

Adult ADHD and Parenting

By Gina Pera

My husband walked into my office, took one look at the explosion of papers surrounding me, and asked, “What the heck are you doing?” There I was, sitting on the floor poring over hardcopies of every study, article, and book chapters I could find on how Adult ADHD affects parenting (all in preparation for presenting on the topic at the CADDAC conference on ADHD in Toronto May 30-31, 2009). With all the various angles and possibilities to cover (ADHD is no one-size-fits-all condition, after all!), it felt very overwhelming.

A few days later, with the presentation finally developed and Powerpointed, I met a 40-something mother who also felt overwhelmed—by living the topic I’d only been writing about. That’s definitely more challenging!

This top-of-her-class attorney had adjusted fairly well to her first child’s arrival some seven years ago. Four years later came her second daughter, the sweet-faced little spitfire whose photo her mom proudly shared with me from her iPhone. With that second child’s birth, this stay-at-home mom’s organizing skills—tenuous, even at times the source of family mirth since childhood—hit the skids.

Setting off on her errands after dropping her oldest child at school, she’d often find herself inexplicably off-course. Instead of mailing items at the post office and grocery-shopping, she was sipping lattes and cruising the toy-store aisles. At first she attributed her distractibility to being overwhelmed with the responsibilities of raising a family. “But honestly,” she said, “when I looked around, I saw plenty of other mothers doing much more and with less stress, it seems.”

She’d also noticed that she and her husband, who had always gotten along so well, now often squabbled. Finally, in classic ADHD inter-generational style, her daughter’s teacher mentioned a significant problem with daydreaming and disorganization; that prompted her husband to read up on ADHD, thus finding apt descriptions not only of his daughter’s but also his wife’s heretofore “quirky” behaviors.

“I think I’m a good mother, a very loving mother who truly enjoys her children,” she confided in me, “But I’m not the mom with the organized closets and the weekly meal plans. In fact, if you peeked in my closets, you’d think, ‘what is she, crazy?’”

Newly dumbfounded by the recent revelations about ADHD, she wasn’t quite ready to acknowledge that it might be a problem for her. She did admit, however, she was tired of expending so much energy to get through the simplest household tasks. “And I worry,” she added, “about how I’m going to help my daughter stay organized and work with the school on helping her.”

This mom has a good foundation for tackling her challenges as well as supporting her daughter’s school and social success—a supportive spouse, secure income, high intelligence, low defensiveness about her ADHD, and access to good resources. If she had chosen to ignore her challenges and those of her child, however, poor outcomes might be almost guaranteed.

As your child prepares for another school year, it might be time to re-assess how your own or your co-parent's ADHD symptoms might put the whammy on a successful school year (not to mention domestic happiness). Some questions to help you “connect the dots”:

- If you procrastinate and are always scrambling to meet last-minute deadlines, how can you teach a child to complete a school project on time?
- If you’re utterly disorganized, how can you help a disorganized child tame the chaos?
- If you’re hyperactive or impatient, how can you slow down enough to listen to your child -- or help a hyperactive/impatient child to slow down?
- If you’re a daydreamer, how will your child know your drifting away doesn’t mean he or she is boring or not cared for?
- If you can’t filter stimuli (noise, touch), how can you help a child deal with same?

"The evidence is dramatic and the message is clear: We need to treat the whole family, not just the child," says Andrea Chronis, Ph.D. University of Maryland, who has published several studies on the impact of parental ADHD on the family. "Too often the answer is just to give the children medication. But our study suggests that when there are problems in the family, you need to address those, too."

To help get you started, here are some tips for parents with ADHD:

- Optimize your own treatment for ADHD along with your child's.
- Develop a positive self-concept; if you complain about your own (or your partner's) ADHD challenges, your children will apply it to themselves.
- Forget the "I SHOULD be able/find to remember that." Write things down. Have a system.
- Use a large master calendar for the family.
- Post important messages on white board in central spot. Keep it simple. Family members check daily.
- Watch for "self-medicating" with too many after-school activities or passively going along with too many extended-family obligations. Allow plenty of downtime, independent play, and rest for everyone.
- Designate areas for important items: key racks, coat racks, backpacks
- Create simple daily routines; stick to them as much as possible. (Parents, that includes your bedtime!)
- Model good problem-solving attitudes around procrastination, overwhelm, and distractibility.

Finally, try to remind yourself:

- ADHD is not your fault.
- ADHD is not your child's fault.
- ADHD is not your partner's fault.
- ADHD is not an excuse to avoid facing and solving your family's problems.
- No one has a "perfect" family.
- Appreciate each other's unique contributions and personalities.
- Keep your sense of humor!

*Gina Pera is a popular speaker on Adult ADHD and author of the award-winning book *Is It You, Me, or Adult A.D.D.?*, a guide to understanding the wide-ranging aspects of Adult ADHD, especially as it affects relationships, and its evidence-based treatment strategies. She blogs at ADHDRollerCoaster.org*