



What to Expect: Entering Adulthood With Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

8.1

Christopher J. Nicholls, Ph.D.

How quickly they grow up! One minute it seems we are teaching our children how to tie their shoes; the next thing we know, they want the keys to the car. In the big picture, the time children spend at home with their parents is pretty short. Parents can have a lifetime of input into their children's lives, but all in all, children become adults very quickly.

How can parents best prepare their child with ADHD for the future? What should parents and their young adults expect? Are there any problems that seem to come up again and again? This article covers these and other subjects.

A Lifelong Disability

Although many of the early, core symptoms of ADHD seem to get better with age, this is a disorder that never really goes away. The troubles faced by the person with ADHD change with age and the different tasks of being an adult. For many, the support and guidance given by parents and teachers during the childhood years seem to disappear as the young adult leaves the nest. Parents can help to prepare for this transition if they expect certain trouble spots.

Independence

The transition out of the home is a difficult time for both the young adult and the parents. If college is part of the plan, then parents can hand off some of the responsibilities of watching over their young adult to a dormitory resident advisor or other supervisory person. The student can purchase meal tickets for the college cafeteria and rely on the college bus or the close-by shops and clubs common to most college campuses. In this way, parents can feel some comfort in knowing their child has a world specifically designed with the developmental needs of the young adult in mind.

It still might be a good idea, however, to explore (with your child) the resources available through the college's or university's disability resources or student services departments. Many colleges have an office designed to assist students with disabilities in various ways. Such services can add a layer of protection against the hard knocks of becoming independent.

Most people don't get to go away to live at a college campus, however. They face the issues of whether to continue to live at home (if they go to a local college or get

a job) or get their own place to live. Often this becomes a "yo-yo" time of trial and error. Most 18-year-olds can't wait to get their own place to live, a job that will provide them with cash in their pocket, and the freedom of not having to be home by a certain time. However, many never really have had to pay for "everything" out of their paychecks before and suddenly find that there is "too much month at the end of their money!"

Some parents offer to have their young adult continue to live at home, rent and food (and laundry) free. This seems like a good way to ease entry into the adult world. If you wish to make this choice, then try to set it up so that the young adult has to take on more and more responsibility over time. Ask that your child make "rent" payments and contribute some money for food, utilities, supplies, etc. Help your young adult set up a budget and set aside money from each paycheck to pay the bills. Go over the household finances together—both income and expenses—and show your child how to set aside money for taxes, car insurance, retirement, etc. Most people learn these things as they are forced to deal with them. You can help by preparing your young adult ahead of time.

If your youngster will live at home, discuss and agree upon what the rules will be. Set guidelines based on your needs, and explain that if the youngster wants to live with you, he or she must go by your rules. Discuss what time at night the child must be home (or have called to say that he or she won't be home). Discuss your preferences on such issues as having friends/dates over, smoking/drinking/drugs, and use of the family car and other items. Don't be a pushover. It's your house! Don't be inflexible, however. Help your young adult learn to negotiate for change by identifying his or her own wants and needs, asking for them in a responsible way, and being willing to "pay" for them by his or her own responsible behavior.

Responsibility

We don't change overnight. It takes time to learn to be responsible, and you probably have been working on these issues since you first asked your child to pick up the toys. With increasing age, however, the responsibilities get tougher, and ADHD is a big risk factor for having lots of different kinds of problems.

It might be helpful to define responsibility as the ability to respond—in other words, we all make choices about what

we do. Help your young adult think through various situations and make choices on the basis of good information, not impulse. Guide your young person by prompting him or her to make up a plan, think about the various outcomes of different choices, and live with these decisions.

What Are Some Common Areas of Trouble?

Credit Cards

Recommend using cards that require a deposited balance or must be paid off each month. If you cosign an account, require that you see the statements regularly.

Driving

Young adults with ADHD have a much higher rate of accidents. Actively teach defensive driving, insist that your child take extra driver education classes, make sure he or she takes the appropriate medications, and require your young adult to abstain from alcohol and drugs while operating a vehicle. Consider "safe" cars; avoid motorcycles. Require that your child buy his or her own auto insurance and pay for gas and auto repairs.

Alcohol and Drugs

People with ADHD are much more likely to have problems with drugs and alcohol. Actively discuss the ways alcohol interferes with judgment and coordination. Explain that nicotine is highly addictive and that although it treats ADHD symptoms (it does), tobacco smoke kills. Encourage your child to find the right type and dosage of medications to treat his or her symptoms and to take the medicine regularly.

Employment

Consider asking the young adult to visit with an employment or vocational counselor. Some jobs are just not a good fit for some people and are perfect for others. There is no perfect "ADHD job," so help your child identify the kinds of interests, skills, and talents he or she has and the style of work he or she can handle best. Match abilities and interests with the job. Help your young person avoid the frequent tendency of adults with ADHD to skip from one job to another because they get bored easily or can't follow the rules and duties of the job.

Relationships

"The grass is always greener on the other side" is particularly true for people with ADHD. Finding someone who will appreciate one's talents and accept one's troubles is hard enough when one is patient and self-assured. It is harder still if the person is impulsive and prone to thrill seeking. Explain that mature relationships involve prob-

lem solving, sharing, and mutual support. Help your young adult solve conflicts by talking and trying to find "win-win" solutions.

Deal With Emotional Baggage

Very few people have ADHD alone. Depression, anxiety, learning problems, substance abuse, anger control problems—all are common conditions that accompany ADHD. Be sure to treat each of these problems effectively. Encourage your young adult to seek professional help when needed. Most problems can be dealt with quickly, effectively, and at a reasonable cost. Ask for referrals from your doctor, if needed.

Self-Esteem

Many, if not most, adults with ADHD have taken some pretty big hits on their self-concept over the years. Help place the hurts in perspective. Point out the areas of strength and success. Actively praise and be proud of what your young adult does well, no matter how little the task. Explain that adults must pump themselves up when the going gets tough and that adults often don't receive from others the kind of feedback that parents and teachers gave them throughout their childhood. Young adults must learn to set their own goals and measure success by their own achievements. Consider hiring a "coach" to teach organization, time management, and other skills.

Allow Setbacks and Expect Ups and Downs

One of the hardest parts of being a parent is allowing our children to fail and to learn from their mistakes. Be there to support and help, but remember that your child is an individual and that you are not responsible for what he or she does. Be proud of your child's victories and comfort your child in failure, but don't fall into the trap of feeling that you have failed if all things don't go right. All parents try to the best of their abilities. Some do better than others. Your love and teaching prepares your child for adulthood. Your teachings will be there forever, in your child's heart.

Christopher J. Nicholls, Ph.D., is a health psychologist in private practice in Phoenix. A graduate of the University of Virginia, he specializes in children with traumatic brain injuries and attention disorders.