

## **Take Time to Teach Time**

By Alyse Siegel

The concept of time is an elusive one. Even the most brilliant minds in the world, including Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein, find it difficult to describe. When posed with the question, "How would you define time?" Albert Einstein responded, "When you sit with a nice girl for two hours, it seems like two minutes. When you sit on a hot stove for two minutes, it seems like two hours. That's relativity."

Time changes with the blink of an eye. It stands still. It flies. It drags on. Where did the time go? I just need a little more time! If only, I had the time. Given the inconsistent and changing nature of time it is no wonder that individuals with processing weaknesses in the areas of temporal sequencing, attention and executive functioning find it a mysterious obstacle. As noted by Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*, "Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year." Many individuals who have difficulty with time perception could certainly benefit from such obvious cues as blaring trumpets or thunderstorms but, unfortunately, there are none. The inability to identify, appreciate and manage time impacts awareness of time passage, ability to meet deadlines, sense of how long it takes to complete a task, capacity to allocate time properly, knowledge of the best order in which to undertake steps in a complicated process, and ability to develop and adhere to schedules (Levine).

Time becomes not only a mystery but a potential enemy for the child with nonverbal learning disabilities, executive functioning deficits, and attention issues. These children are not prepared to fight the battle against time and their schools are not providing them with the weapons they need. Most of the instruction for LD and ADD/ADHD students is directed toward improving basic skills in the academic areas and very little attention is given to more rudimentary skills like organization and time planning. However, as society becomes increasingly complex, the concepts of time management become a more important function in academic and everyday life.

Currently, the identification process is an informal procedure comprised primarily of teacher/parent observations, inability to meet grade/age expectations in the acquisition of time management skills, and selected information from standardized tests. Unfortunately, there is no specific test or series of tests that definitively identifies these individuals. Fragmented information may be available from various subtests on the WISC-III or WAIS-R. Questions on the Information subtests that deal with sequencing or time may provide clues. Measures of processing time are available on subtests of the Woodcock Johnson, WISC and other timed tests, but slow processing time does not always equate with poor time management. The Connor's Continuous Performance Test also provides a measure of reaction speed based on the speed of a stimulus presented on a computer screen. The speed of many ADD and ADHD individuals slows down more than expected when the stimuli slows. This suggests that these individuals require more external structure. This isolated information, however, cannot form the basis of a diagnosis. Other instruments like the Time Use Analyzer, Time Perception Inventory and the Functional Time Estimation

Questionnaire provide data on time awareness but their normative samples are limited or do not include children.

Most children are initially identified through parent or teacher observations. A review of my own case history profiles and clinical observations led me to compile the following list of words and phrases that describe these children or adolescents. Parents state their children are:

*Lost in a time warp, consistently late, notorious procrastinators, live for the moment, live in the here and now.*

They have difficulty executing routine activities like getting up and dressed in time for school and, homework overwhelms them since they can't break it down into smaller units. Teachers note, "students rush through tasks to finish on time since they haven't allocated enough time or can't plan for the future. They get little work done in relation to the amount of time they spend. Younger students have difficulty learning the days of the weeks or the months in the year. They find it difficult to tell simple stories in a sequential manner. For older students, there is a delayed mastery of multi-step math problems and oral and written expressive language may seem to be incoherent and lacking a logical order of ideas." This terminology is consistent and implies an impaired sense of time. In addition to teacher and parent observations, an informal assessment of the acquisition of time management skills based on grade and age expectations can be useful in identifying at-risk students.

Although the current literature does not propose guidelines for skill acquisition in the area of time management as it does for math, reading or written language, a comparison can be made by reviewing the information in the box on the next page. While there are variations depending on the school, these skills appeared most frequently in my work with students in kindergarten through eighth grade. In conjunction with teacher/parent observations and age/grade expectations, information obtained from psychoeducational evaluations can be useful in "red flagging" individuals with time management problems. In-depth evaluations may reveal processing deficits in temporal sequential ordering, visual spatial abilities, attention or executive functioning.

Once students are identified, the question then becomes, "What can be done to assist these children in acquiring the skills they need?" In planning a program for intervention, there are three fundamental principles in the acquisition of time management skills. First, all skills must be directly taught. Second, skill instruction must focus on two areas: increasing time awareness and then improving time management. Finally, success requires a coordinated effort among schools, outside service providers, and home.

Since almost half of a student's waking time is spent in the classroom and several hours after school are spent on school related activities, schools are key to teaching time management skills. Following the principle that time management must be directly taught, teachers must include time management instruction as part of their daily curriculum. Beginning with increasing time awareness, teachers and administrators can model good time management. Teachers need to begin and end class on time and finish their daily lessons within the given

classroom period. The semester's work should be evenly distributed so students do not experience the common last minute rush to complete a month's worth of work in the last week of school. In departmentalized grades, teachers need to coordinate efforts to insure that the book report for language arts is not due the same week as the science fair project and the social studies research paper. Many schools have resolved this problem by having a central monthly calendar posted in the school office which indicates major or long term projects along with their due dates. Other schools have rules dictating that there may not be more than one major assignment, one test, and one quiz scheduled in the same week.

Coordinated planning within the school can alleviate time management problems for the student. In addition, teachers need to correct and return graded work on a timely basis and appear promptly for appointments and meetings with students. Schools may want to consider rewarding punctuality and good time management. We don't think twice about giving praise for work in academic areas that is well done. We give stickers, have honor rolls, and award special privileges for high quality work. Why not do the same for time management skills?

In addition to increasing time awareness, schools can help students improve time management skills by providing appropriate assignment books and directly teaching students how to use them. All students should use the same assignment books just like they use the same social studies or science textbooks. Imagine the confusion in teaching science if each student was allowed to select his or her own textbooks! Appropriate assignment books are ones that are predated and preformatted with the subject names.

Furthermore, planners must contain lines to write on and provide adequate space for entries. It is common for students with time management difficulties to also have difficulties with handwriting. The less they need to write, the better! Good assignment books allow the student to view the entire week at one time and provide monthly calendars. Individuals with visual spatial deficits can have difficulty processing gestalts and may never see the individual days as a week's worth of work. Monthly calendars also help provide "big pictures." If possible, planners should be preprinted with school events, vacations, and days off. If this is not possible then teachers should instruct students at the beginning of the school year to transfer their school calendars into their assignment books.

Once students have appropriate assignment books, teacher can proceed to directly instruct students on how to use the planner. The first year that assignment books are introduced, teachers can provide a larger identical planner on display where he/she can model the entries. Many publishers already offer this option when purchasing quantities of books. Schools must also establish specific guidelines for how to enter assignments. Guidelines should address issues like:

- Will students be required to prioritize assignments?
- Are assignments entered on the day they are assigned, the day they are due or both?
- Will students enter the amount of time spent on each assignment in an attempt to build time awareness?
- Will teachers provide time estimates as to how long each assignment will take to help guide students?

- Will students be required to write "no homework" if none is assigned to insure that they have not just forgotten to enter the assignment?
- Will teachers' check planners on a regular basis to insure proper use? While guidelines may vary from school to school, consistency throughout the grades in any given school will lessen confusion.

School programs can be successfully coordinated with outside support services including tutors, educational therapists, psychologists, and social workers. Out of school support should reinforce the guidelines established by the school and focus on the same two areas of increasing time awareness and improving time management. One of the most effective ways to build awareness of time is to have students keep a record that estimates how long they think it takes to complete common tasks like reading five pages in a textbook versus a record of how long it actually takes. The student can enter his estimated time on a grid and then the tutor can time the child actually completing the task. This information can be transferred to a reference sheet to help students realistically gauge how long it will take to do many of their nightly assignments and plan accordingly.

Outside support services also need to help students improve their time management by providing practice exercises to reinforce school guidelines for assignment book use, teaching prioritizing, and practicing long term planning. Summer provides an excellent opportunity to introduce or reinforce school procedures for assignment book use through mock entries on practice sheets that duplicate the assignment books used by the school. Tutors can prepare written exercises that present a typical day of assignments and then have students rehearse entering the assignments in the duplicate planner. Students that are too young to use a planner can be taught how to create simple "To Do" lists that indicate important daily activities. Outside support providers can also teach students how to prioritize assignments. Often students with poor time management have difficulty not only estimating how long an assignment will take, but they also have problems distinguishing the proper order in which to complete the assignments. As a seventh grade student said, "What's the difference what order you do them in as long as it gets done?" Prioritizing can lead to more efficient work completion. Priority guidelines for homework completion will vary based on the student. Some students need a quick and easy "warm-up" task to build their confidence and act as a starting point. Others can jump right in. As a general rule of thumb, I recommend that following the "warm-up" task. If necessary, students study for tests/quizzes and complete papers that are due the following day. Next, assignments should be done based on the level of difficulty and due date. It is best to work on assignments that are due the next day, then assignments that are most difficult, then long-term assignments and assignments that are easy.

Requiring students to make conscious choices about priorities and requesting that they indicate priority numbers in their assignment books provides a solid foundation for work completion. Long-term assignments that are more common in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade are also problematic for students with nonverbal, attention, or executive functioning issues. Dr. Russell Barkley refers to the maturational process of developing a sense of time as a "window on time" that opens more slowly for students with attention deficits. Preschool ADD or ADHD students have a window that is shut implying that the only time that exists is

"now." Three to six year olds have a window that is open for a few minutes to a few hours. By age seven or eight, the window is about twelve hours. For adolescents, the window on time is up to two days and for adults eight to twelve weeks. This information makes it is easier to understand why a high school student who has been assigned a history research paper with a three-month lead time doesn't begin working on it until two days before it is due. While we can't force the window to stay open any longer, we can help students break down their long-term projects so that a portion of it is due every day or every two days.

Providing written guidelines and offering practice exercises for long term planning will help students become more independent as they get older. Long-Term Planning Guidelines include:

- Determine how many days there are until the assignment is due
- Plan to finish two days in advance
- Highlight the various parts of the assignment in different colors to serve as a way to distinguish the possible components
- Include time for hidden tasks like purchasing materials, going to the library, reading the resources, taking notes, organizing the information, and proofreading several times
- Include time for unanticipated delays. Long term planning, like assignment book use, can also be taught during the summer and put into practice the following fall.

Parents are an important part of the overall plan to improve time management skills. Their role is to model and monitor. Good models wear watches, use appointment books, plan time aloud, post calendars with family schedules, and have scheduled routines at home. Parents should wear and make reference to their watches. In addition, they should make sure their children wear watches ("Watch Minders" and those with beeper functions can be particularly helpful). Parents can model time planning by using appointment books (or Palm Pilots) and by thinking aloud when they plan their own activities. Make your child aware of how you schedule routine activities by saying, "I have to pick up your dad at 6:15 at the train station. It's 5:15 now. It usually takes 10 minutes and I'll add on another five minutes for rush hour traffic. I think I'll leave at 6:00 p.m."

In addition, draw parallels between the time it takes to complete various activities. Compare an unknown period of time to a familiar period of time. "We're leaving for the orthodontist in 30 minutes. That is that same amount time you spend watching *The Simpsons*." As monitors, parents should review the child's 'To Do' list or assignment book each day after school. Review students' priorities and check to make sure they are realistic about the amount of time they plan to spend on an assignment. Remember to post a calendar with personal activities in the kitchen or family room. Assist your child with entering these personal commitments including birthdays, parties, special events, sports practices, haircuts, and medical appointments in their school assignment books. By incorporating personal plans with schoolwork and activities, the child can get an accurate picture of his total time commitment. Most importantly, establishing a routine schedule at home that has predetermined meal times and bedtimes provides the framework your child needs to plug in his or her other activities and homework.

Time is an ever changing and complex phenomenon. In order to manage it, an evolving hierarchy of skills is required. From simple skills such as following a predetermined time schedule to independently allocating time over the long term, skill acquisition for students with time management problems requires a coordinated effort among the schools, home, and outside service providers. When implementing any of the proposed suggestions, always keep in mind that these guidelines are subject to alteration based on individual need. Also remember, that it takes time to learn to accurately judge and manage time.

**CONTINUUM OF TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS BY GRADE**  
*(These are examples of expectations and may from school to school)*

**Kindergarten**

Follows the time schedule set in the classroom.

**Grade 1**

Follows the time schedule set in the classroom.

Uses an alarm clock to get up in the morning.

Gets to school on time with the assistance of an adult.

Follows the time schedule set at home.

**Grade 2**

Follows an established after school routine for doing home work.

Knows how to tell time to the half hour.

**Grade 3**

Refers to the family calendar for special events, appointments, etc.

Turns in homework on time.

Knows how to tell time to the minute.

**Grade 4**

Completes a "Daily To Do List" each day after school that indicates homework and other activities.

Keeps own calendar of personal activities.

### **Grade 5**

Maintains an assignment book for homework assignments and personal activities.

Begins to see relationship between after school activities and schoolwork and plans accordingly.

Developing ability to estimate time it takes to complete assignments

Developing ability to plan for long-term assignments and test preparation but still requires adult guidance.

### **Grade 6**

Maintains an assignment book for homework assignments and personal activities but may still require some adult intervention.

Can prioritize homework assignments/ estimate amount of time needed.

Establishing independent planning of long-term assignments and test preparation.

Beginning to schedule own after school activities with adult guidance.

### **Grade 7**

Independently maintains and prioritizes an assignment book for homework assignments and personal activities.

Independently plans for long term assignments and test preparation.

Establishing more independence for scheduling own after school activities.