

Aaron's Case Study – Captain Chaos¹⁴ gains Self-Control

Aaron Abbott was a fireball. Ever since he was a baby, he'd been on the go, like a wind up toy. He couldn't be left alone or he'd be into something. Parenting Aaron was exhausting and frustrating – for him and the rest of his family. It seemed like all he ever heard was “Don't touch that!” “Watch out, you'll fall!” “Can't you ever just do anything carefully?” His older brothers hadn't been anything like this and so his Mom and Dad knew that it couldn't be their fault. Or could it? His grandmother said that they just weren't being strict enough with Aaron. He was the baby and was being allowed to get away with murder.

Was Aaron's misbehavior the result of being allowed to “get away with murder” or was there something else going on?

By the time he was 7 years old, his parents felt like “remote control car” drivers, always telling Aaron what to do. It was a constant effort to try to get him up in the morning, ready for school, and out the door in time for the school bus. When he got home, the work began again -finding out what he had not completed in school that day and chasing him to do his homework. When he wasn't pulling the cat's tail, he was fighting with his brothers. Once he was finally in bed, he was up 10 times asking for a drink of water.

At the end of Grade Two, his teacher mentioned her concerns with his school work. She felt that Aaron was a lot more capable than his marks were showing. She wondered if he might have A.D.D. Both parents were upset at the thought, but once they learned more about it, they had to admit that he sure fit the stereotype. Mr. Abbott, wondered if A.D.D. was just an excuse and that his son just had to learn more self-discipline, but Mrs. Abbott wasn't so sure. She spoke to the family doctor about her concerns and he offered to put Aaron on Ritalin to see if that would help. Mrs. Abbott said she'd rather try some other things first. So she got

¹⁴ Captain Chaos Lives Here is the name of a cute little book by Carol Johnson (1992). In it, she describes a very typical, little ADDer with hyperactivity. The story above is a fictional composite which I have created in order to illustrate how to use a wholistic approach in addressing the needs those with attentional concerns.

some information on A.D.D. and how to deal with it. She didn't really want to use drugs, but was willing to try them if nothing else worked.

Mrs. Abbott felt that the problem was not going to go away and that she was going to try to find out what was going on with Aaron. Her husband was skeptical but still willing at this point to see what could be done. So, they went to a seminar given by a psychologist who specialized in a wholistic approach to problems in the area of attention and learning. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott liked the idea of looking at attention in a wholistic way and so they made an appointment.

First, they each filled out a Screening Checklist of Attentional Concerns in Adult and Children¹⁵ (p. 3) on Aaron and had Aaron's teacher do the same. On all of their checklists, Aaron appeared to have a problem with attention. But what was the cause? Did he really have A.D.D. or was something else going on?

Did Aaron really have A.D.D. or was something else going on?

Mr. and Mrs. Abbott and the teacher completed the Levine Information Processing Questionnaire (see Appendix C, p. 39) and were again in agreement on how Aaron's learning was being affected by his attentional difficulties. He was having trouble filtering out distractions, determining the importance of information, satisfying himself, previewing outcomes and controlling his behavior. No wonder he had complained of things like not being able to think in school when the other kids were talking, or not being sure of what the teacher wanted him to do.

The parents and the teacher decided to work on only one area to begin with. They decided to see if ear plugs or wearing a walkman would help Aaron to be able to filter out noises in the classroom and allow him to concentrate on his schoolwork. He was so excited when he could actually think with the walkman on – both at school and at home. His teacher had arranged a visual signal for when he needed to turn it off to listen to instructions. However, Aaron still wasn't accomplishing very much school work unless he was particularly interested in doing it. He liked drawing and colouring maps, but he hated writing stories.

¹⁵ All of the tools mentioned in Aaron's case study come from [The A.D.D. Guidebook](#) by Dr. Teeya Scholten.

Aaron was so excited that he could concentrate in his classroom when he wore his walkman to block out the distracting noises.

In the process of finding out whether or not Aaron had A.D.D., they would have to rule out all other causes of his attentional problems. The psychologist took a detailed history from the Abbott's about Aaron's early development and what kinds of medical, educational and psychiatric problems there were in the Abbott's and their relatives. The psychologist also observed Aaron in her office and his classroom and did some testing to make sure that he was able to read and write. The Abbott's had had Aaron's vision (eye co-ordination and acuity) and hearing tested the year before, so it wasn't necessary to repeat this. Since Aaron was having such a hard time making his letters neatly, the psychologist recommended having a consultation with an occupational therapist. The occupational therapist worked with Aaron for about an hour and showed Aaron how to hold his pencil properly. She also gave Mr. and Mrs. Abbott some exercises to do several times a week that would help Aaron develop his "fine-motor" muscles which are necessary for writing. She said that he was a bit behind in this area and felt that his written work should be reduced at school until his printing skills improved.

The psychologist then explained that food intolerances can sometimes affect how well our brain works. In order to see if this was the case with Aaron, the Abbott's would have to take one particular food out of his diet for seven days and then reintroduce it. They would then see if this made any difference to his attention. Aaron had had lots of ear infections as a baby and was still got a lot of colds and stomach aches, so they decided to take all milk products out of his diet for a week. After they had made up a milk-free menu, they began the experiment.

At the end of the week off milk products, both his parents and the teacher filled out the Screening Checklist again and compared their results. Everyone felt that Aaron seemed a little calmer and more focused. Even his writing seemed a little neater, but not much. His complexion seemed better because he looked a little less pale and he seemed better able to handle frustration.

Off the milk, Aaron was a little calmer, more patient, focused and looked less pale.

However, he was still out of his seat a lot and there were still major attentional concerns. Although the Abbott's were working with Aaron at home on the printing exercises, he wasn't showing much improvement and he wasn't getting much done in the way of schoolwork. The psychologist was then able to diagnose Aaron with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Combined Type. She felt that Aaron may have also problem in the area of written expression. She suggested that it might be interesting to see if medication would help Aaron in his written work. If his printing still didn't improve, Aaron's difficulty with writing could be formally assessed further, if needed, once the attentional difficulties were treated.

After the seven days off milk products, Mrs. Abbott reintroduced milk to see if it was affecting him. What a difference in Aaron when milk products were reintroduced! There were more fights at home, he got "the sniffles" and completely refused to do any work at all. That was enough to convince Mrs. Abbott that milk products were hurting Aaron and that they were moving in the right direction with him by keeping this substance out of his diet. She spoke to her family doctor about a calcium and magnesium supplement and told him of the progress they were making.

When Aaron was off milk again, and producing some written work, his teacher mentioned that his printing seemed better but still large and immature. It seemed to take a lot of effort to get things done and he was always rushing to get finished. The result was a very messy notebook. The Abbott's thought it was time to ask the teacher to reduce the amount of written work required by Aaron. She was willing to do this by having him write 3 lines when the rest of the class was expected to write 5 lines. On tests, he would be asked to complete every other question. Within a few days, the teacher noticed that Aaron was focussing better on his school work, he was getting more done and his work looked a little neater. He also seemed pleased that he could finish his work now.

The next area of focus was on Aaron's personality type. They discovered that he was an ENTP (Extraverted-Intuitive-Thinking-Perceiving) person. He was a friendly, little guy who loved being with people. He was creative, logical, flexible

and adaptable. On the other hand, he didn't particularly care if his work was correct or if his desk, notebook and room at home were neat and tidy. Aaron also seemed somewhat unaware of other people's feelings and didn't care if he finished anything. No wonder life was such a struggle for him (and others who were concerned about his school work!).

Since Mrs. Abbott was always having to "chase" Aaron to do his homework, the psychologist suggested that the Abbotts learn a behavior management technique¹⁶ that would help Aaron to become more responsible for his own school work. She suggested the rule of "work before play" and explained how there should be an immediate positive or negative consequence for Aaron's choices.

Mrs. Abbott wanted Aaron to be able to play after school, but right after supper, she wanted him to go and do his homework. After that, he could play with his toys, his friends or watch TV. So they made up a rule which was stated in a positive way, applied to the whole family, wrote out the consequences and explained the plan to Aaron.

The Rule was: "We do our work before play."

(+) If Aaron decided to do his work before playing, the "positive consequence" of his choice was that **he had the freedom to play however he wished** for the rest of the evening until bedtime. That included reading, computer, lego, TV and talking on the phone with his friend.

(-) If Aaron chose NOT to do his work before play (and started playing after dinner or at any point before he was finished his homework), **he LOST the freedom to play however he wished** after he had finished his homework. In this case, he could only read or play with his toys for the rest of the evening until bedtime. He couldn't talk with his friends on the phone, watch TV or play on the computer.

Mrs. Abbott couldn't believe that this approach would result in any kind of drastic change in Aaron, but she was willing to give it a try.

The first day, Aaron got up from the supper table and went to get his bicycle. Mr. Abbott ran after him and calmly said: "**Aaron, I notice that you have chosen NOT to do your work before play. As a result, you have lost the freedom to play however you wish when you are done your homework.**". She then reminded him

¹⁶ The behavior management approach is explained in [Riding the Wave](#), by Dr. Teeya Scholten

about what they had discussed. That he would have to come inside and finish his homework. After that he would need to stay inside and just play with his toys or read. He was not allowed computer, friends or TV.

Aaron groaned, but he came inside. He finished his homework and had a quiet evening. The next night, Aaron got up from the supper table and said that he was going to do his homework. His parents asked him to show his homework to them when he was finished. When he was done, Mrs. Abbott said, ***“Aaron you have chosen to do your homework before playing. Good show! The consequence is that you are able to play however you want to until bedtime. Have a good time!”*** Aaron beamed!

Unbelievably, within a few days, Aaron was remembering to begin his homework all on his own! But his parents were very good about noticing his positive choices and reminding him of the consequences. Occasionally, he would begin his homework but go to see what his brothers were watching on TV. When his parents “noticed” that he had chosen NOT to do his homework before playing, Aaron would say, “Whoops, I guess “the consequence” is inside play when I’m done!”

The Abbott family started using a similar system with the other children too. And it seemed to work very well. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott brought in a few more rules for Aaron about getting ready for school on time and for the whole family about getting weekly chores done by Saturday at 4 p.m. This approach seemed to work well, as long as they stayed on top of the routine.

When they really thought about it, Mr. and Mrs. Abbott realized that family life seemed a little more settled and that Aaron’s behavior and school work had improved. He was looking healthier, was not getting sick as often, could concentrate on reading if he wore his walkman and was finishing his homework at home. But in school, the teacher said that he was “fooling around” a lot just playing and was often out of his seat talking to his neighbours. Since he wasn’t finishing his work in school, he had a lot of homework every night and it was tiring have to watch him every minute to make sure that he finished his work. He had improved, but it wasn’t just not quite enough. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott were finally ready to consider medication.

Since they were confident about the diagnosis of AD/HD, they asked the family doctor if he would be willing to use the Farrelly Protocol (see Appendix D, p. 47) for doing a “medication trial” of Ritalin. He thought that it looked reasonable to begin with small amounts of the drug and gradually increase it. They started off

small at ½ table twice a day and increased the dose every week by ¼ of a tablet per dose. At 1 and ½ tablets twice a day, they seemed to be getting very good results. Aaron was actually finishing the work he had been given at school. He had just ½ hr. of homework every night instead of a huge amount. When he was given 1 and ¾ tablets to take, Aaron reported feeling very tired and he did not seem to be himself. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott had been told that this was the sign of too much medication, so they cut him back to his previous dose that was 1 and ½ tablets twice a day. On this dose, he was calm, pleasant and focussed at school. It seemed easier for him to understand the teacher's instructions and his written work was getting finished in school. However, it was still a struggle for him to print neatly and it didn't seem like he would ever be able to do all of it, like the other students. So, even on medication, written work was still an area of challenge.

On medication, their little Captain Chaos had become calmer, more pleasant and focused, but he still didn't wasn't able to finish all of his written work.

It was time to do more formal assessment, to see if he had a learning disability. Both the psychologist and the occupational therapist did some testing and concluded that although Aaron was above average in language areas, he was below average in non-language areas. They said that he had a visual-spatial learning disability and would benefit from learning how to do his written work on a computer. He should also be able to dictate some of his ideas and stories to others. They decided to continue to rule that if he had to write anything by hand, it was half the amount required of the other students.

Aaron was quick to pick up keyboarding on the computer at school and he loved illustrating his daily journal with graphics and the drawing program. This was the first time his parents or teachers had ever seen him do more than the minimum requirement in the way of written assignments! Pretty soon, using the computer, Aaron was able to do as many questions as the other students. The work was neat and he had learned to use the spell-checker, so he was very proud of what he was producing.

So that's Aaron's story. A very typical scenario. It took a lot of work in terms of diet, teaching Aaron how to use a computer, medication and behavior management at home. Just using any ONE of these interventions would NOT have "solved the challenges" for Aaron. Addressing A.D.D. in a wholistic way, resulted in a

happier, healthier child and more peaceful family. To be sure, the work was not over and new issues would need to be addressed as Aaron grew older, but the Abbott's had the tools they needed to help their son be the "best he could be" as naturally as possible.

Captain Chaos had finally gained self-control!