

AD/HD and Issues for Adults  
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## Fatherhood and AD/HD

Of the many articles I have written over the years, the one that follows has received the most consistent emotional response from parents, particularly fathers. Parenting a child with AD/HD is extremely difficult, a challenge that at times creates a burning deep within our solar plexus which we feel can only be extinguished through a raging purge. As we know though, this only leaves the child feeling empty, inadequate and diminished.

I have been privileged to facilitate many workshops for fathers who parent sons with AD/HD. Many of these men also have AD/HD. Unlike their children though, they grew up receiving either the rage or dismissal of society. They were labeled lazy, bad, unmotivated or told they would never live up to their potential. What I tell the men attending these workshops is that their children can now use them as a guide. Becoming such a guide takes work along with a willingness to change long-held perspectives about self and the child.

I see in the eyes of these fathers, as I see in my own eyes when I look in the mirror, the pain that exists when we consider what our children go through. The pain is compounded when we are the last emotional line of defense for our child, and we leave them standing alone, unprotected and vulnerable. I also have witnessed the profound difference a father's understanding touch and hug can make in reassuring a child that he or she is loved, exactly as they are.

A child instinctively knows a mother will always love them - no matter what. As fathers, however, we must show such love every day to reassure our children that we will not physically or emotionally abandon them. A spoonful of touch and love a day can make all the difference between children who believe in their abilities and those who believe their abilities are flawed.

Fathers of children with AD/HD have a special calling: to stand with their children during times of emotional or behavioral difficulties, to give their children hope and courage, and to provide opportunities that encourage their children to define themselves by their strengths rather than their deficits. To do this, one must appreciate the experiences and struggles these children face each day and create a positive environment within the family that allows them to overcome such obstacles. Creating and maintaining a positive environment in the face of AD/HD and co-occurring conditions requires a conscientious and consistent shift in the father's perspective of himself and his child.

## Understanding Mutual Frustration

As a father, bear in mind that when you are frustrated with your child's behavior, your child is most likely feeling the same level of frustration. At such a moment, your son or daughter may be momentarily frozen in time, like a deer caught in headlights. The child's natural desire to please and conform is overshadowed by an emotional state well beyond their control. With each demand for the child to 'snap out of it,' or an indication that he/she is a disappointment, the pain sinks deeper and the headlights brighten.

Averting this type of downward spiral is no easy task, one requiring a shift in the father's experience of the situation. Fathers know there are times when a child loses control. This loss of control is not purposeful - it is directly related to one's inability to hold it together internally. Anticipating this downward spiral will help you identify in advance how you want to respond to the emotional upheaval. This requires consciously talking yourself through the steps of what you want to do and how you want to respond. This is particularly important for fathers who generally meet the child's aggression and out-of-control behavior with their own. Training yourself to ignore impulsive or inappropriate behavior requires an understanding of what your child can and can't control. If you continue to reinforce positive movements toward success, your child will begin to define himself as a success!

## Creating A Self-Disciplined Child

What is the connection between disciplining a child and a child's learning self-discipline? There is a direct link between the way children are disciplined and the degree to which they assume responsibility for their own actions and behaviors. Disciplining a child, especially a child with AD/HD, is made more complicated by our own emotional response to what we consider misbehaving or other social improprieties. The more emotionally consumed we become by our children's behavior, the more likely we are to utilize ineffective or inappropriate disciplining strategies, such as hitting, screaming, threatening, bullying, or withdrawing love and attention. When we lead with our emotions, the outcome is typically less than desirable, perhaps even regrettable.

How we choose to discipline our children is one of the most fundamental aspects of raising a child with AD/HD.

As noted by one father:

I used to be a lot stricter with my son. I'd treat him like a normal kid, meaning that I really didn't take into account that he had difficulty processing information or following directions. I would keep harping on him and trying to make him act like any other kid his age. I've come to learn that is not him, that he is not like many of his friends. In some ways he demonstrates more control. I attribute this to the work we have been doing to create more consistency in our home, and to reduce getting too emotionally attached to the issue. It is not that he doesn't want to do things, it's just that he can't always do things the way others want or expect.

An essential aspect of learning how to discipline your child effectively is understanding what he or she is personally capable of doing and when he/she is most able to do it. A child with AD/HD needs to lean upon the father during times when he

cannot hold it together himself. If you are angry, upset or out of control your-self, you cannot provide the type of emotional support and discipline necessary to resolve the problem.

A child with AD/HD needing his father's support is akin to a person with a broken foot needing a crutch. The crutch is not permanent. However, in order to feel comfortable continuing with daily duties, one needs the broken foot and crutch to work together to minimize discomfort.

As the child with AD/HD matures, he will need his father less for support, and more as an important sounding board and resource. Children with AD/HD yearn for resolution in a healthy manner, especially when they see themselves as the source of the problem.

## Practicing Calm Discipline

The practice of remaining calm with our children who have AD/HD and establishing effective methods of discipline are fraternal twins. Remaining calm and consistently disciplining inappropriate behavior produces a child who understands and takes responsibility for his or her own actions and behaviors.

The father of a nine-year-old boy gives us this clear example: I don't think the way I deal with Marty now at all resembles the way I used to treat him. I used to think he was just a spoiled little kid who wouldn't stop until he got his way. If he didn't get his way, he would say things like, 'I hate you,' or mumble derogatory comments under his breath. I would literally chase him up the stairs and around the house just so I could scream in his face.

I think after he was diagnosed with AD/HD and we put him on medication, I believed he was going to stop a lot of the [awful] behavior that drove me and my wife nuts. At that time, I didn't realize that a change in him hinged on a change in us, especially in me, because my wife was much more tolerant and forgiving of his behavior. The fact that he was on medication and still acting out made me even angrier.

I didn't know how to make him act like he was supposed to. Even though my wife said I should look at how I reacted to Pete, it had very little effect on how I treated him. Believe it or not, things began to change for me after I read an article in one of my wife's magazines on disciplining your child. After reading it, I was shocked at how I basically did everything to ensure that Pete was not developing self-control and self-discipline. The screaming and punishment tactics I used only made him feel more helpless and out of control.

Shortly after, I read another article about AD/HD. It helped me understand what is going on inside Pete's mind and body. I suppose I became more sensitive to what he was going through. I began doing more reading about how to help him when he was out of control. I rarely yell anymore. I let him know what is expected of him and what needs

to happen in order for him to do what he wants. I think my not yelling and being on an even keel has made a positive impression on him. I see him as much more responsible and better able to listen.

This was the gist of the article: Don't get excited about what your child does, be clear about expectations, be clear about family rules, and be clear about what the family limits are regarding certain behaviors and choices. The most counterproductive thing you can do is scream or hit your kid. This definitely makes the kid shrink from taking responsibility for what he did.

## The Parenting Paradox

When a father becomes accepting of his child's behavior, an interesting paradox occurs: the problematic behavior diminishes in frequency, intensity and duration. This does not mean that you accept the inappropriate behavior. Rather, you accept your child for who he or she is and for what he or she can and cannot do at that given time. This does not mean that AD/HD is or can be used as an excuse for acting out or engaging in disrespectful behaviors. We can and must hold our children accountable for their behavior while still maintaining a position of love and support. One father described how changing his attitude toward his son changed the relationship: When Paul is off his medication and his emotions are swirling all around, if I say something that irritates him, which isn't hard to do, he'll immediately say something like 'shut up' or 'get out of my face.' It took me a while to accept the fact that this is his impulsive side showing. In the moment he really can't control what he is saying. When he is on medication, that type of response is very rare. I also respond to it differently now, so he doesn't hang on to the negative feeling. I can tell he wants to say or do something different, but this surge happens and he blurts out this stuff. Since my attitude has changed, the more negative impulsive responses happen less frequently.

Following is a wonderful example of how even the most difficult AD/HD temperament can respond positively to sound parental structure and ongoing support: I have seen Quint use many of the techniques and strategies that my wife and I have used with him over the years. If he is getting too aggressive or angry, he pulls himself temporarily out of the situation to cool down, focus and figure out what exactly is going on and how he is contributing to the problem. We are starting to see the results of years of working with him, modeling for him, and standing by him. When he was first diagnosed at age four, he was aggressive, agitated and difficult to control. Now at age eight, he still has his down moments, but it is nothing compared to what it was. I see Quint as a happy and self-confident young boy. Because he was so disruptive at an early age, it would have been easy to be angry and disapproving. But with guidance, talking with other parents and professional help, Quint is, and is going to be, fine. Each day he learns to cope with AD/HD more effectively.

Parenting calls us to a level of responsibility unparalleled in any other area of our lives. Our children are more than an extension of us: they represent all the possibilities and potential the world has to offer. They have the opportunity to exceed our

expectations and to excel in ways unprecedented. We place enormous responsibility on our children to succeed, make good choices, establish sound values and be good citizens. We often expect them to capitalize on opportunities we failed to or were unable to, and to construct a magnificent staircase carrying them, and by extension us, to our individual success. We want them to heal our historical wounds. In reality, however, our children must battle the same battles we fought, feel the same disappointments we felt, and learn the way we did in order to make sense out of an unpredictable world.

When your child has you as a guiding force, he does not have to face the world entirely alone. While our children may offer us an opportunity to heal, what they definitely offer us is the chance to live honestly, demonstrate integrity, model forgiveness and show compassion. We can give our children the things, emotional and physical, we did not get. But, as many parents have learned over time, it is much easier to provide physical comforts than the emotional comfort we may not have received ourselves. Fathers especially must push against both gender and social stereotypes in order to provide their children, and especially their sons with AD/HD, with the level of emotional sustenance they need.

## Raising A Resilient Child

Children with AD/HD are incredibly resilient, resourceful and determined. Even in the face of disappointed parents and disillusioned teachers, these kids try to hang on and 'do better next time.' Children who do not receive the support, empathy and care that they need will eventually break under the weight of years of negative criticism and failed attempts at improvement. One father described his son's desire to fit in and do well:

I know Bret wants to control himself and fit in. I can just tell. But once things start going badly for him, he becomes more frustrated and has an even harder time. He doesn't give up, though. I know he is trying to pull things back on track. And he knows I am supporting him in doing his best at the moment. I sometimes think of myself as his 'emotional airbag.' I know the way I deal with him makes him feel safer and better able to get things back together. I want him to walk away from a bad episode knowing that he is OK, and that he can handle his frustration rather than it handling him.

The following can be seen as a metaphor for personal resiliency and emotional fortitude:

One day a mule fell into a dry well. There was no way to lift the mule out, so the farmer directed his boys to bury the mule in the well. But the mule refused to be buried. As the boys threw dirt on the mule, it simply trampled the dirt. Very soon, enough had been thrown into the well that the mule walked out.

That which was intended to bury the mule was the very means by which it rose. This story speaks as much to the experience of parents of children with AD/HD as it does to that of the children themselves. As parents, we sometimes feel like we are being 'buried alive' by all the problems caused by AD/HD. It is not that our children intend to smother

us; rather, the symptoms emerging from the AD/HD are themselves suffocating to both the parent and the child.

Like the mule, a surprising number of children with AD/HD refuse to be emotionally buried by negative feedback, parental disapproval, isolation and academic difficulty. Somehow these children walk into their adult lives making significant contributions to their communities and chosen vocations. It is believed that these children often had at least one person who unconditionally believed in them and supported the competent and capable side of their personality. It is amazing what one person, especially a father, can do to ensure a child's success. The following story demonstrates this point.

Before Chris was diagnosed and medicated, I would go ballistic if he disobeyed, talked back or caused problems. I became so aggravated that I just would lose it. This in turn sent him even deeper into a spiral of defiance. The louder he got, the louder I got, and so forth.

There was tremendous stress and tension in the house. Since I have learned more about AD/HD and realize my previous way of dealing with Chris was, at best, ineffective, I now deal with him in a different way. If he starts spiraling out of control, I reduce my negativity and greet his intensity with calmness and reason. The change in his behavior in response to my demeanor is remarkable. There is very little tension in the house, and if he does something really inappropriate, I calmly send him to a time-out. The evening is now different and productive, especially when he feels overwhelmed by his emotions.

Children with disabilities, whether emotional or physical, can often overcome sizable odds if they know a parent believes in them. Like a chameleon who takes on the color of its environment as a form of protection against danger, children with AD/HD often take on the attitudes and beliefs of their parents. Children define themselves by how they are defined. If they perceive that they are 'bad,' a 'waste of time,' 'worthless' or only tolerated, they begin living out this belief by seeking out negative experiences. On the other hand, when a child feels loved, even when he doesn't feel particularly loved, he experiences a sense of redemption and hope.

## Reference

-Voices From Fatherhood: Fathers, Sons and AD/HD' by Patrick Kilcarr, Ph.D. and Patricia Quinn, M.D., 1998 Brunner/Mazel Publications, Inc.