



Girls With Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder

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Girls with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often are not identified at an early age. However, even when they are identified and treated successfully for the primary symptoms of ADHD, these girls often face other significant difficulties as they become young women and begin to confront the effects of their attentional challenges on their ability to fulfill gender role expectations. Parents increase the chance for long-term success when they help their daughters develop an internal voice that both explains and values their differences so that by the time these girls leave home, they feel confident and capable of leading satisfying, successful lives as women with ADHD.

Early Identification

For girls, especially those who are primarily inattentive, ADHD is as much a set of cognitive and attentional differences as it is a description of behavior. As a result, girls with ADHD often are difficult to identify at an early age. In addition, the struggles of these girls often go unnoticed because of their tendency to “people please” and to internalize instead of act out their difficulties, and because protective factors in their environment, such as parental support and structure, can mask the extent of the problem.

Discussions that recognize ADHD in girls as a significant and severe condition that needs to be treated emphasize the importance of early identification in alleviating the distress of the ADHD symptoms themselves as well as preventing the development of secondary negative consequences. One study, for example, discusses “the risk to the attention-disordered girl who is passive, doesn’t disrupt other children, is not a problem to anyone and so remains undiscovered” (Berry, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 1985, p. 562). The authors warn, “this makes her vulnerable to academic underachievement and social and emotional disturbances.”

Beyond Early Identification

It is important to recognize, however, that early identification and even successful management of the primary problems with attention through standard treatment methods (organizational strategies, behavioral management approaches, and medication) might not be enough to ensure long-term successful outcomes for these girls as they become women with ADHD. The secondary effects of living with ADHD often develop in spite of early treatment

for the primary symptoms and need to be the focus of a separate, parallel set of interventions.

In my work with women with ADHD, I have observed that, when girls reach early adulthood and lose the structure and support that home might have provided, they very often encounter a whole host of new challenges. When young women begin to see ADHD’s effect on their ability to fulfill gender role expectations, the deeply held views about their differences they have developed are often the determining factor in whether they will continue to employ successful strategies or, instead, retreat behind a wall of shame. Above and beyond treatment for primary ADHD, then, we must take a longer view when we think about helping these girls. We must be just as vigilant about the subtle *messages* they are receiving about their ADHD as we are about the *methods* aimed at their primary symptoms.

Providing an Internal Explanatory and Valuing Voice

An important goal for parents is to help these girls, from early on, begin internalizing an explanatory and valuing voice that they can carry with them as they confront their ADHD as women. Parents can become internal partners with their daughter by talking with her in an objective, explanatory way about her experiences and thinking through strategies together until she is able to think through situations for herself. As a result, she will develop a strong internal voice on which she can rely as she encounters new challenges throughout her life. While it’s important to provide structure, support, and strategies after identification of ADHD, it also is critical for parents to help their daughter gradually learn how to approach and analyze increasingly complex and important situations.

With this ability to act in her own best interest comes an increasing feeling of control and confidence and a growing sense that she is someone who has options and can affect her own life in a positive way. Then, when attention-related difficulties arise throughout the girl’s life, she will be more likely to ask herself, “How can I make things work?” rather than saying, “I’m a jerk, I’m hopeless, I’m stupid, I’m a slob.” Once this positive and confident self-talk becomes natural and routine, she will be able to communicate much more effectively with others about her differences and needs. Instead of defending, apologizing, or withdrawing, she will focus on getting what she needs to make her life work.

Gender Role Models

All parents need to provide healthy role models to their daughters and teach them to resist the pressure to conform to gender role expectations that have damaging effects on girls as they become adolescents and young women (Pipher, 1995). Girls with ADHD have less opportunity to be exposed naturally to successful models with whom they can identify, so parents of these girls must be even more deliberate in providing examples of successful women who break the traditional mold. Mothers who have ADHD themselves must remember that their daughters will internalize not only what these mothers say directly to their daughters but also will absorb what their mothers say and feel about their own difficulties and differences.

It is especially important for a mother with ADHD to model "asking for help" in filling in her own gaps. If a mother has difficulty in specific areas relating to her daughter, she can show her willingness to involve others in the process. For example, she could ask her sister or husband to take over certain activities with her daughter, such as shopping for school supplies or organizing her notebooks. At the same time, though, the mother with ADHD needs to be clear about the abilities and strengths she does possess and provide. This attitude models interdependence, conveys an appreciation of variations, and demonstrates an ability to move beyond traditional gender role expectations.

Fathers also play a very important role in the lives of their daughters with ADHD by telling and showing what they value in women. In this way, their daughters can integrate the idea that perfect organization and following the cultural norm are not the essential elements of what makes a woman valued. If his wife has ADHD, a father can discuss with his daughter what special qualities he appreciates in Mom, such as integrity, individuality, creativity, warmth, and sensitivity. This will go a long way in helping the girl with ADHD resist the shame and the fear that often arise when she becomes a young woman who doesn't match the idealized cultural image of what is important in a woman. Father also can contribute to the healthy development of these girls by modeling task division on the basis of strengths, not gender. As a result of this modeling, the girl, by the time she becomes a young woman, will feel capable of developing an intimate and equal relationship in which she feels valued by her partner, instead of assuming or accepting a one-down position.

Talking to Her so She Will Talk to You

It is vital to remember that, even if her difficulties are not apparent, the girl with ADHD might be compensating by overworking and internalizing her feelings rather than acting out behaviorally. This eventually can lead to feelings

of isolation, anxiety, and depression. An atmosphere of safety will encourage your daughter to confide her struggles to you. We want to prevent a climate that establishes a lifelong pattern of "hiding" in which a girl might say to herself, "Well, I'm doing all right even though I'm working very hard just to keep up, so I won't say anything to anyone. I wouldn't want to wipe away the good opinion they have of me." Hiding herself this way deprives the young woman of the benefit she could derive from partnership with, modeling of, and teaching by a caring adult.

Five Reminder Questions Parents Can Ask Themselves

Begin by listening to yourself as you talk to your daughter with ADHD about her differences and challenges. Think about what you might be conveying indirectly to her or what other subtle messages she might be absorbing. Ask yourself:

1. "Will what we're saying to her not only help her succeed or get better grades now, but will it improve her ability to make choices for herself later as she faces more complex challenges?"
2. "Are the messages we're conveying, or the models we're providing, going to help her feel safe to ask for help when she needs support as an adult?"
3. "How might the way we talk about our own differences or treat our partner's difficulties be contributing to her view of herself as an individual of worth and value, even with her set of challenges?"
4. "Are our words giving her false reassurance or minimizing her struggles?" Statements such as, "Don't be silly, nothing's wrong with you," have the effect of pushing her to cope silently on her own. Validate and take her problems very seriously, but always keep them separate from a characterization of *her* as the problem.
5. "Are our words or messages subtly conveying the message that treatment means we want her to get over who she is?" It is important for your daughter to understand that the purpose of treatment is to help her be able to express *more* of who she is and to make it easier for her to do this. Guard against subtly conveying that she is valued or acceptable only when she's not displaying ADHD symptoms.

Summary

Young girls with ADHD need parents to be partners in their challenges from an early age. We need to teach them to understand how their brains work so they learn early how to manage their difficulties, in order to access their strengths. We must teach them interdependency and give

them appropriate role models to internalize other than traditional images of women. We must be good role models ourselves, showing we aren't afraid to get help with our difficulties, and that we value differences in other people. If girls are diagnosed early with ADHD, receive interventions designed to help them with their significant difficulties, *and* simultaneously and vigorously receive interventions that focus on their developing self-concept, they will grow into young women who see themselves as valuable and unique individuals, capable and competent to live successful lives with their particular set of abilities and complex challenges.

References and Resources

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