

Mary Matalin

Talks about Life with Two Kids, a Democrat, and AD/HD

by Bryan Goodman, MA

MARY MATALIN, ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL POLITICAL CONSULTANTS IN THE COUNTRY, served as the deputy campaign manager for President George H.W. Bush, assistant to President George W. Bush, and counselor to Vice President Dick Cheney. In addition to making numerous appearances on network television, Matalin coauthored with her husband, Democratic political strategist James Carville, a book titled *All's Fair: Love, War and Running for President* (Simon & Schuster, 1995). What is not widely known is the Matalin-Carville family's experience with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Now living in her husband's home state of Louisiana, Matalin took time away from her busy schedule to talk with CHADD's Bryan Goodman about her own symptoms, living with a husband who has the disorder, and parenting two daughters, thirteen-year-old Matty and eleven-year-old Emma—both of whom have learning differences.

I had a wonderful conversation with your husband recently about his AD/HD. While he didn't mind talking about his personal experience, he said he would be more comfortable if you talked about your daughter's AD/HD. Now, you have two daughters, Emma and Matty, but it's Matty who has AD/HD, right?

It is a tricky thing—it is very nonspecific. I wouldn't say AD/HD. I think that is the diagnosis with which we started. People need to understand that there is a variety of processing issues that impact kids with learning differences. Nothing fits neatly. Both of my daughters are off the chart when it comes to language and creativity, and below the chart on math. When I got them into a learning environment that could address their math deficits, they were able to progress, and they are now in advanced math. Everyone has a different way of learning. I think this is a different issue than AD/HD, but that was the diagnosis early on. Matty was placed on stimulant medication, which helped her focus. She was going to Commonwealth Academy in Alexandria, Virginia, which focused on learning differences. The teachers there were zeroing in on her processing issues, and the classroom size was small.

It sounds as though you don't label it; you view learning differences as something needing accommodation. Perhaps those differences are a little AD/HD, perhaps they are a little of something else, but parents have to try different things and have to find

the right accommodations, the right kind of classroom setting for their kids.

I would only add that someone should try different things at different times. What works in fifth grade is not going to work in seventh grade. You have to stay on top of it. All things come down to parents, but of course you couldn't do it without great teachers. And not just great teachers, but perceptive teachers. We did not know that Matty was eighty percent blind until her kindergarten teacher said she was too tired all the time. We just thought she was clumsy—but she couldn't see.

What was it about the educational experience at Commonwealth that worked for Matty?

When she saw how to focus, I don't know whether it was the chicken or the egg, either that helped or was happening in conjunction with teachers who were zeroing in on her particular processing issues. The teachers' working with each kid as an individual, no matter what their differences were, in this small class of seven kids, was the key. They all had organizational issues.

I took Matty to Commonwealth when she was going into middle school. I had her retested, and the doctor we went to was so very thorough and so very good and so very understandable to me. I asked him, "How can we help her with all this stuff?" He said there are various strategies. You can do cards, you can do notebooks, you can—he listed like twelve practical things. You can orient her room this way. You can move her desk to this place. I said there must be people who do this. Can I hire somebody who is like an executive skills set—an organizer like Closets by Design? He asked whether I'd ever heard of the Commonwealth School.

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James Carville, Mary Matalin, and daughters Emma and Matty pose in front of a vibrant family portrait by Russian artist Victor Razgulín in their home in Alexandria, Virginia.

So we went over there. It was a miracle, an absolute miracle, because the thing they do helps every kid, I don't care where they are on the continuum. Everything is very visual—the schedules, for example, and every class is in a different colored notebook. It is very structured to the way that these kids learn; again, no matter where they are on the continuum. Every class is like that.

Since we have been in New Orleans, I have been going to schools where the kids may or may not have processing issues, but there are so

many other issues—from poverty to social disorder to post-traumatic stress disorder from Katrina. There are so many issues that you don't even know what you are dealing with. But the thing that works in every case, what makes a difference in every place, in every kid every time, is dealing with them one at a time. And reinforcing it continually. If they get out of line, they have to get back into line. If they are not using good grammar, you have to correct their sentences. You cannot let it go, you just have to develop habits. It is the immediacy of it.

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Is Matty still at Commonwealth?

She is in an all-girls Catholic school in Louisiana. It's traditional. It is memorization. It is repetition. It is grammar that makes no sense. She has shed more tears over dangling participles than she has over boys. On the other hand, she knows every Greek god, every Roman god, and every saint. Her ability to function in a hyper-traditional learning environment by virtue of taking two years off to attend Commonwealth and figure out how her brain works is phenomenal.

What about your other daughter, Emma?

Describe her learning style.

She is really, really creative. Matty was taking high school writing in third grade, and Emma was doing graphic design and clothing design and dressing me, putting my outfits together: jewelry, shoes, scarves, whatever, and helping me with my interior design. Now, if you sit her in a math class and make her do her multiplication tables, she really gets mad about it. Matty would just get frustrated. But Emma is different from Matty. Kids are very different, even when they are in the same family. This one has to do yoga, this one is very physical, and so on and so forth. Once you scratch their itch, they take off and they have a natural instinct to self-monitor.

Your husband, James Carville, also has AD/HD.

In fact, you are the one who suggested that he seek an evaluation. Would you mind talking about your experience living with a spouse who has AD/HD?

My sister, who has several master's degrees in special education, taught me the one thing that is missing in adult AD/HD is social cues, and the behaviors that seem inappropriate are learned or unlearned. You can change it. So many things that would cause issues, he didn't realize he was doing. For instance, he would pick up the phone while I was talking to him. I would think: Is he hearing me? But he would know what I was saying. He can talk on the phone and listen to me at the same time. But any normal human being you talk to would be offended if somebody picked up the phone while you're talking to them. After watching this one afternoon, my sister encouraged me to tell James that his behavior was bothering me. When I was learning about the symptoms of AD/HD after Matty's diagnosis, I saw these characteristics in my husband, which really helped me better understand him. Now I just think, okay, you are having an AD/HD moment.

So how do you deal with it?

Now I know not to talk to him before he runs. He has to run. That is his medicine. Or he has to eat when he has to eat and sleep when he needs to sleep. I don't want to say he self-medicates, but for sixty-five years he has not only dealt with this but channeled what used to be considered an ailment into huge creativity. The smartest people I know all have some form of AD/HD. The key to functioning is you have to march to the beat of your own drummer, and that is an important thing for parents to let their kids know.

Do you have any of the symptoms of AD/HD?

I am hyperactive. I don't know if I am inattentive. I am on the spectrum somewhere. It is no coincidence that James and I separately ended up on political campaigns. One of the driving forces, if you will, about AD/HD is the necessity of constant stimulation. I don't know if there is some chemical release. I am better now that I am older, and I run and do a lot of other things, but there was a time when I could not focus unless I was in a crisis situation and under the gun. That is why I can do TV.

And then you hyperfocus?

Yes. Campaigns are just a constant hyperfocus. TV is a hyperfocus. But I can go to the other end, too. I can read a book for a thousand years. James can read, but he has to read a thousand things, and he reads really fast. Matty is on my side. Maybe it is a girl/boy thing. She and I can sit and read for hours on end and never twitch.

You have worked for presidents and vice presidents.

Do chief executives tend to have some of the characteristics of AD/HD, or do they tend to be more focused?

Everybody is on a different continuum. I think the ones who are super-creative cannot be successful unless somebody is channeling them. That would be like Newt Gingrich or Bill Clinton. Someone has to say, "This meeting cannot go on for ten hours. I know you have a hundred good ideas, but let's just take the top ten." What is brilliant about them is that they know that they need to channel their brilliance.

Hillary Clinton is someone who could do that.

She was very focused as first lady. She was very much caught up in the minutiae, and President Clinton was more of a global thinker. He certainly found someone who complemented him in that way.

Yes, but she is not his secretary. I know that is not what you are saying, but...

No, definitely not...

Having worked with her, I can tell you that she is a global thinker herself. But somebody has to have her feet on the ground and somebody has to have his head in the clouds. Jimmy Carter was a really organized guy but, by any measure, a terrible president. Different times call for different things. Sometimes you just need order *über alles*, but then you need to be paired up with some creative person saying, "Did you think of this?" The one thing we don't teach is that you've got to respect what everybody brings to the table, and I think corporations are kind of ahead of the curve on this. It is like things your parents said: Look somebody in the eye, give a firm handshake, be confident, blah, blah, blah. All the lists: You are your own special angel, all that kind of stuff. Well, little did they know they were all treating what now has a name. ●