to anticipate, create, and apply successful strategies that can be applicable in other musical and non-musical contexts. Teachers of students with special needs can feel a great sense of accomplishment and purpose when the student progresses. By incorporating the suggestions offered, as well as by discovering their own strategies, instrumental lesson teachers can be a major source of inspiration for all students while helping them hone skills on a musical instrument.

NOTES

1. Wendy S. Coleman, M.D., *Attention Deficit Disorders, Hyperactivity, and Associated Disorder: A Handbook for*

Parents and Professionals, 7th ed., rev. (Madison, WI: Calliope Books, 2007), 1–2.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. United States Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights, "Your Rights Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act," accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/504.html>.
5. United States Department of Education, "Part 104—Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Handicap in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance: Subpart E—Postsecondary Education, 104.44a," accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/rights/reg/ocr/edlite-34cfr104.html#E>.
6. Mary S. Adamek and Alice-Ann Darrow, *Music in Special Education* (Silver Spring, MD: The American Music Therapy Association, Inc., 2005), 62.
7. Ibid., 63.
8. Robert Lambeth, "Adapting Studio Voice Instruction to Meet the Needs of the Attention Deficit Disorder Student," *Journal of Singing—The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 54, no. 3 (January/February 1998), 22.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Carl Swanson, "Students with ADHD," *Journal of Singing* 64, no. 2 (November/December 2007), 219.