Mastermind versus the Glitches: Organizational Skills Training

by Mark Katz, PhD

FOR SOME CHILDREN WITH ADHD, paying attention isn't their biggest problem. They pay attention when they're interested in what they're doing. They struggle much more with things like using their day planner, organizing their backpack, bringing the right books home from school, estimating how much time to spend on different assignments, doublechecking homework for errors before turning it in, sometimes even actually remembering to turn in the homework.

These are not unrelated struggles. Rather, they belong to a family of characteristics referred to as OTMP—Organization, Time Management, Management of Materials, and Planning. OTMP problems usually first appear in elementary school and tend to grow more serious in middle school and high school. Improving OTMP skills before middle school can prevent far more serious problems down the road. For children with ADHD, this can improve the quality of their academic and emotional lives—and their parents' lives as well.

Organizational Skills Training was developed with this in mind. The empirically supported treatment helps strengthen OTMP skills in children with ADHD in grades three to five, well before they start middle school. The OST program is the brainchild of Howard Abikoff and Richard Gallagher of the Child Study Center at NYU Langone Medical Center. Abikoff and Gallagher have been developing and researching OTMP strategies and tools for over a decade, and have been credited with a number of advances in our understanding of these characteristics. Their findings would eventually culminate in OST.

A recent study of 158 children (ages eight through eleven, in grades three to five) who completed the program showed significant sustained improvements in organizational functioning (at school and at home), reduction in homework problems, improved academic performance and improved family relationships. Importantly, OST also strives to take the shame and blame out of OTMP struggles, and in so doing, helps children with ADHD learn to see OTMP challenges in a hopeful new light. More about how they strive to do this shortly.

Overview of the OST treatment model

OST focuses on four key skill areas (or modules): tracking assignments, managing materials, time management, and task planning. Over the course of twenty twice-weekly one-hour sessions conducted under the direction of an OST-trained therapist, children learn strategies and tools for improving performance in these four areas both at home and at school. The sessions for modules 1, 2, 3, and 4 follow a sequence corresponding to steps children must follow to successfully complete tasks at home. The sequence of OST sessions are as follows:

- **Two preliminary contacts** to assess OTMP problems at school and introduce the treatment process to the child's teacher
- **Introduction** (two sessions) to orient the parents and child to the program, and to guide parents in the use of social learning strategies to motivate skill building
- **Module 1: Tracking Assignments** (two sessions): Introduction to strategies and tools for recording and tracking school assignments
- **Module 2: Materials Management** (five sessions): Strategies for managing papers at school; review of routines for tracking assignments and managing papers; introducing strategies for organizing backpack; getting work areas ready to go
- **Module 3: Time Management** (five sessions): Understanding time and the use of calendars; time estimation and time tracking of homework assignments; telling time and calculating the passage of time; time planning for conferences at home and school; time planning for longer-term assignments; avoiding distractions; time planning for regular routines
- **Module 4: Task Planning** (five sessions): Managing materials and time; fitting the steps into the schedule; planning for long-term projects; checking it out and planning for graduation from OST
- **Program Summary** (one session): Creating personal commercial (short four- to five-minute personal audio or video recording created by the child to tell other children what he or she learned); graduation from the program

Parent and teacher involvement

OST relies heavily on principles of behavioral skills training. Each OTMP skill is specifically defined, along with guided practice in implementing each skill successfully in real life situations. To maximize mastery of skills, OST guides parents through a four-step process:

- Prompting
- Praising
- Monitoring
- Reinforcing

"Prompts" serve as positive reminders to execute one or more specific OTMP skills. According to Abikoff and Gallagher, children with ADHD generally need more prompts in order to execute new

skills. By closely "monitoring" skill usage, parents and therapists can determine whether skills are being mastered or whether children need more practice. They also note that specific "praise" for successful execution, when given genuinely in one's own style using one's own words, can help motivate children to continue executing skills in the same manner. Parents are guided on how to praise small behaviors leading to a larger goal. Small daily (immediate) and weekly rewards are intended to "reinforce" consistent use of OTMP strategies and also to keep children interested in the learning process.

Teachers who agree to participate in OST are involved in an initial contact with the therapist before training begins, and four additional contacts during the course of training. The initial contact is usually around thirty minutes in length. The four additional contacts, which can be conducted via phone conference, are about fifteen minutes in length. Teachers are also provided with tools to prompt, monitor, praise, and reinforce the child's use of OTMP skills at school. These daily activities typically take about three to five minutes of the teacher's time.

How our Mastermind keeps the Glitches under control

Drawing upon their active imaginations, children learn all about Glitches—metaphorical, mythical creatures living in our brains whose mission is to trip us up when we're engaging in OTMP activities. Four specific mythical Glitches are described, each with accompanying cartoon caricatures:

- **Go-Ahead-Forget-It-Glitch**, who lurks in our memory, preventing us from remembering things like writing down our assignments, or keeping track of important dates
- **Go-Ahead-Lose-It-Glitch**, who tricks us into misplacing things and messing up our backpack.
- **Time Bandit**, who tries to convince us to ignore clocks and calendars or any tool to help us keep track of when things are due.
- **Go-Ahead-Don't-Plan-It Glitch**, who tells us it's okay to wait until the last minute to start on that assignment

Children learn that we're all susceptible to the mischievous ways of Glitches, some of us more than others. Fortunately, we all also have a Mastermind that helps us keep the Glitches under control. But sometimes our Mastermind gets tired, anxious, or focused on other things. And when it does, those mischievous little Glitches take over. Children learn that through OST we train our Mastermind to be more active so that it can control the Glitches and prevent them from doing mischievous things.

In this regard, OST takes special care to remove feelings of shame and blame for OTMP problems, and to help children learn to see those problems in a hopeful new light.

Children's Organizational Skills Scales

To help assess OTMP skills, Abikoff and Gallagher also developed the Children's Organizational Skills Scales (COSS), which provide scores in task planning, organized actions, and materials management, as well as a total score reflecting overall organizational skills. Rating scales are completed by parents, teachers, and children. The COSS is used as part of the OST screening process to determine whether a child is a suitable candidate for training. (Learn more about COSS at mhs.com.)



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Becoming an OST provider

OST was designed to be implemented by therapists working in mental health, private practice, or school settings. Abikoff finds that experienced therapists are able to successfully replicate the model once they've thoroughly familiarized themselves with the training protocol and practiced some of the in-session procedures. He does recommend, however, that only therapists with experience in treating children with ADHD offer the training. This includes experience in providing ADHD parent training services as well as a strong background in behavior therapy.

Therapist guidelines for providing OST along with the treatment manual and supporting material, appear in Abikoff and Gallagher's recently published book, *Organizational Skills Training for Children With ADHD* (Guilford, 2014). To learn more about OST training opportunities, webinars, and workshops, contact Dr. Richard Gallagher via e-mail at Richard.gallagher@nyumc.org or by phone at the Child Study Center of the NYU Langone Medical Center, 212-263-6622.