

Tips for Avoiding Parent-Child Dynamics in Adult ADHD Relationships

By Melissa Orlov

If one or both of you has ADHD and has not been thinking overtly about how ADHD impacts your marriage, chances are very good that your marriage is in trouble. ADHD symptoms often encourage specific and predictable negative patterns in relationships, yet as most couples are unaware of the impact of ADHD in their relationship, they pick exactly the wrong approaches to solving their marital problems.

One of these twelve patterns that I review in my book, *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*, is that of parent/child dynamics between spouses. It is perhaps the most common and most destructive of all of the patterns. In it, one spouse (the non-ADHD parent figure) is almost always responsible and the other (the ADHD spouse) rarely is. Here's how it usually starts: Symptomatically, an untreated ADHD spouse does not follow up on tasks for which he (or she) is responsible. He intends to, and says he will, but he simply gets distracted or forgets. At first his wife compensates and takes over the lion's share of the responsibility, but soon she resents the burden this places on her. She gets to do all of the scutwork, while he "cruises along" and does "the fun stuff."

When approached about his lapses, he agrees to help out, but rarely follows through. She reminds him again; he agrees again; he forgets again. His actions aren't intentional; he's simply distracted and unfocused. Over time he becomes "reliably unreliable" in his wife's eyes, and she begins to nag and attack him in order to get him to "pay attention to what he should be doing and stop goofing off." He retreats from the attack; she attacks harder in the face of his retreat. Soon, they both learn that interaction is painful: an exercise in being hurt, and feeling hurt. The only way she seems to be able to get his attention is to blow up at him. Sometimes he does get things done. But his wife learns to be wary because he is so inconsistent. What she will remember is not his accomplishments, but his

failures—and she behaves accordingly. He learns that getting things done doesn't get him much credit, which demotivates him.

Eventually, she is sure that his lack of action means that he doesn't care or is lazy, while he is convinced that there is no point in making the effort to help out because "I'll never be good enough for her, anyway!" She ends up responsible for everything. He ends up feeling inconsequential in the relationship. Hopelessness, frustration, and anger set in.

The parent/child dynamics pattern is intensely destructive because it:

- Leads to an imbalance in power – you are no longer partners, but more like master and slave (one dictates – the other follows orders)
- Is unsexy – it ruins your love life
- Results in huge frustration and anger for both partners, effectively poisoning all interactions
- Often results in the ADHD partner retreating from interactions

Parent/child dynamics are one of the first things I work on when consulting with couples. Spouses usually feel they “have no other choice” than to nag or try to control (non-ADHD partner) or retreat or be defensive (ADHD partner) when engaged in this pattern. So no positive improvements can be made while it continues. Below are a few tips for each partner to consider as you move to improve your relationship by abandoning parent/child interactions:

Tips - Avoiding the Parent-Child Dynamic for the Non-ADHD Spouse

- **Don't nag!** Although it feels right now as if the only way you can get your spouse's attention is to nag or parent, don't do it! Keep searching for alternative ways to express your needs and get things done. Use family meetings to organize and discuss your issues with less distraction; consult with a marriage therapist; schedule dates to connect. You are right to insist that attention be paid to you; just work with your spouse to find more productive ways to get that attention than nagging.
- **Take control of your own actions**, and stop all verbal abuse immediately. The lack of respect verbal abuse communicates makes improving your marriage virtually impossible. Find a different outlet for your frustration such as learning conversations or working with a therapist.
- **Recognize that you can never successfully “parent” a spouse**, even though it's possible to successfully help a child with ADHD. “Parenting” an ADHD spouse is always destructive to your relationship because it is not an acceptable “format” for an adult to adult relationship (unlike parenting a child, where you

both expect the parent to play a more dominant role.) Adult parent/child dynamics demotivate both partners and generate chronic frustration and anger. As you look for ways to live together successfully, always ask the question, “Am I moving into a dominant, parenting role with these words or actions?” If so, reject or modify that option. (Note here: This doesn’t mean you can’t ever be involved with your spouse’s ADHD; it just means that you need to be conscious of how you are involved.)

- **Remember that parenting a spouse kills the romance** and warm feelings critical to a successful marriage.
- **Applaud all forward progress.** Research shows that encouragement, support, and recognition of an ADHD partner’s successes are far more effective than offering “help” when your goal is to inspire continued success.
- **Understand that offers of “help” can be misconstrued** in adult parent–child relationships. They may say, “You’re not competent enough to do this alone.” Try to offer partnership: that is, participate in creating solutions that work for you both rather than “fix” something your spouse isn’t doing right.
- **Develop verbal cues.** Arrange with your spouse a method for pointing out and talking about parent–child interactions as they happen, so you can start to identify them, eliminate them, and replace them with more constructive interactions.. Remain as neutral as possible during these conversations.
- **Keep your marriage at the top of your list.** If you have a child with ADHD, make sure to keep the needs of your marriage up front. You’ll find time for your child, but it’s all too easy to lose track of your relationship.
- **Consider hiring professional help.** This is a very difficult dynamic to change. A professional ADHD coach or therapist can help you identify parent–child interactions and provide ideas for new ways to interact. Make sure the person has experience with ADHD!

Tips - Avoiding the Parent–Child Dynamic for the ADHD Spouse

- **Talk with your doctor about improving treatment.** You may wish to change medication dosage or timing, undertake a regular exercise routine, add fish oil, do brain training, or adopt behavioral changes through cognitive behavioral therapy, ADHD coaching, or another approach. Though it may be hard to hear, some of that parenting is in direct response to inadequately managed ADHD symptoms – so treating them and getting them under control really can change things.
- **Start making your changes with something symbolic.** Since “parenting” behavior usually starts after an ADHD spouse has failed to complete household tasks, taking full ownership of a project or task that is meaningful to your non-ADHD spouse can help you start turning things around. Don’t assume you know what this is; ask, and listen. (Hint: as the two of you discuss what you should take on, make sure you choose a meaningful task that fits with your strengths, not your weaknesses. I can’t tell you how many people with ADHD I’ve heard from decide this means they should pay the bills, even though there is

ample proof that financial management is one of their weakest skills.) Figure out all the steps. Develop a reminder system so you get it done at the right times. Do this task without any help from your partner. Achieving success by taking on this symbolic project is the first step in getting your spouse to calm down a bit and move ahead again.

- **Determine what you are not good at** and establish a plan for getting it done by someone else. Don't hand it to your spouse, who is already overburdened, unless he or she agrees that you are taking at least as much of her burden away from her by taking on some of her tasks.
- **Start a regular exercise program** if you don't have one already. This will improve your health, energy, and focus. It will also improve your mood, and therefore your interactions with your spouse. (Note: The focus benefit of exercise lasts for a few hours, so thinking about when you exercise can help you use this tool to its best advantage.)
- **Agree to verbal cues to point out parent–child interactions as they happen.** “Cue” responses such as “Please don't talk to me that way” can gently alert your partner that the direction of the conversation needs to change.

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