

ADHD: Three Essential Tips for Parents

1) Take Care of Yourself

Although parenting can be one of the most rewarding and joyful roles in the world, at the same time it can also be one of the most demanding, frustrating, exhausting and even overwhelming jobs in the world. It can be especially challenging if your child has Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). If you are like most parents, you know that parenting a child can sometimes be really hard. Parents are on demand 24/7.

Therefore, it is extremely important for you to learn to take particularly good care of yourself. If you have ever flown over water, you have heard the flight attendant demonstrate how to use the oxygen masks. Remember how they always say ‘if you are traveling with a child, place the mask over you own nose first and then put your child’s mask(s) over your child’s nose’. The theory here is that if you don’t have oxygen soon enough you may pass out and you won’t be able to help your children get their masks on. But if you take care of yourself first then you will be able to help your children.

The same theory applies to parenting. If you are exhausted, worn out, angry, or at your wits end you will not be in good enough shape to take care of your child effectively. As a result you and your child will suffer. But if you take good enough care of yourself you will have the energy, emotional stability, consistency, enthusiasm, and love to be a much more effective parent.

Take a break from parenting. Because parenting is a 24/7 proposition, you need to establish some resources so you can take a break periodically. **Find some good babysitters so you can have some ‘time off’** for yourself without the demands of a child.

Establish a ‘date’ night with your husband or significant other. When my daughter was little, my husband and I established a weekly ‘date night’. My husband’s sister would come to the house, feed my daughter, play with her and put her to bed. She was thrilled to be able to spend time with her niece while we ‘went out’ together. And my daughter always looked forward to spending time with her aunt. It was definitely a win/win situation and a much needed relief from the constant demands of parenting.

If you are married, share the parenting chores. Be kind to each other and take turns with some of the routine tasks like bath time, cooking, helping with homework, driving to activities, spending time with your child. Your child will love spending one on one time with each of you separately when they can ‘have you all to themselves’. Agree ahead of time on ‘sleep in’ days where one of you gets to sleep in while the other gets up and takes care of the kids. Make sure to take turns.

If you are a single parent, it is even more important to get some help so you can have a break. Sometimes there is a visitation schedule in place that will give you some

time off when your child visits their other parent. Make sure you take advantage of these times to take care of yourself and rejuvenate. Look for other resources to get some help.

Build a support system. You need a break on a regular basis from you parenting responsibilities. If you don't, you will get worn out and resentful.

Join or start a babysitting co-op. You babysit for someone else's child and they babysit for yours another time. This is a free way to get a break from parenting.

Find someone to talk to. A parent can feel very isolated and alone. Just know that this is not uncommon and do something to counter it. Parents you meet at your child's activities or school can be an excellent resource. When my daughter was a baby I joined a baby massage class at the YMCA. In the class I became friends with two other new moms with babies the same age as mine. Twenty-two years later, I am still in touch with one of these friends.

Join a parent support group. In a Parent Support Group you will meet with other parents, learn from each other, support each other, and help each other locate resources. Look online or call the local Child Guidance Clinic, Family Service Agency, or town Social Service organizations for resources.

Find that a psychotherapist and/or a Parent Coach. If you are like most parents, you learned your parenting skills mostly from being parented by your own parents. You may be doing what your parents did or deliberately rejecting what they did and trying to do it differently. This may or may not be helping you be an effective parent. It can be extremely helpful to have someone you trust explore options for parenting and teach you parenting skills you have never been exposed to.

Get regular exercise. This will keep your body, brain, and immune system in shape and will also help to keep your stress manageable. You might even be able to do this with your child. Even better, get outside in nature and take a walk. It will do wonders for your energy and mood.

Get enough sleep. This is so important and is often difficult when you have a child that does not sleep well. As you help your child improve their sleep, work on your own as well. Tag team with your partner to take turns getting up with the kids so periodically you each get a full night of uninterrupted sleep.

Eat a nutritious and healthy diet. And remember, your child learns from watching and experiencing what you do. When you eat a healthy diet on a regular schedule they will do the same. And you will feel better and have more energy.

Develop a meditation practice. Give yourself the opportunity to calm your brain, quiet the inner chatter, connect with your inner being, and escape from the hustle/bustle of the world and parenting for at least 10 minutes every day. Listen to a meditation CD or subscribe to a daily online meditation like www.gurugrams.com.

Have some FUN! Have you noticed how much you work? There is ALWAYS more that needs to be done. This has certainly been true in my life. Kids always need your attention or something done for them. And you run a household, probably have a job or career, and have your own relationships and needs. Make a list of ways to have fun and schedule it into your life.

Get some help. You MUST recharge your own batteries. In order to make time for rejuvenating yourself, get some help. Use shopping services that deliver groceries (Stop and Shop delivery service is www.PeaPod.com), use a laundry service, get a cleaning service even if it's only every two weeks. Trade off with other parents and take their kids while they rejuvenate and vice versa. Trust me, they all need it as much as you do and will be glad you suggested it.

Schedule rejuvenation time. What rejuvenates you? Everyone is different. Make your own list. Keep the list handy and add to it every time you think of something else that would rejuvenate you. You may be out of practice as you have probably been totally focused on taking care of everyone else but you for quite some time. A massage, warm bath, or a nice long walk might do wonders for you. Schedule the time on your calendar and do it.

Remember the oxygen mask! Take care of yourself.

2) Make Sure Your Child Actually Has ADHD

The symptoms of ADHD may resemble other medical conditions or behavior problems. For example, learning disabilities are sometimes discovered when a person appears to have ADHD and often co-occur with ADHD. Children may be hyperactive and distractible if they are suffering from food sensitivities, too much sugar or caffeine, allergies, chemical sensitivities, food additives, chronic illness, heavy metal exposure, chronic stress, anxiety, fear, a chaotic home life, or sleep deprivation including sleep apnea. Even enlarged tonsils can cause a primary sleep disorder which may cause hyperactivity, irritability and poor concentration. I recommend you consult a holistic health practitioner and a pediatric allergist for a full assessment.

And let's not forget that poor concentration is one of the symptoms of depression as well as anxiety. Often these occur together. A child who can't concentrate, gets yelled at all the time, and perhaps feels like a failure is prone to depression as well as anxiety. No wonder depression is common in people with ADHD. Learning is more difficult, organizing is tough, social skills are affected, relationships are rocky, getting things done is harder, holding down a job can be impossible for some, and childhood behavior is often very difficult to manage.

ADHD is defined in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-IV TR) used to diagnose all mental disorders, as a disorder of childhood. It includes

a pattern of poor concentration, organization, and task completion and may also include impulsivity and hyperactivity – all that are abnormal for developmental age. Remember each person is unique and may experience these symptoms differently.

The criteria are presented here in modified form in order to make them more accessible to the general public. They are listed here for information purposes only, but if you are like me, you like to know as much as possible. Only trained health care providers can diagnose or treat ADHD.

DSM-IV Criteria for ADHD

I. Either A or B:

- A. Six or more of the following symptoms of inattention have been present for at least 6 months to a point that is disruptive and inappropriate for developmental level:**

Inattention

1. Often does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities.
2. Often has trouble keeping attention on tasks or play activities.
3. Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Often does not follow instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (not due to oppositional behavior or failure to understand instructions).
5. Often has trouble organizing activities.
6. Often avoids, dislikes, or doesn't want to do things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period of time (such as schoolwork or homework).
7. Often loses things needed for tasks and activities (e.g. toys, school assignments, pencils, books, or tools).
8. Is often easily distracted.
9. Is often forgetful in daily activities.

- B. Six or more of the following symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity have been present for at least 6 months to an extent that is disruptive and inappropriate for developmental level:**

Hyperactivity

1. Often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat.
2. Often gets up from seat when remaining in seat is expected.
3. Often runs about or climbs when and where it is not appropriate (adolescents or adults may feel very restless).
4. Often has trouble playing or enjoying leisure activities quietly.
5. Is often "on the go" or often acts as if "driven by a motor".
6. Often talks excessively.

Impulsivity

1. Often blurts out answers before questions have been finished.
 2. Often has trouble waiting one's turn.
 3. Often interrupts or intrudes on others (e.g., butts into conversations or games).
- II. Some symptoms that cause impairment were present before age 7 years.
- III. Some impairment from the symptoms is present in two or more settings (e.g. at school/work and at home).
- IV. There must be clear evidence of significant impairment in social, school, or work functioning.
- V. The symptoms do not happen only during the course of a Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Schizophrenia, or other Psychotic Disorder. The symptoms are not better accounted for by another mental disorder (e.g. Mood Disorder, Anxiety Disorder, Dissociative Disorder, or a Personality Disorder).

Based on these criteria, three types of ADHD are identified:

1. ADHD, *Combined Type*: if both criteria 1A and 1B are met for the past 6 months
2. ADHD, *Predominantly Inattentive Type*: if criterion 1A is met but criterion 1B is not met for the past six months
3. ADHD, *Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Type*: if Criterion 1B is met but Criterion 1A is not met for the past six months.

American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

Most symptoms seen in children with ADHD also occur at times in people without this disorder. However, in people with ADHD, these symptoms occur more frequently and interfere with learning, school adjustment, employment, and often with relationships with others. **And in order for a diagnosis to be made, the symptoms had to have been present before age 7** and not be better accounted for by another diagnosis. Thus, true ADHD isn't something one gets later on in life. It is brain based. You essentially come with it.

People with ADHD tend to be very bright. Many famous people including inventors, scientists, and actors have ADHD. They tend to think outside the box and come up with extremely creative ideas. They often have lots of energy and spunk and can be a lot of fun.

ADHD is a pattern that shows up in all areas of your life. Often, when children are diagnosed with ADHD a parent realizes they have been dealing with it themselves for their whole life. They often describe a sense of relief at knowing what 'it' is. Remember that issues with concentration can come and go and be in normal ranges. And memory tends to slip a bit as we age. But a pervasive pattern of poor concentration, forgetfulness,

losing things, not finishing tasks, making impulsive decisions, and not being able to sit still may be worth checking out with a psychotherapist that specializes in ADHD.

3) Get Help

Let's begin this step by discussing the risk of not treating or doing anything about your child's ADHD. There is a high incidence of co-morbidity (meaning occurring together) of ADHD and depression. People (and particularly children) with ADHD get constant negative messages about themselves from their world. Their parents yell at them. Their teachers tell them they could do better. Sometimes they hear they are lazy, or stupid. Their peers may avoid them. They may constantly feel frustrated, or irritated by their lack of success and by criticism. They may experience a sense of hopelessness, like nothing they do is good enough, or that they never succeed at what they attempt to do.

It is less likely your child will become depressed due to the ADHD if you recognize it and treat it early. You must help them preserve their self esteem and concept of self worth. Teach them how to be successful and how to thrive with the challenges as well as the pluses that ADHD brings to their life.

Another risk of not treating ADHD is that when kids can't concentrate in school, they often end up with gaps in important academic skills. For example they may not be paying attention when new math skills are introduced. Or they cannot stay focused long enough to really learn how to do a math or science problem. They often have trouble with memorizing and therefore struggle with things like times tables and spelling. This happened to my daughter with math. She has become an excellent writer but never really embraced math despite both parents being mathematically skilled.

Get counseling and/or coaching for you and your child. It is extremely helpful. Notice I said YOU and your child. You will need support in ways to best help your child succeed. A good therapist can help you understand what your child is going through and help you identify what your child needs from you. They will teach you behavior management skills and explore options for dealing with your child's forgetfulness, impulsivity, lack of task completion, lack of motivation, etc.

The most dramatic change usually occurs when the parents change how they interact with their children. Often, it seems that parents think that if they just drop their kids off at counseling some magic will happen and their child won't have ADHD anymore. YOU MUST be involved in this process. How you treat your child, how you react to them, the tone of voice you use, the words you say, how you nurture and support them is the most important thing you do for your child. Your child cannot change in your family system if you keep doing everything the way you have always done it.

A therapist can teach your child organizational skills, social skills, and study skills. They will help your child improve his self esteem. They can help your child understand

how ADHD impacts their lives, options for dealing with it, and how to feel better about themselves. They will help you help your child with all of these issues. They will help you create and maintain a healthy parent/child relationship.

One common style of therapy is Cognitive/Behavior Therapy (CBT). CBT is an especially good option for helping kids succeed with their ADHD. CBT looks at options for making thoughts, feelings, and behavior contribute to success. It contains a focus on skill building including managing emotions (kids with ADHD are often very volatile), interpersonal skills, behavior, and whatever that particular child may need.

Another common style of therapy for children is Play Therapy. Play Therapy recognizes that young children are not usually capable of ‘talking about their feelings’ as such. Play Therapy provides a way for the therapist to interact with a young child within the child’s fantasy metaphor. Often, the child will display their feelings through their play with a doll house or through their drawings or other creative play media. A skilled Play Therapist can help the child via the vehicle of play without ever having to leave the child’s theme of symbolic play. Some parents are dismayed when their child tells them they just ‘played’. Ask the therapist about the process. Research has proven the positive results gained from Play Therapy.

Your child may benefit from a support group or a group that helps to build social skills. These are often found at mental health clinics or agencies such as a Child and Family Agency or the Social Services department in your town. Schools often offer groups for kids right at the school. These are convenient, the school personnel already know your child, and your child gets to practice socializing with kids he will encounter daily. A downside to this is that some kids are embarrassed to be in a group like this and to have their classmates know they attend. You know your child best. Think about this concern and talk to your child and his teacher before you decide.

There is a national organization called Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD).⁴ This is a support group setting for parents and can be very helpful in providing you with emotional support as well as essential resources and referrals. Find your local CHADD online at www.chadd.org.⁴

The Institute for Advancement of AD/HD Coaching (IAAC) and the Edge Foundation both provide credentialing for ADHD coaches. Coaches combine personal and professional coaching skills with knowledge of ADHD to provide support, structure, and accountability to your child. A list of IAAC coaches can be found online at www.adhdcoachinstitute.org²⁷ and Edge Foundation Coaches at <http://www.edgefoundation.org/>.