



Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adolescence: Common Dilemmas for Parents and Teens

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We've only just begun to appreciate that Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is likely to be a lifelong condition for many people. There are often unique issues for adolescents who have ADHD. The teen years present new challenges even for individuals who were diagnosed in early childhood and have been treated for a number of years.

Medication

Children who have been very cooperative and compliant about taking medication on a regular basis sometimes rebel when they enter adolescence. Taking medication often makes teenagers feel different from their peers. They sometimes become acutely self-conscious about taking medication and feel that it makes them "defective" in some way.

One area of sensitivity is disclosing to peers, in particular to a boy- or girlfriend, one's ADHD diagnosis and need for regular medication. In early teenage years, most adolescents tend to go through a period where they feel they are invulnerable. This view of themselves as self-sufficient and protected from all harm can result in teenagers with ADHD feeling that they don't need the "crutch" of medication. It is often helpful to talk with these teens about other common conditions their peers might have, such as poor vision that requires contacts or eyeglasses (Robin, 1990). Similarly, inattention and distractibility are correctable with medication.

Additionally, many adolescents become acutely sensitive to any medication that is supposed to affect their mind and erroneously feel that they are "under the control of a drug." In talking with teenagers who have ADHD, it is important to emphasize that the medication does not take away their control or individuality but only optimizes their ability to achieve personal goals.

Parents, Independence, and ADHD

It is normal for teenagers to want greater independence from parents. However, teenagers who achieve a healthy separation come from families with parents who provide optimal levels of support while encouraging the adolescent's age-appropriate independence. Although teenagers should be permitted privacy proportional to their maturity (for example, requiring that anyone knock before entering their bedroom), it is important for parents to remain in

control of issues such as curfew, academic standards, and knowing their children's whereabouts.

Teenagers with ADHD sometimes feel that their parents are overly focused on their ADHD. Some teenagers view ADHD as a "kid's disease" and think they should have outgrown it. Parents tend to contribute to this pattern by excusing the teenager's behavior and in particular by excusing behaviors that are not related to core ADHD symptoms. Non-ADHD behaviors include stealing, lying, and aggression. The most helpful approach is for parents to talk openly with their teenager about the ADHD-related inattention and concentration problems while emphasizing that there are a number of coping skills for managing and overcoming these weaknesses.

Schoolwork and Teens With ADHD

Many adolescents with ADHD will continue to struggle with academic work. In school, these students usually are entitled to such accommodations as extra time for tests. Teachers and parents can be of greatest help to these students by teaching them to "learn how to learn." Students at this age can develop a sophisticated understanding of ADHD and help generate strategies to compensate for their weaknesses in attention and concentration. Such strategies include making lists, using electronic schedulers, and working in short time intervals punctuated with brief breaks.

As tests in high school gain greater importance, it is crucial for students to learn effective test-taking strategies. For example, students taking multiple choice tests should recognize that when they come across a specific test question that they can't answer, they should move to the next question rather than catastrophizing ("I don't remember anything about this question; I can't think of anything about the next one either—Oh no! I'm losing my focus!! I shouldn't bother trying to finish this test!").

Parents might need to monitor homework. Teenagers should have a specific time and place set aside for homework. Although parents should not hover over the adolescent who is doing homework, they should check the work for completeness. In addition, the teenager might benefit from verbal review and quizzing for exams. Parents should allow teenagers some autonomy for homework, but the parents generally should be in the household and aware that homework is taking place (Robin, 1990).

Parental Standards and Support

It is important that parents have a strong alliance with one another. Teenagers are particularly skilled at "splitting" parents. Mother might be the "bad guy" and Father the "good guy." Teenagers also are particularly skilled at going around one parent to the other. Thus, parents need to be in constant conversation with each other about their rules for teenagers.

Parents also should pick their battles wisely (Robin, 1990). It usually is not helpful for parents to "come down" strongly on core ADHD symptoms such as fidgetiness, restlessness, and inattention. However, it is appropriate for parents of adolescents to expect respectful behavior and common courtesy.

Parents need to take time for themselves. It is important for parents to have a strong support network of friends, spouse, and extended family. Married couples should schedule regular time for themselves so that the marital relationship will continue to be strong. Individually, each parent should have time for exercise, relaxation, and quiet activities such as reading. By taking care of themselves and their adult relationships, parents will have greater patience and consistency with their teens.

References and Resources

Robin, A. L. (1990). Training families with ADHD adolescents. In R. A. Barkley (Ed.), *Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: A handbook for diagnosis and treatment* (pp. 462-497). New York: Guilford.

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