



**John Duggan:** Welcome. This is a special podcast for the American Counseling Association. I'm John Duggan. ACA realizes our communities today face unique challenges, challenges unknown to past generations. Kids, for example, in school face aggression and pressures to succeed.

At home, relationships break apart and there may be violence in neighborhoods and local communities. The American Counseling Association also recognizes that good things happen in families, and our homes or schools, and our communities. We know that focusing on strength, resiliency and good healthy relationships makes a difference in the lives of our youth. That's why we have prepared a special series of podcasts for volunteers and staff who work directly with youth in community centers.

We're here to provide some support and information that can help you do your jobs and volunteer and make a difference in the lives of our kids. Today, I'm delighted to welcome Shayna A. Swaney, NCC. Shayna is currently an elementary school counselor in Fairfax County, Virginia.

She holds a Master's Degree in School Counseling from Loyola University Maryland and has been a counselor for nine years. She focuses on working with students to help them become successful and she's implemented special programs in the areas of social skill development, bullying prevention, career awareness, leadership skills for students, and character education.

Shayna was recognized in May 2015 by the Montgomery County Maryland PTA for her work with students with special needs, and she is an active member of the American Counseling Association and a conference contributor. Shayna welcome to the program.

Let's start with the volunteer that is working with some kids, and they noticed that this child or adolescent is having a hard time paying attention to directions and the volunteer is just getting frustrated, repeating themselves over and over. What could they do?

**Shayna:** That's a really great question. I hear this from staff and volunteers quite a bit asking how to support kids who exhibit these characteristics. If able, talk to the family and see if they are seeing the same characteristics at home or in other social situations.

In some cases, you'll learn that they do see the same things and there is a diagnosis of ADHD. If that's the case, ask them what works at home and what they do to get their kids to follow directions and comply and complete tasks in a timely manner. If you're lucky parents can really offer great insight into what works for the kids since they really do know them the best.

**John:** Just so folks listening will know ADHD, what does that mean?

**Shayna:** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. What you should be aware of is that there are different forms of ADHD. Some kids who have formal diagnosis are very

active. They acted as if they have a motor running them all the time. They have difficulty sitting still. They are constantly moving, they might move from place to place.

Sometimes it's talking a lot. The characteristics are different in every child. Other kids and youth look like they are not paying attention. That's your inattentive type and they tend to look to you as if they are zoning out. If they're not listening to what you're saying, you might have to call their name a couple of times to get their attention back on what you're doing. Some kids can have both. It's not as common when you see both types of ADHD in a student but it can happen.

**John:** What would you suggest that a staff person or a volunteer do if the parents choose to share this type of a diagnosis with them?

**Shayna:** Thank them profusely for sharing. It's not easy for parents to open up and say, "This is what's going on with my child." Let the parent know as a volunteer, as a staff member that you really appreciate them sharing with you, and let the parent know that you've got their child's best interest at heart and you really want their child to enjoy the time in their after-school program or group or activity or whatever it is that the child is participating in. When parents know that you have their child's best interest at heart, they are more likely to work with you in supporting their student.

**John:** So what might be helpful?

**Shayna:** I found it helpful to break directions and large tasks into smaller parts for them. For kids who are having a hard time attending those large tasks are incredibly overwhelming and it might go in one ear and out the other ear pretty quickly. Short and simple really works the best.

**John:** Sure that makes sense. What does that mean for the staff or volunteer?

**Shayna:** You might have to repeat the directions a couple of times, but this is going to ensure that that student or adolescent can do what you're asking them to do. It is also helpful to have the child repeat back to you what the task is so that you know they understand what you are asking of them.

**John:** Okay, so let's take an example. Let's say that I have this one kid who is just having a hard time focusing and staying on track. You have talked about breaking it down and then getting them to give feedback. How would that look? How might that happen?

**Shayna:** Visual check lists can be helpful, put it somewhere they can see on a piece of paper next to them, if you have a couple of kids in a group maybe write it on a board, whiteboard or a chalk board if you have that available. First, you are going to do this. Second, do this. Third, do this. That way the child can look at the board and see what they're doing and they know step by step what they need to do.

**John:** Will a structured environment help?

**Shayna:** Definitely. Structured environments are incredibly helpful for students. This lets them know what the expectation is. You can also within that group you have another adolescent or youth working within that group, you can have them buddy up with the student that your focusing on, and that's good peer model for this child and that's going to show them too what it is that they can be doing and that can be a positive motivator.

**John:** Are there ever times when maybe shame is a factor and that can trigger a pulling away and feeling very self-conscious?

**Shayna:** Absolutely that can happen. Have the kid that you are working with take a break, pull them aside and say, "I noticed this is going on, you were participating really well. What's going on? What can we do together to make things better?"

When you let kids know that you're there for them and you care about them, they're hopefully going to open up to you and maybe you need to simplify the task and maybe that craft project is just too detailed and it is too hard for them.

You need to change it to meet them where they are. That way you're meeting their needs and then they're going to feel successful in their own right, and they're not going to have that feeling of shame or being upset because they can't do what other kids are doing.

**John:** How about organizing materials? As a counselor I have worked with kids and adolescents who sometimes they'll open up their homework book and it is just completely disorganized. How might a volunteer or staff person in a community center help a kid who is showing up and it just looks like they have stuff everywhere?

**Shayna:** This is a common question I get from staff who work with kids all the time. They are going to need a lot of support organizing their materials. They might need a different place to keep their things when they come into your program after school or on the weekend.

Sitting in the whole group if everybody is working on homework is too much for them. Let them move somewhere quieter. One-on-one support is also going to be necessary for teenagers. Planners are really helpful and teaching them how to use the calendar going from the big monthly calendar into weekly expectations and those constant check-ins with staff and volunteers with kids. "Okay, I noticed you have got this project going on it is due then what can we work on today?"

But it's also important to keep in mind as you're providing the support they're going to be overwhelmed with this, it's a lot of information. When you start to see that they're not complying and they might start giving you a bit of attitude or they look at you and they go, "I'm done," let them take a break.

Praise them for working really hard because they need to hear that because they really have them working hard, and then maybe later on after they have had some down time to decompress, come back and follow up. The consistency with organization support is also really important for these kids. When they get into the habits they're more likely to keep those positive habits going.

**John:** Okay, if there's times where there is inconsistency or perhaps shifting gears too quickly or too often that could really make it hard for kids with this type of disability. That's what I'm hearing?

**Shayna:** Definitely. They're going to need warnings of transitions. "We have got five minutes left in this activity. We have got five more minutes to work on this. Okay, now we have got two minutes, one-minute warning, thirty seconds," and let them know what you're getting ready to move on to so that it is not a completely shock.

When you have a student who has ADHD or ADHD-like characteristics, a quick transition is going to be a rude awakening to them, and you're going to get some resistance with them, and then they're going to have a harder time moving on to what you're planning for your next activity or project or whatever it is that you are working on.

When you let them know what the expectation is, they will transition easier. You also might have to go up to them and individually say, "Alright this is what we are moving onto next, you have two more minutes to do this and then I'm going to come back over and we're going to start cleaning this up and move on to our next activity."

They also might need a break in between activities too because they have been focusing so hard on that task at hand and they need to clear their brain before they can move onto something else.

**John:** Earlier on when we were talking you had mentioned that there are a couple of different types. There is the hyperactive type and then there is the inattentive type. How can volunteers help those kids that really sit there and they're squirming, they're fidgeting, where the adolescent that just needs to get up and move around even when you're in the middle of kind of giving instructions or having a discussion. How could a volunteer help those kids?

**Shayna:** There are a number of different things that volunteers can do. For your kids who are moving constantly, don't ask them to sit. Let them stand off to the side or towards the back. They might need to rock back and forth so that they are constantly moving and getting some of that energy out.

Younger kids might like what we call "wiggle seats." They are smooth on one side and then they are bumpy on the other. They can rock back and forth as they sit either on the rug or in a chair on that and that is helping them focus as well. Fidget items, so squeeze balls, play dough, the softer side of Velcro, tangles are all good things for kids who tend to move quite a bit to have in their hands.

For a number of those kids, they will then be able to pay a little more attention to the conversation or to what you are trying to share with them when they've got something in their hands. Some kids if you're doing seated activities as well and after-school programs don't do well sitting in a chair.

If you have a stool that they can sit in, that is also helpful as are yoga balls. Kids like to bounce no matter what their ages whether you have somebody in elementary school versus a high schooler. They like to bounce on those balls and it lets them focus on what they supposed to be doing as well.

**John:** I like the idea of the wiggle seats. Back in the day we didn't have that.

**Shayna:** They're really wonderful things. Something to keep in mind when you are supporting kids like this is that you're going to constantly have to change up what you're doing. You might find for a little bit that a squeeze ball works really well but then they're going to lose their attention, and then you're going to have to a tangle, and then you might have to try play dough, or there's a new item called sinking putty that you can try as well. Silly putty works as well too. You're just going to have to constantly switch it up.

**John:** What could staff and volunteers do to help kids who are inattentive?

**Shayna:** They're not going to need all of these tangible items. They're going to need the proximity control, an adults sitting next to them or a volunteer, whispering their name, making sure that they are attending. They are going to need nonverbal cues, a tap on the shoulder if they are okay with touch, a picture card that is going to remind them that they need to be attending to the task.

You might also after you have done a whole group activity and the kids are going off to do a craft or moving into centers. You might want to check in with them and say, "I noticed this, can you tell me what the next steps are?" You're checking to make sure that they did grasp what you're sharing with them, and if they didn't try not to get frustrated with them, they're not doing this on purpose.

They might look like they are zoning out but they're really not. You just need to say, "First we're going to do this and then we're going to do that." You might have to check in with them a couple of times, and when you see that they are following your directions praise them.

They're going to realize when you're giving them positive reinforcement that you as the adult as a volunteer working for them notice how hard they're working and that makes them feel good and then they're going to try to do that even more for you.

**John:** I'm thinking in the community center or the volunteer center where it's an environment where we're really wanting to have kids be able to express, to play, to be themselves without having too much structure in terms of assignments or task

completion like they have a project do. I'm imagining that the inattentive child or adolescent could actually start on the activity at hand.

Then they may start to wander and all of a sudden be on something that they were working on yesterday. It sounds like that might be a helpful thing just let them be with that and then maybe redirect them?

**Shayna:** As long as they're not doing something that's harmful or dangerous to themselves or somebody else, there's no reason why they can't go onto something they were working on yesterday. That's the way that their brains are working they started something when they got to your program, and then they realize they never completed yesterday's task and let them go do it.

It shows you and them that they're aware of what they need and what they can do and it gives them options. Their attention changes constantly throughout the day. That's also giving them a break from what they're working on. If they want to do something else great, why not? Let them go for it. Then you could say, "Hey, I noticed you're doing this, great job from finishing that up from yesterday."

**John:** Shayna, I love how you described that it's like the child is teaching us how their brain works and that's okay. It's acknowledging and helping them to be successful with their particular activity and also with the larger group. I love it.

**Shayna:** Exactly. We learn from the kids that we work with and we need to take our cues from them. If we see that they need support somewhere that's where we as the adults who work with them can jump in and say, "Hey I noticed this. How do you feel about that?" And get their feedback. They're really keyed into what we do. Older teens and adolescents are really great at saying, "Yes. I love that. No I don't." Let them be a big part of what we do with them to support them.

**John:** In past podcasts I've explained that we're not asking staff and volunteers to become counselors, that takes a lot of training and work, but learning from some of these tips can be beneficial to help these community programs be successful, and the opportunities that kids bring to be more of a productive experience.

What about a youth or an adolescent that comes to a program and just can't seem to connect with them? They talk about what they want to talk about, and maybe when the group or when the volunteer changes the topic this particular kid goes back to what they were doing before. Sometimes they might be alone or not want to join the activity. What could a volunteer or staff person do in this type of a scenario?

**Shayna:** That's a really great question. There are a number of different things that you can do. Again, if you have the opportunity to speak to that youth's parents and get information from them, wonderful. Hopefully the parents have some insight that they can share with you. If not, not a big deal.

You can try a number of different things on your own. I have found that these adolescents who have these specific interests do have a hard time talking about something that's not in their purview, understanding somebody else's point of view. If you can pair them with a positive role model, maybe start small and show them with that partner how to take turns talking about topics.

That will start to develop some positive social interactions. That's going to slowly get them to join in to group activities. You might need to let the other teen that you're partnering them with, the other child know that this is that person's interest, and that you'll take turns talking about things.

You might need to with any kid like this say, "Okay. First it's your turn, now it's your turn you might have to structure it a little more." And then move on with topics. I have found however that students who are like this and who have specific interests have the difficulty with understanding somebody else's point of view have other characteristics such as difficulty transitioning.

They might exhibit the same behavior, they might rock back and forth, or talk about the same thing over and over. They might not look at you when they're talking. They could have difficulties with their attention and their speech, it could be on the autism spectrum. You're going to see a lot of different things from those kids.

If you can plan for that strength, you've partnered them with somebody who's going to talk to them about their interests, and that gives that kid an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and feel good about themselves. It's going to boost their confidence.

**John:** What about self-care for the volunteer or for the staff? I'm imagining that being patient with oneself and also with the youth would be particularly important.

**Shayna:** Yes. It can be frustrating for the volunteer or for any adult working with a kid like this because you want them to move forward, but the kid is going to have a hard time transitioning. Like our kids who have ADHD and those similar characteristics you're going to need to give them warnings of transitions.

You're going to need to keep the direction short and simple. The more direct you are the better off you are. Providing a structured environment for them will be helpful. If you as the staff that's working with them start to feel yourself get frustrated, or you feel you need a break, go ahead and take it.

Self-care is really important no matter who you are when you're working with teens and other youths. It helps you stay fresh in working with kids, and it makes you a better provider for these kids. I do think too that kids recognize this and they're going to appreciate it as well.

**John:** Okay. As we're looking at the autistic spectrum of disorders I'm aware that environment, fabric, sounds, temperature, there are so many variables that for most people it just seems like, "Hey it's okay. I'm going with the flow." But for these kids in particular they could have a real difficult time or a high sensitivity.

**Shayna:** That's very true. Fabrics might bother them, so if you're doing a craft they might not like the feel of glue, or paper, or felt if you're doing something with that. Large group activities can also be incredibly overwhelming because of the noise. Kids like this might need to do a different activity somewhere that's quieter.

You could try headphones to block out noise if that's something that works. If you have weighted items and this is always a little tricky because they tend to be pricey. Things like heavier bean bags give kids who have a diagnosis of autism, give them sensory input and they like that they might have to have that when they're doing an activity.

You might need to have visuals for them depending on their abilities. "First you're going to do this and then we're going to move into this, and then we're going to move into that." You have to keep in mind too that you're not sure what could upset them.

They can be emotional and sometimes loud noises or the feel of something is going to send them running off into another room. That's a great time for them to take a break to calm down and then you can talk with them about what's going on, and figure out how to support them moving forward.

**John:** I'm imagining that all of those things of stress management and structure could be very important for them as well.

**Shayna:** That's incredibly important. For a student who does have an emotional disability, they are going to become frustrated easily. It's been my experience that they just don't recognize when something is causing them stress, and that's when we as the adults who work with them are going to have to be aware of situations that could be stressful or scenarios when they can become frustrated. Break tasks no matter what they are into smaller parts, and that's a great thing for everybody no matter who you're working with.

**John:** Most of us have had periods in our life when we have just found ourselves to be worrying about something, it just is going over and over in our minds and we can't break away from it. We might be able to empathize with these kids who just are questioning everything that they do.

They need a lot of reinforcement or reassurance. Sometimes they can get very emotional, they might not be able to breathe. How is it that a volunteer or staff person could help a youth who's experiencing a lot of anxiety?

**Shayna:** I really appreciate you asking that. I see this quite a bit working with kids. I want to talk about some strategies that we can teach them and these are helpful for

everybody. Start by listening to what they are worried about. When you take the time and just be there with them, be present, that's really important.

Listen to them about what their concern is. Sometimes providing facts, if they're concerned about weather, and they're worried about its impact, show them facts about what's going to happen and talk about a plan. If you're somewhere where you've got a lot of snow and they're worried about that, "This is how much we're supposed to get. This is what we're going to do."

If they're just generally worrying about things, give them an emotion scale. Sometimes something as simple as a one through five scale. One: I'm not worrying about something at all, Five: my worry is great. I like to talk to kids no matter their age about what can we do you to go down on that scale? Do we need to take a break? Do we need to take some deep breaths? Do we need to try counting backwards? Should we try journaling? Do you want to draw? Can we do some visualization? Listening to calming music, playing music.

For kids who have a pet at home, cuddling with a pet, or do you have a specific item that you like to hold onto that makes you feel better; are all things that we as adults who work with kids can do to help them reduce those worries. Then with that scale, when they say that they're at a five, what strategies can we do to get them back down? Then as you progress with them, help them figure out what their triggers are and start to use those calming strategies right away.

**John:** What if a kid all of a sudden starts to have a lot of tummy aches or pains or something like that and it may be anxiety that's showing up. How could a volunteer respond to that?

**Shayna:** Listen to them, "Why is your stomach hurting? What's gone on before? Why does your head hurt? Do we need to take a break from what's going on?" You want to look at what's causing this. Is it something during their school day? Is it something that's going on in that activity that the volunteer's not aware of?

A lot of times there are situations that we as adults just don't see. It's not because of us, it's because there's just a lot going on in these kids' lives. When we sit down and talk to them, see what the trigger is.

**John:** How about kids that get easily frustrated? It's like all of a sudden they just burst out and they're yelling or the opposite happens. They just completely shut down and it's like, there is this anger or rage. How can a volunteer get through and help with that?

**Shayna:** Kids like this can be very hard to figure out. I have found that sometimes they're reacting to situations in their life and this is their way of coping with it. Other times they do you have an emotional disability which causes these reactions. If you as a volunteer can have a conversation with them, start off in a low stress situation.

If it's a male student who really enjoys basketball, go play basketball with them and say, "Hey, I've noticed this is what's going on just want you to know that I'm here for you." The hope is that in that comfortable situation, that kid is going to start to open up to you and say, "Yes, this is what's going on at home, or this is what's happening at school, and this is how I'm feeling about it."

Other times you're going to have to try some different strategies with them. Again, keeping that line of communication open will be really important for them. It's been my experience that teens in particular don't always share everything in their lives because they're worried about how their friends are going to perceive their problems. Teens are going to hold on to the bigger issues.

It's important to keep in mind that no matter what behaviors the student is exhibiting, let them know that you still like them and care about them, but you don't like the current behavior, and you want to help them diminish the current behavior so that they can move on and enjoy what they can be doing or what they should be doing. Kids need that reassurance that you're still going to be there for them even when they do things that you prefer they not.

**John:** What if we're trying to help a child make a choice? How would you work with that?

**Shayna:** Give them two choices. You can do this group activity, or you can do that group activity. Make sure that the activities are appropriate for them and it's not going to provide sensory input that's distressing. Like the craft that we talked about before that they're not feeling something that's going to upset them.

You also need to make sure that you're giving them warnings, changes in routine. "Okay, we're moving on to this in five minutes." Provide feedback on tasks as well. The more feedback and the more warnings of changes that you can provide the better off you are.

**John:** Any last thoughts?

**Shayna:** Be flexible. You never know what kids are going to share with you.

**John:** I love it. Shayna, thank you so much for joining us today. I appreciate your time.

**Shayna:** It's been my pleasure.

**John:** That's all the time that we have for our program. I want to thank everyone for listening. If you have any questions you can email them to [podcast@counseling.org](mailto:podcast@counseling.org). I'm John Duggan. Thanks so much for joining us. This program is copyright 2016 of the American Counseling Association, all rights reserved.