



Coping Successfully With Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in the Family

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It is estimated that separation or divorce is three times more likely to occur in families that include a child with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Mothers of children with ADHD are more likely to suffer depression and feelings of self-blame. Additionally, friends and extended family members might not be emotionally supportive because of a lack of understanding about this disorder (Alexander-Roberts, 1994).

Factors for Success Within the Immediate Family

Many articles document the struggles of a single-parent family in today's society. However, being the only adult in the household allows that parent to make decisions regarding discipline, mealtimes, activities, bedtimes, homework, etc., without compromise or argument from a spouse. Parents of children with ADHD who have different opinions about child-rearing practices often envy single parents. When couples disagree about child-rearing practices, there is increased stress and disharmony in the home, not to mention lack of consistency with their child.

When one parent decides to use "time alone in your bedroom" as punishment and the other parent has difficulty getting the child to go to sleep in that bedroom, the child receives mixed messages that invite parental disagreement. One way to solve this problem is to discuss the discipline ahead of time and work out the details so that both parents feel comfortable when the need to discipline arises. Consistency is such a big factor in the success of any discipline or behavior management plan that you can ill afford not to support each other.

Many couples disagree on everything from "when to take the bottle away" to "whether or not the TV is on during dinner" to "why don't you go back to work so you're not dealing with this every minute of every day." Sometimes it is necessary to seek the advice and help of an objective third party, because each parent is sure the other person is wrong and needs to be set straight. With assistance and guidance from a professional who has knowledge about the challenges of raising a child with ADHD, parents can learn a tremendous amount about how to listen and communicate more effectively with each other. Professional counselors can provide couples with information and techniques specific to the parenting needs of the child with ADHD. Some counselors give "homework assignments" to

parents to improve their relationship as a couple and also to refine their parenting skills. Parent homework assignments might include planning a weekly date where neither partner can talk about the child; giving sincere, daily compliments and supportive statements to each other; and identifying the ways in which each partner can relax and relieve the daily stresses associated with the multiple roles as parent, spouse, employee, and so many others.

Parents often credit their work with professional counselors for saving their families from destruction. Though not everyone needs this particular kind of support, the job of parenting a child with ADHD calls for additional understanding and support from outside sources. These sources can include the extended family, friends, a support group, clergy, or a professional counselor. The point is that no matter how educated you are or how grounded you seem to be in your personal and professional life, parenting a child with ADHD brings a different level of stress to families. Parents cannot ignore it. They must recognize it and be able to reach out for support without feeling guilty or diminished in any way.

Factors for Success With Extended Family Members

Remind yourself over and over again that most of the negative and nonsupportive comments you hear from family and friends come from a lack of understanding about why the child is "behaving like that." Until you learned about ADHD and its effects in your family, you also might have wondered, at one time long ago, how parents could "let their child get away with that!" Now it has become your responsibility to educate your extended family members about ADHD. Be aware that family stress increases when parents serve as educators in addition to their other roles.

Some authors recommend that you send reading materials to members of your family to acquaint them with the diagnosis and current thinking about ADHD. This is a great suggestion if you know that your sister, brother, aunt, uncle, mom, or dad truly will read the information. When selecting reading material for extended family members, choose a very short, informative piece that explains ADHD in terms the general public can understand easily. You live with this child 24 hours a day, so it benefits you greatly to read a lot about ADHD. Others probably don't need quite that much information. Family members who spend time

with your child require more information than those who spend limited time with her or him, but relatives who rarely interact with your child don't need to read exhaustively to gain sufficient understanding to be able to be supportive and to enjoy their niece, nephew, or grandchild. Isn't that what we are looking for anyway, a typical relationship with grandparents for all of us?

A letter to relatives written from the child's perspective that includes descriptions of behaviors that the child exhibits (not all behaviors associated with ADHD are exhibited by all children) often has a softer touch than a brochure or article describing the full range of behaviors, medications, prognoses, etc. If your child is old enough, have him or her help you write the letter, taking care to specify what he or she likes about "visiting Grandma and Grandpa." A letter from a young (7-year-old) child might go something like this:

Dear Nana & Papa,

I can't wait to come see you and that beautiful Christmas tree you always put up in the living room. I love sliding down the stairs on my tummy and watching how the lights look from that angle. Don't worry, I know how to stop without hurting myself. And remember those special ball ornaments that spin? I can't keep myself from touching them, so Mom said you probably will put them up high this year so I can only look at them with my eyes. Will you put on some ornaments that I can touch?

You'll be surprised how much better I'm getting at reading. I've been taking this special medicine that helps me concentrate better, so I'll bring a few of my favorite books if you will let me climb up in your lap, Papa, and read them to you. Nana, I love helping Mom at home in the kitchen—can I help you when you have a lot of work to do in there? I'm good at putting away dishes and stirring stuff.

Mom and Daddy told me about your new puppy. Can I take it for a walk to the park (you know, the one with the swings and monkey bars) holding onto the leash? The puppy and I could run around a lot and use up some "extra" energy.

I'll see you in 2 weeks. I love you.

Kisses and hugs,

Me

What grandparent wouldn't love to receive a sweet letter along with a drawing from a grandchild? Then, when you visit, describe what kinds of things they might see your child do, and explain your responses to specific behaviors. Be sure to fill them in on your behavior management plan. One plan that parents find helpful is *1-2-3: Magic!* by Thomas Phelan, Ph.D. It is portable and easy to teach to

others. (See the References and Resources section at the end of this article for full publication information.)

Don't expect your parents to change their reactions to you or your child with ADHD immediately. If they questioned your child-rearing practices with your other children, it should be no surprise that, again, they are questioning your permissiveness or strictness. If you can explain to your parents the symptoms of ADHD as they see them happening, they will be better able to understand and support parental decisions. The more frequently grandparents are able to spend time with your child, the easier it will be for them to understand, accept, and deal with the misbehaviors. Be sure to praise the ways in which they interact effectively with your child, and don't be afraid to model ways in which you would like them to handle something differently.

Family vacations that include grandparents can have benefits for all family members. Mom and Dad are able to have some time alone (you brought the baby-sitters with you), grandparents get to see someplace they might not travel to on their own, and the child has so many more people to do things with that the adults don't seem to tire of the child's endless activity.

Holiday gatherings can be difficult with a child who has ADHD. A simple solution to the problem is to have family get-togethers at your house. The child with ADHD will be comfortable in that environment, knows the boundaries and expectations, and probably will be less active in the familiar surroundings than in someone else's home. Remember that a new environment is more likely to create additional problem behaviors. If you do travel to a relative's home, be sure to plan ahead and take appropriate toys, games, books, computer software, or magazines, anything that will make your child feel more comfortable, regardless of the age. When parents travel with infants and toddlers, they make sure they have the right "stuff." It's the same mentality now! Parents who take the time to plan ahead will find that the child is more comfortable and parental inconvenience decreases. Parents and children alike want to be able to enjoy family visits with the least possible amount of stress.

Summary

Research has documented the stress on families, both immediate and extended, of raising a child with ADHD. As parents, we are constantly learning more and better ways to raise our children effectively. We didn't learn how to accept and deal with ADHD overnight, and our understanding and strategies for behavior management have evolved over the time our child has been with us. We need to help our parents, grandparents, and other family members learn some of what we know, and give them the time to internal-

ize it and practice it. Meanwhile, we are educating the world one family at a time. Support from professionals and educated extended family helps to nourish the couple who is parenting the child with ADHD so the family unit can remain intact, especially against the odds.

References and Resources

Alexander-Roberts, C. (1994). *The ADHD parenting handbook: Practical advice for parents from parents*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Co.

Phelan, T W. (1998). *1-2-3: Magic: Training your children to do what you want!* Glen Ellyn, IL: Child Management, Inc.

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