

ADHD Parenting Tips

Helping Your Child or Teen with Attention Deficit Disorder

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Life with a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD) can be frustrating and overwhelming, but as a parent there is a lot you can do to help control and reduce the symptoms. You can help your child overcome daily challenges, channel his or her energy into positive arenas, and bring greater calm to your family. The earlier and more consistently you address your child's problems, the greater chance they have for success in life.

How to help your child with ADHD

Children with ADHD generally have deficits in *executive function*: the ability to think and plan ahead, organize, control impulses, and complete tasks. That means you need to take over as the executive, providing extra guidance while your child gradually acquires executive skills of his or her own.

Although the symptoms of ADHD can be nothing short of exasperating, it's important to remember that the child with ADHD who is ignoring, annoying, or embarrassing you is not acting willfully. Kids with ADHD want to sit quietly; they want to make their rooms tidy and organized; they want to do everything their parent says to do—but they don't know how to make these things happen.

If you keep in mind that having ADHD is just as frustrating for your child, it will be a lot easier to respond in positive, supportive ways. With patience, compassion, and plenty of support, you can manage childhood ADHD while enjoying a stable, happy home.

ADHD and your family

Before you can successfully parent a child with ADHD, it's essential to understand the impact of your child's symptoms on the family as a whole. Children with ADHD exhibit a slew of behaviors that can disrupt family life:

- ▶ They often don't "hear" parental instructions, so they don't obey them.
- ▶ They're disorganized and easily distracted, keeping other family members waiting. Or they start projects and forget to finish them—let alone clean up after them.
- ▶ Children with impulsivity issues often interrupt conversations, demand attention at inappropriate times, and speak before they think, saying tactless or embarrassing things.
- ▶ It's often difficult to get them to bed and to sleep.
- ▶ Hyperactive children may tear around the house or even do things that put them in physical danger.

The impact of ADHD on siblings

Because of these behaviors, siblings of children with ADHD face a number of challenges:

- ▶ Their needs often get less attention than those of the child with ADHD.
- ▶ They may be rebuked more sharply when they err, and their successes may be less celebrated or taken for granted.
- ▶ They may be enlisted as assistant parents—and blamed if the sibling with ADHD misbehaves under their supervision.
- ▶ As a result, siblings may find their love for a brother or sister with ADHD mixed with jealousy and resentment.

The impact of ADHD on parents

The demands of monitoring a child with ADHD can be physically and mentally exhausting. Your child's inability to "listen" can lead to frustration and that frustration to anger—followed by guilt about being angry at your child. Your child's behavior can make you anxious and stressed and if there's a basic difference between your personality and that of your child with ADHD, his or her behavior can be especially difficult to accept.

In order to meet the challenges of raising a child with ADHD, you must be able to master a combination of *compassion* and *consistency*. Living in a home that provides both love and structure is the best thing for a child or teenager who is learning to manage ADHD.

ADHD parenting tip 1: Stay positive and healthy yourself

As a parent, you set the stage for your child's emotional and physical health. You have control over many of the factors that can positively influence the symptoms of your child's disorder.

The power of a positive attitude

Your best assets for helping your child meet the challenges of ADHD are your positive attitude and common sense. When you are calm and focused, you are more likely to be able to connect with your child, helping him or her to be calm and focused as well.

Keep things in perspective. Remember that your child's behavior is related to a disorder. Most of the time it is not intentional. Hold on to your sense of humor. What's embarrassing today may be a funny family story ten years from now.

Don't sweat the small stuff and be willing to make some compromises. One chore left undone isn't a big deal when your child has completed two others plus the day's homework. If you are a perfectionist, you will not only be constantly dissatisfied but also create impossible expectations for your child with ADHD.

Believe in your child. Think about or make a written list of everything that is positive, valuable, and unique about your child. Trust that your child can learn, change, mature, and succeed. Make thinking about this trust a daily task as you brush your teeth or make your coffee.

Take care of yourself so you're better able to care for your child

As your child's role model and most important source of strength, it is vital that you live a healthy life. If you are overtired or have simply run out of patience, you risk losing sight of the structure and support you have so carefully set up for your child with ADHD.

Take care of yourself. Eat right, exercise, and find ways to reduce stress, whether it means taking a nightly bath or practicing morning meditation. If you do get sick, acknowledge it and get help.

Seek support. One of the most important things to remember in rearing a child with ADHD is that you don't have to do it alone. Talk to your child's doctors, therapists, and teachers. Join an organized support group for parents of children with ADHD. These groups offer a forum for giving and receiving advice, and provide a safe place to vent feelings and share experiences.

Take breaks. Friends and family can be wonderful about offering to babysit, but you may feel guilty about leaving your child, or leaving the volunteer with a child with ADHD. Next time, accept their offer and discuss honestly how best to handle your child.

Tip 2: Establish structure and stick to it

Children with ADHD are more likely to succeed in completing tasks when the tasks occur in predictable patterns and in predictable places. Your job is to create and sustain structure in your home, so that your child knows what to expect and what they are expected to do.

Tips for helping your child with ADHD stay focused and organized:

Follow a routine. It is important to set a time and a place for everything to help the child with ADHD understand and meet expectations. Establish simple and predictable rituals for meals, homework, play, and bed. Have your child lay out clothes for the next morning before going to bed, and make sure whatever he or she needs to take to school is in a special place, ready to grab.

Use clocks and timers. Consider placing clocks throughout the house, with a big one in your child's bedroom. Allow enough time for what your child needs to do, such as homework or getting ready in the morning. Use a timer for homework or transitional times, such between finishing up play and getting ready for bed.

Simplify your child's schedule. It is good to avoid idle time, but a child with ADHD may become more distracted and "wound up" if there are many after-school activities. You may need to make adjustments to the child's after-school commitments based on the individual child's abilities and the demands of particular activities.

Create a quiet place. Make sure your child has a quiet, private space of his or her own. A porch or a bedroom work well too, as long as it's **not** the same place as the child goes for a time-out.

Do your best to be neat and organized. Set up your home in an organized way. Make sure your child knows that everything has its place. Lead by example with neatness and organization as much as possible.

Avoid problems by keeping kids with ADHD busy!

For kids with ADHD, idle time may exacerbate their symptoms and create chaos in your home. It is important to keep a child with ADHD busy without piling on so many things that the child becomes overwhelmed.

Sign your child up for a sport, art class, or music. At home, organize simple activities that fill up your child's time. These can be tasks like helping you cook, playing a board game with a sibling, or drawing a picture. Try not to over-rely on the television or computer/video games as time-fillers. Unfortunately, TV and video games are increasingly violent in nature and may only increase your child's symptoms of ADHD.

Tip 3: Set clear expectations and rules

Children with ADHD need consistent rules that they can understand and follow. Make the rules of behavior for the family simple and clear. Write down the rules and hang them up in a place where your child can easily read them.

Children with ADHD respond particularly well to organized systems of rewards and consequences. It's important to explain what will happen when the rules are obeyed and when they are broken. Finally, stick to your system: follow through each and every time with a reward or a consequence.

Don't forget praise and positive reinforcement

As you establish these consistent structures, keep in mind that children with ADHD often receive criticism. Be on the lookout for good behavior—and praise it. Praise is especially important for children who have ADHD because they typically get so little of it. These children receive correction, remediation, and complaints about their behavior—but little positive reinforcement.

A smile, positive comment, or other reward from you can improve the attention, concentration and impulse control of your child with ADHD. Do your best to focus on giving positive praise for appropriate behavior and task completion, while giving as few negative responses as possible to inappropriate behavior or poor task performance. Reward your child for small achievements that you might take for granted in another child.

Kids with ADHD: Using Rewards and Consequences

Rewards

- Reward your child with privileges, praise, or activities, rather than with food or toys.
- Change rewards frequently. Kids with ADHD get bored if the reward is always the same.
- Make a chart with points or stars awarded for good behavior, so your child has a visual reminder of his or her successes.
- Immediate rewards work better than the promise of a future reward, but small rewards leading to a big one can also work.
- Always follow through with a reward.

Consequences

- Consequences should be spelled out in advance and occur immediately after your child has misbehaved.
- Try time-outs and the removal of privileges as consequences for misbehavior.
- Remove your child from situations and environments that trigger inappropriate behavior.
- When your child misbehaves, ask what he or she could have done instead. Then have your child demonstrate it.
- Always follow through with a consequence.

Tip 4: Encourage movement and sleep

Physical activity can help your child with ADHD

Children with ADHD often have energy to burn. Organized sports and other physical activities can help them get their energy out in healthy ways and focus their attention on specific movements and skills.

The benefits of physical activity are endless: it improves concentration, decreases depression and anxiety, and promotes brain growth. Most importantly for children with attention deficits, however, is the fact that exercise leads to better sleep, which in turn can also reduce the symptoms of ADHD.

Find a sport that your child will enjoy and that suits his or her strengths. For example, sports such as softball that involve a lot of “down time” are not the best fit for children with attention problems. Individual or team sports like basketball and hockey that require constant motion are better options.

Children with ADHD may also benefit from martial arts training, tae kwon do, or yoga, which enhance mental control as they work out the body.

Better sleep to help your child with ADHD

Insufficient sleep can make anyone less attentive, but it can be highly detrimental for children with ADHD. Kids with ADHD need at least as much sleep as their unaffected peers, but tend not to get what they need. Their attention problems can lead to overstimulation and trouble falling asleep. A consistent, early bedtime is the most helpful strategy to combat this problem, but it may not completely solve it.

Help your child get better rest by trying out one or more of the following strategies:

Decrease television time and increase your child's activities and exercise levels during the day.

Eliminate caffeine from your child's diet.

Create a buffer time to lower down the activity level for an hour or so before bedtime. Find quieter activities such as coloring, reading or playing quietly.

Spend ten minutes cuddling with your child. This will build a sense of love and security as well as provide a time to calm down.

Use lavender or other aromas in your child's room. The scent may help to calm your child.

Use relaxation tapes as background noise for your child when falling asleep. There are many varieties available including nature sounds and calming music. Children with ADHD often find "white noise" to be calming. You can create white noise by putting a radio on static or running an electric fan.

The benefits of “green time” in kids with attention deficit disorder



Research shows that children with ADHD benefit from spending time in nature. Kids experience a greater reduction of symptoms of ADHD when they play in a park full of grass and trees than on a concrete playground. Take note of this promising and simple approach to managing ADHD. Even in cities, most families have access to parks and other natural settings. Join your children in this “green time”—you’ll also get a much-deserved breath of fresh air for yourself.

Tip 5: Help your child eat right

Diet is not a direct cause of attention deficit disorder, but food can and does affect your child's mental state, which in turn seems to affect behavior. Monitoring and modifying what, when, and how much your child eats can help decrease the symptoms of ADHD.

All children benefit from fresh foods, regular meal times, and staying away from junk food. These tenets are especially true for children with ADHD, whose impulsiveness and distractedness can lead to missed meals, disordered eating, and overeating.

Eating regular meals may help your child’s ADHD



Children with ADHD are notorious for not eating regularly. Without parental guidance, these children might not eat for hours and then binge on whatever is around. The result of this pattern can be devastating to the child’s physical and emotional health.

Prevent unhealthy eating habits by scheduling regular nutritious meals or snacks for your child no more than three hours apart. Physically, a child with ADHD needs a regular intake of healthy food; mentally, meal times are a necessary break and a scheduled rhythm to the day.

- ▶ Get rid of the junk foods in your home.
- ▶ Put fatty and sugary foods off-limits when eating out.
- ▶ Turn off television shows riddled with junk-food ads.
- ▶ Give your child a daily vitamin-and-mineral supplement.

Tip 6: Teach your child how to make friends

Children with ADHD often have difficulty with simple social interactions. They may struggle with reading social cues, talk too much, interrupt frequently, or come off as aggressive or “too intense.” Their relative emotional immaturity can make them stand out among children their own age, and make them targets for unfriendly teasing.

Don't forget, though, that many kids with ADHD are exceptionally intelligent and creative and will eventually figure out for themselves how to get along with others and spot people who aren't appropriate as friends. Moreover, personality traits that might exasperate parents and teachers may come across to peers as funny and charming.

Helping a child with ADHD improve social skills

It's hard for children with ADHD to learn social skills and social rules. You can help your child with ADHD become a better listener, learn to read people's faces and body language, and interact more smoothly in groups.

- ▶ Speak gently but honestly with your child about his or her challenges and how to make changes.
- ▶ Role-play various social scenarios with your child. Trade roles often and try to make it fun.
- ▶ Be careful to select playmates for your child with similar language and physical skills.
- ▶ Invite only one or two friends at a time at first. Watch them closely while they play and have a zero tolerance policy for hitting, pushing and yelling.
- ▶ Make time and space for your child to play, and reward good play behaviors often.

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