

# Alchemy for ADHD

by Jerome Schultz, PhD



**I**N ANCIENT TIMES, alchemists searched for a catalyst they believed could turn base metals such as lead or iron into gold. History has taught us that there are no shortcuts to the real thing. However, in helping a child achieve the gold standard of success in life, transformation of a basic emotion—fear—can make all the difference.

If you can help a child accurately assess the difficulty level of a new task, rate his or her ability and willingness to engage in the challenge, experience success and own it, you'll go a long way toward turning fear into the fuel for success. With a better understanding of the impact of stress, you can put your child or student on a path to enjoying school more, fearing failure less, and finding the satisfaction that comes from facing and overcoming anxiety.

## **When “fight or flight” becomes “freeze”**

From a neurological perspective, fear has a function. Our Paleolithic ancestors faced life-threatening situations. Imagine walking alone on a path when suddenly you see a long slithering object. You hear a soft *hiss*. With lightning speed, these sensory signals travel deep into the brain where they activate the threat center, a structure called the amygdala. *Threat identified: a snake!* This recognition triggers a cascade of hormones designed to get us out of harm's way. Our ancestors who survived made a rapid decision about whether to fight or run, and avoided the toxic venom.

In the modern world, and specifically at school, students face significant stressors daily. Most kids have the skills to handle the challenges they face. However, many students with ADHD and other learning challenges have developed a negative attitude toward challenging tasks. They face a reading or math assignment with fear and trepidation, assuming the worst. Instead of actively seeking out and mastering the challenge, their fight or flight response is triggered.

A young boy with short dark hair is shown from the waist up, wearing yellow boxing gloves and blue denim shorts. He is looking upwards and to the right with a wide, open-mouthed smile, appearing to be shouting or cheering. The background is plain white.

# Turning Fear into Fuel for Success

Like our ancestors, students with ADHD and learning challenges may experience an increase in heart rate, breathing, and blood flow to the legs. Unfortunately, running out of the room is not an option. Neither is fighting with the teacher. It's important to understand that under stress, the pre-frontal cortex, the mission control center for executive functions, takes a back seat to survival. Reacting to tasks with fear makes our ability to analyze and think less efficient, just when problem-solving skills need to be at their best.

## The “perfect storm” and the student with ADHD

We all know that kids with ADHD can be funny, quick-thinking, creative, energetic, and entertaining. Much of the time, these kids can be very fun to be around, especially when they are not confronted with tasks that make constant demands on them throughout the day. These positive traits, if nurtured and nourished can allow them to mature into adults who are charismatic, high-energy, success-bound leaders that people will want to be around.

On the other side of the ADHD coin, kids with this condition can be impulsive and hyperactive. They have difficulty with executive functioning, and they often have coexisting learning disabilities. This “perfect storm” may lead to missing parts of a reading passage or even missing an entire and critical lesson due to absences, doctor's appointments or—all too often—disciplinary suspensions. Unfortunately, the student with ADHD often experiences more failure than success. In order to protect themselves from stigma and shame, they are on the lookout for tasks that might make them feel stupid. Rather than embrace challenge, they avoid it or run from it, to keep out of harm's way.

### Consider the “fear factor”

In the *Fear Factor* reality show, adult contestants have to do some pretty scary stuff to compete for a \$50,000 prize. One episode, titled *Ten Craziest Challenges*, provides some insights into the impact of fear on human performance. For me, there were six takeaways about the best ways to face fear:

- Actively seek out challenge
- Believe success is possible
- Assess the reward as significant enough to make the task worth doing
- Just do it—don’t focus too much on how hard the task is
- Give yourself credit for success
- After finishing one challenge, go right on to the next

Kids with ADHD often believe that they have to do everything in front of them, and that they have to do it well. This is certain to activate the fear factor, which will predictably lead to avoidance, negativity, oppositionality, withdrawal, anger and a host of other emotions or behaviors that are incompatible with effective and satisfying learning.

### Three strategies for success: Transforming fear into gold

Before you start to focus on how to neutralize the fear factor, which I assure you that you will be able to do, here’s something you need to remember: It’s unlikely that kids will tell you, let alone acknowledge, that they are afraid or reading or math or public speaking, even though it’s fear that’s causing the problem here. Here are three strategies to use, and there are some suggested activities provided in the sidebar.

#### 1. Seeking out challenge

To be willing to approach a new challenge, help the student to overcome their strong emotions by helping them to name or “call out” their feelings. Because fear may be considered shameful, kids with ADHD may have difficulty acknowledging that they are afraid of a learning task. Provide support in terms they can understand. Most kids understand and use the words “anxious” or “stressed.” As a parent or teacher, it may be useful to describe their feelings in these terms: “I know that having to read all those

# Activities for Transforming Fear into Fuel

## ACTIVITY ONE Choosing What’s “Just Right”

This can be done at home or at school. Create a folder with several paragraph-long reading samples. Pick selections that are close to the child’s ability range. Then ask the child to look at the three samples, explaining, “Some kids think that one of these is too hard, some think one is too easy, and some think one is ‘just hard enough for them.’” Have the child pick the one that looks just right for him. Then have the child rate the task as explained in Activity Two.

## ACTIVITY TWO Rate the Task

Have the child rate the task he/she is presented with based on the following five-point scale:

**How hard is this task?** 1= This is easy!  
I know I can do this.  
2 = pretty easy but I can do it.  
3= I can probably do this  
4= I don’t think I can do this  
5= I know I can’t do this

**What’s my ability to do this?** 1 = I know I can do this.  
2 = I think I can do it.  
3= I can probably do this  
4= I don’t think I can do this  
5= I know I can’t do this

**How willing am I to do this?** 1 = very willing, maybe eager!  
2 = pretty willing  
3= so-so  
4= not very willing and  
don’t want to  
5= I am not willing to do this.



words on a page sometimes causes you to be (worried, anxious or stressed.) I believe there's a way to face these challenging tasks in a different, more successful way?"

## 2. Believe success is possible

Tap into the student's strengths by using an example from his positive experiences, for example, "One way to approach this with a positive attitude to approach it the way you do when you face that hockey puck or fast pitch." (It's important to get some buy-in at this point.) Consider asking the student, "Are you willing/ready to find out how?" If that doesn't happen easily, try saying, "What if we do an experiment? Try to change the message that you're sending to your brain when you face the task. Let's see if this helps you do better. If it does then maybe you will consider trying this approach in the future."

## 3. Assess the task and reward

Help kids figure out the "DQ", or "difficulty quotient" of a task. Most kids with a history of failure perceive

each task as a fear stimulus. A high level of anxiety often leads them to expect disaster when in reality, the task may not be as impossible as they think. To help a child know whether that task has the same level of difficulty as the perceived threat (i.e., whether that snake is poisonous or harmless) it is important to strengthen her ability to rapidly and realistically assess the difficulty level. (See the sidebar for suggested activities.)

I hope that I've made the case that fear erodes competence in kids with ADHD, and it's especially potent if a child has had more failures than successes in life. If you can help a child accurately assess the difficulty level of a new task, rate his or her ability and willingness to engage the challenge, and experience success and own it, you will have gone a long way toward turning fear into the fuel for success. By doing this, you can put the child on a path to enjoying school more, fearing failure less, and finding the satisfaction that comes from facing and overcoming the anxiety that often accompanies new challenges. **A**

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## ACTIVITY THREE The Fear/Anxiety Hierarchy

### 1. On a stack of index cards, list 5-10 activities.

On the first card, start with something that the child simply cannot or will not do. Then make cards for related tasks, in decreasing order of stress or fear. Shuffle the deck and have the child put them out on a table in order from the most stressful to the one that she could comfortably complete. Here are example cards that could be presented to a student who has difficulty with structured writing assignments:

- Writing an essay about a topic assigned by the teacher
- Writing an essay about a topic I choose.
- Writing a paragraph about a topic assigned by the teacher
- Writing a paragraph about a topic I choose.
- Writing a sentence about a topic assigned by the teacher.
- Writing a sentence about a topic I choose.
- Writing three words related to a topic
- Not writing at all, but telling my teacher:
  - Three words related to a topic
  - A sentence
  - A paragraph (three sentences)
  - A story I make up about a topic.
- Drawing a cartoon or picture showing what I know about some topic
- Cut pictures out of a magazine and paste them in a folder, as a way to show what I think or know about a topic.

### 2. Do the task.

### 3. Give credit.

Always recognize effort over achievement. Help the child see his progress over time. Encourage him to give himself a pat on the back. Be sure that the child is rewarded in a way he or she enjoys.

### 4. Go on to new challenges.

To debrief and move forward into the future, consider discussing quotations like those below with the child. Point out examples of times the child has been brave and overcome fear. Confirm that the child has the capacity to change a fear mindset to a brave mindset.

"Fear doesn't shut you down, it wakes you up."

-Veronica Roth

"Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

-J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood."

-Marie Curie

"There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure."

-Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*