

Parenting Your Active, ADD, ADHD or Whirlwind Child



Many times as a single parent you will suddenly find yourself in the principal's office or standing before your child's teacher at school. Everyone in the world is insisting there is a problem with your child or they are telling you your child is ADD or ADHD. The simple solution is to medicate your child. Are there other things you need to do or know? This article explores some tips to help you parent your active child.

by Linda Ranson Jacobs

There is a lot of concern in single parent families regarding Attention Deficit Disorder, ADD, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD, in children. After working with children for over 30 years, I believe many children from divorced homes are misdiagnosed. If you look at the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-IV-TR (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association) definition and symptoms, you will see that many children under stress, experiencing a crisis or experiencing the divorce of their parents will exhibit the very same symptoms as the ADD/ADHD child.

Some symptoms of ADHD children:

- Impulsive - They act without thinking. They blurt out comments that are inappropriate. Sometimes they express feelings that are inappropriate for the environment.
- Inattentive - They may daydream or appear to be sidetracked easily; they can't stay on task or focus on schoolwork and other tasks.

- Hyperactive – They can't seem to sit still, are always moving or on the go, appear not to notice social cues and talk when others are talking.

Some children truly are ADD or ADHD. Medications do help many of these children. Whether to medicate your child is your decision. Don't be bullied into it, but do keep an open mind, listen and research every aspect of medication. At this time there is no medication that will cure ADD/ADHD. Whether your child is clinically ADD, ADHD or just active and stressed to the max, there are several things you need to know to help you parent your child.

Medical Conditions

There are medical conditions that mimic the ADD/ADHD child also. Get a physical for your child and rule out any medical conditions. An example is iron deficiency. Recently, researchers have discovered that children who have an iron deficiency may not be able to focus. A thyroid condition is another condition that can mimic the

symptoms of ADD children. From my own experience, I have a hypothyroidism condition. I cannot sit still and intake information. I learned early on that my body has to be moving in order for me to learn. I take copious notes; I draw pictures or scribble and doodle on scraps of paper. If I sit still, it seems my brain goes into “sleep mode” with no screen saver. People dislike sitting next to me at conferences and in church because my legs move, my arms move and I fidget horribly. I would be that problem child in today’s classroom.

Practice, Practice and Practice What Your Child Is to Do

Because the mind of an ADD/ADHD child is chaotic, unorganized and unreliable and many times does not think in logical sequences or in concrete terms, these children need structure and boundaries to help them. Children experiencing the divorce of their parents will also have unorganized thought processes. They may appear to be chaotic or dazed and living in another world. Remember they may now have two sets of rules to remember. Their lives are chaotic if they have to live in two different homes, even on a part-time basis. One thing to remember is, don’t ever assume the child understands or knows what the expectations are.

If the child does something one way at the other parent’s place and comes home and you have slightly modified it, it may take the child several reminders from you of how you expect things to be. He or she has to practice how to act. If the issue is doing homework, then practice how you want the child to get ready to do the homework. Write out a script; go over the script with your child. Practice this procedure, and afterwards question your child to make sure he or she understands everything. You may have to

practice several days in a row before your child understands it and comprehends it. Realize when your child visits the other parent that everything may be lost and you will have to rehearse again. But each time this happens, the rehearsing should become shorter.

After you know the child understands and has the routine down, then in the future you can use a cue such as putting your hand on his or her shoulder or saying the child’s name to remind him or her what is supposed to happen regarding the homework schedule. Use any cue that will help your child be successful. One other tip: don’t try to force the other parent to do things the way you want them done. You have no say in how things should be at the other parent’s. Your child can learn to adapt. It’s great if both parents can agree how things should be done, but for the most part, this doesn’t happen.

Speechless Communication

Many children will do better with pictures, icons, signs, hand signals and cues than the spoken word. For example, if your child is having problems at school, encourage his or her schoolteacher to take your child aside the minute your child walks in the door and rehearse or go over the day’s schedule. Ask the teacher to talk with your child and get his or her help in developing some hand signals or facial expressions the teacher can use to stimulate your child’s brain as to what comes next. For some children, it is helpful to have the teacher give them their own copy of the day’s schedule. The child can fold it up and carry it around. In the evening you can take time to have your child walk you through his or her day using the written schedule.

Role-Play

Role-play works well with some of these children. Let's say your child has returned from visiting the other parent. Your child acts like he or she has amnesia and can't remember how to get ready for bed.

Example: "Hey Jason, I noticed last night that you had a little bit of a problem focusing when it was time to get ready for bed. I can understand because when I'm under a lot of stress, the same thing happens to me. I want to share with you how I handle this. Let's go over what you are supposed to do when I say, 'Time to get ready for bed.' Let's pretend I just said, 'Time to get ready for bed.' Now what is the first thing you are going to do?" After you have gone through this, then switch roles. Have your child be the parent and you be the child. As the child, you can pretend to forget what you are supposed to do. Ask your child what comes next as you role-play this scenario.

Techniques to Cue Your Child

You can also use the same technique to cue your child when his or her behavior is not appropriate. I developed a particular look with my face and eyes and just a slight nod, kind of a half "no" nod, of my head to let a child know his or her behavior was inappropriate and needed to stop. It is important to make eye contact when using signs, signals and speechless communication. These signs can be used when you are in a social setting such as a church outing, at home, in an extended family gathering or even at the mall or grocery store. The thing is to be consistent and use the same signal each time and every time.

When a child is getting out of control, starting to cause problems or makes a scene, a terrific body signal for many of these kids

is simply a shrug of your shoulders with a look on the face that says, "So you blew it!" There are no repercussions, just some attention and validation that says, "Hey kid, you really messed up. Now shake it off. Move on. Try again. You can do it." You don't verbalize this; just use "the look" as the kids I worked with used to call it. An example: You are at church and as you stand to sing, your child fumbles his Bible, drops it and causes a lot of noise. Just look at your child, shrug your shoulders a little and in your mind say, "Oh well!" There needs to be no repercussions, just acknowledgement.

Short Phrases and Things to Say to Your Child

Short verbal phrases such as "Oh well!" work well with many of these children. Another one is the word "Bummer!" with a lot of expression. Bummer conveys empathy and sympathy but doesn't take ownership of the child's problem. As the adult, you will have to refrain from saying anything more than the word "Bummer!" or "Oh well!" And believe me, this can be very difficult. You will want to say, "How could you do that?" Or "How many times have we been over this?" and "If you will just concentrate, you won't keep making these mistakes." Or "Get in control. Calm down." You don't want to get in the habit of giving a lot of attention to some of these behaviors. For many children, even negative attention is attention. As a parent you may not realize how much negative attention your child is receiving from you. Don't take ownership of your child's problems. Hold your child accountable for his or her problems. Let your child know you are there, but allow your child to learn to be responsible for him- or herself as much as possible.

Accommodating Excessive Movement

For some children constant movement is just how they are going to be. Keep remembering that it is impossible for them to sit still and pay attention. Maybe your child would listen better if he or she were not sitting. Some children need organized movement to help get their brains focused. Organized movement on the outside creates organized movement in the brain. Organized movements can be crossing the right hand over the body to reach something on the left side. Have your child stretch the right hand over the body to the left side; switch and have the left hand stretch over the right side. These types of activities are called crossing midline, and they help the brain to focus. Crossing lateral is also important. To force both brain hemispheres to connect, have your child do cross laterals. Cross laterals are arm and leg crossovers. The “Macarena” that was popular a few years back is a great and fun way to get the brain focusing and connecting. For younger children, use the song “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” where the right hand is the spider and climbs up the left arm, and then the left hand climbs up the right arm; this is an example of a cross lateral exercise. Get creative and have fun and enjoy your child during this time.

Physical Attention

Don’t forget to touch your child a lot. Some children need personal touch to help them calm down. When you read the Bible, you find that Jesus touched people. There was such healing in His touch that people wanted to be able to just touch the hem of His garment. For many children, a touch is healing. Encourage your child to sit next to you while watching TV or reading together. I always enjoyed sitting together with my children in church. Since I was the one who couldn’t sit still, I would rub their hair or

their arms and pat their backs. It helped me concentrate, and it felt good to them. At home in the evenings I rubbed their feet while they watched TV.

Other Ideas

- Noise levels - some children are highly reactive to loud, chaotic noise level. Keep the noise levels tolerable. In the late evening bring the noise levels down in your home. This will produce a calming effect to help them transition to bedtime.
- Keep your home as calm and in control as possible.
- Use lavender aroma in the bathroom and bedroom at bedtime. Lavender aroma is calming.
- Cinnamon is an aroma that stimulates us and helps us wake up. Use cinnamon aroma in the morning or give them cinnamon flavored foods to help them wake up or to stimulate homework time.
- Channel activity. Use extra energy constructively in physical labor. This allows your child to contribute to the society in which he or she lives. In other words your home is the society where your child lives and needs to contribute. Besides, you don’t need to try and do everything yourself. Your child needs to help and contribute to the home.
- Cue your child about transition time. Decide in advance what a cue or signal will be for turning off the TV to get ready for dinner or bed or to leave the house in the morning.
- Reinforce social routines such as good-byes, hellos, please, etc. For many children who are stressed or are

ADD/ADHD, they lack social politeness, so make them aware by practicing these social routines often.

- Break tasks down into do-ables. Too many directions are confusing.
- Assign a place for everything. This may be as hard on you as your child, but it is a must. Always know where your child is supposed to put his or her coat, lunch bag, backpack, shoes, etc. Be consistent!
- Keep your home and especially your child's room organized and clutter free. Overstimulation in the form of clutter only serves to keep your child confused and overstimulated. Many kids simply can't calm down in the midst of clutter. This may mean some of the toys and gadgets in their bedrooms will need to be removed. Store items not used every day out of sight.
- Keep colors and shapes to a minimum in your child's room. Too many shapes and colors overstimulate many children. Cream or off-white and beige walls are optimal for keeping hyper children focused and calm. The color red and yellow can send many ADD/ADHD children over the top. For non-hyper children these are called creative colors and will stimulate their creativeness. Red also stimulates the appetite.
- Be careful of overstimulation through music and other activities.
- Be aware that many children who are stressed or on certain medications will have sleep deprivation. They may sleep at night, but the sleep may not be restful and they may not ever get to the REM or rapid eye movement sleep. Try and find ways to help your child relax. Stretching and deep

breathing with a warm bath may be calming for your child. For some children a glass of warm milk at bedtime will induce sleep. For other children thinking of two or three things they were successful at during the day and asking them to recite those things can be calming as well as comforting.

- Pray with your child at bedtime. Thank God for your child's uniqueness and creativeness. Thank God for making your child the way he or she is. Ask God to give your child pleasant dreams.
- Be consistent and keep all routines the same. This means (unfortunately for many single parents) that if your child's daily routine is to get up at 7:00 a.m. Monday through Friday, then your child should get up at 7:00 a.m. on the weekends. Many of these children have an internal body clock. They can't handle the "clock" being changed.
- In addition to meals, use peanut butter, cheese or other foods high in protein and amino acids. Amino acids are important for making neurotransmitters and play a big role in brain make-up and emotions. Some amino acids can lift moods and increase alertness. Use calming foods such as applesauce, mashed potatoes or pudding. Use foods high in potassium such as orange juice and bananas.
- Give your children water to drink to help hydrate the brain. Give water to drink at homework times or times when your child appears to be frustrated. Thirsty brains can't think or focus.
- Consider natural and logical consequences. If your child doesn't eat at mealtime, the natural consequence is going to be hunger. Allow your child to

be hungry for that night. He or she can always eat a big breakfast in the morning. A logical consequence is one where the natural consequence would be dangerous or threaten a child's long-term outcome. For example, a natural consequence of not brushing one's teeth is a health risk later on. In this case, a parent would need to use a logical consequence.

- Use simple commands and directions. Do not use the word "Don't" but rephrase directions. Tell your child what TO do versus what NOT to do. We are good at telling children what they are not supposed to do, but we forget to tell them what to do. So give usable information to your child.
- Make sure your child understands simple instructions. Ask, "Is there anything about this conversation you don't understand?" Fill in the blanks.
- Pray, pray and pray for your child, and pray with your child. Pray for yourself, and ask your child to pray for you.

Some children don't experience successes in other settings such as school and child care, so help your child have success at home. Take time to really study your child. Ask God to reveal to you the gifts He has given your child. Find your child's strengths, and use those strengths to enhance your time at home. Make your child aware he or she is valuable to you and God. Many ADD/ADHD children are very smart and creative. Use their creativity. Every child doesn't have to be like "the other kids."

Make this scripture your motto, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak [and act] and slow to become angry [and send them away]" (James 1:19).

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