

Disclosure Can Be an Opportunity

by Melinda McNaughton

“If only the people around us knew that he has AD/HD. And if only they understood the complexity of living with AD/HD and the challenges we face because of it.” How many times have you had these thoughts? Simply telling someone that you or your child has AD/HD doesn't mean that you will be offered a comforting smile with a “how can I help?” response.

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I can't count the number of times, with an almost naive hope for understanding, I would share with someone that my son has AD/HD. Often the reaction I got would leave me with a sense of the proverbial bubble being burst. I thought that if I was open about our “situation,” surely people would understand, maybe even be supportive of my painstaking efforts to help my son. The disappointing reactions stemmed from countless misconceptions of AD/HD. Sometimes no words were uttered, but the expression on the person's face said enough: *“There's no such thing as AD/HD! It's simply a feeble excuse for laziness or poor parenting.”*

Deciding whether or not to disclose AD/HD is sometimes a very simple choice. Sometimes it is an arduous decision, however, with a number of potential outcomes to consider. Through discussions with many friends and acquaintances, I realized that choosing to disclose this very personal issue may not only help to ensure a more accommodating environment but could also be an opportunity to educate someone or even diminish the stigma associated with the disorder. Disclosure should be a thoughtful decision for each individual and every scenario.

Whenever I've debated (with myself) whether or not to opt for disclosing that AD/HD is part of our lives, the same questions would swirl through my mind: *How can I articulate effectively what it means to have AD/HD? Will I be able to stomach another blank stare from the person I'm trying to connect with? At what point do I volunteer this information? Should I incorporate it into my introduction, as in “Hi, I'm*

Melinda. My son has AD/HD.” My answers varied, depending on the situation. There have even been moments when evaluating whether or not to disclose was a luxury. Those were times when I wasn't even sure what had just happened, but emotions were definitely running high.

On the playground

Some of my first experiences with disclosure took place at Blake's preschool. On most days, after school was out, many kids would play on the playground. It was a good time for the children to run about and burn off some steam. It also allowed time for parents to talk and enjoy some grown-up conversation. I never actually participated in these discussions from beginning to end. I was too busy watching Blake, mostly from close proximity. At that point in our AD/HD journey, I had graduated from shadowing him to loosening up the reins. I could still see every move he made, but I didn't need to be an arm's length away. I usually knew more about the topics of discussion among the four-year-olds than those among the adults.

Early in the school year I had disclosed Blake's AD/HD to two mothers of boys in Blake's class. This had been a successful attempt to obtain support and patience when Blake was struggling socially. One result of my choice to divulge Blake's AD/HD took me by surprise- a wonderful surprise! Along with the moral support these moms offered, they helped me by being aware of any potential problems. You could say they were the eyes in the back of my head. If a situation was becoming volatile and I wasn't right there, they would step in. Their assistance meant much more to me than having a couple of pairs of extra eyes. They also understood why I wasn't a social butterfly

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chit-chatting with the other parents. Simply put, I was touched. Their efforts lessened the sting of battling AD/HD.

One afternoon Blake seemed to be meshing well with the other kids. Feeling a bit more confident of his ability to manage his interactions, I decided it was a good time to join in a conversation with some moms standing nearby. I was sure they had labeled me the antisocial mom and I was excited to show them otherwise. I was in mid-sentence as I heard an angry voice coming from the area where Blake had been. When I turned to see what had happened, I saw a woman yelling at Blake. I quickly headed that way.

By the time I reached the furious mom and Blake, I felt my heart racing and my palms sweating. As calmly as possible, I said I was Blake's mom and asked what had happened. She began screaming at me. I was so stunned, I'm not even sure of the words she shouted, but they pertained to an incident that resulted in Blake pushing her son. I do remember the feeling of my jaw dropping—literally. I stood with my mouth open as this complete stranger verbally attacked me. Only one bystander tried to defend me—Blake. In a desperate attempt to help his mom, Blake grabbed a handful of wood chips from the ground and threw it at her legs. She turned toward him, waved her finger in his face, and screamed, "Don't you dare throw anything at me! You DO NOT disrespect an adult like that!"

Her tirade left me speechless. I thought I had developed a shield of armor from the exclusions from play dates and countless scowls aimed toward me over the years, but this attack revealed that my "shield" was terribly ineffective. The worst part wasn't how upset I was but that Blake was watching and blamed himself for my tears. After that day, I asked myself what I should have said to this woman. A couple of weeks passed before I saw this mom again. She came up to me and made a poor attempt to apologize. I calmly told her that I was happy her son hadn't been hurt that day. I told her that at times it was incredibly difficult for Blake to control his impulsiveness. I also chose to share that Blake has AD/HD



Melinda McNaughton and her son Blake.

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and that we have both worked diligently to improve the issues he faces. I closed by adding, "The truth is—that day *you* behaved much worse than did my four-year-old son."

Teaching disclosure

In discussions with other parents of children with AD/HD, I've found an overwhelming consensus in favor of sharing with schools and teachers. And I've found that the more details I can offer about my son, the better.

Whenever he enters a new classroom, I communicate very openly with his new teacher. Informing a teacher that your child has AD/HD is one thing, but giving a detailed account of his strengths and weaknesses can help create a more successful experience. I ask myself, "What is the most effective way to motivate my child? What is the one most crucial element for my child to be successful in the classroom?" The most important piece for my son is to have a trusting relationship with his teacher. As long as he trusts his teacher and feels his trust is reciprocated, he will strive to please.

I was struck by something another parent told me while discussing his approach to talking to others about his child's AD/HD. "Because we have been so open and transparent about our daughter's AD/HD, we've taught her that there is nothing wrong with having AD/HD." What a wonderful mentality to show your child!

My son has a resource specialist at his school, a teacher who works with him on his IEP goals outside his general education classroom. Once a day Blake leaves his "regular" classroom and spends time with her in her classroom. Of course, other kids see this

and become curious. The resource specialist encourages her students to answer any questions or comments from the other kids by saying, “Everybody needs different things to learn. For me it’s being in this class sometimes. For someone else it may be wearing glasses or even just sitting in the front row of class.” If a child understands what AD/HD is for him, it doesn’t mean he will feel inferior or incapable. The result is just the opposite. Being open with a child about AD/HD will clarify and answer questions he has had about feeling “different” from others. Instead of speculating that there’s something wrong with him, he will be reassured that everyone has different needs—and that is *normal*.

In the workplace

Since AD/HD is a lifespan disorder, disclosure remains an issue beyond the days of school and playgrounds. A friend who has AD/HD told me about an experience he had in the workplace. He is a bright, articulate, driven 27-year-old whose AD/HD struggles include organization and time management. Getting to work on

time, or getting anywhere on time, had always been a weakness for him. Despite his absolute genuine attempts, he was consistently arriving five to fifteen minutes late. His boss wrote him up, saying his tardy arrivals needed to end. The next time it happened, he would be given an unpaid suspension.

My friend felt ashamed and incompetent. He began to have anxiety about arriving to work not one minute late. For a couple of weeks he was able to avoid distractions that would normally make him lose track of time. His anxiety level, as well as the shame he felt, were beginning to decrease. But then one day he started driving to work with just enough time to ensure he wouldn’t be late. Or so he thought, until he looked at his gas gauge. He had forgotten that his gas tank was on empty. His heart dropped as his panic-filled mind began to race. If he stopped to get gas, he would be late. If he didn’t stop, he might run out before he made it to work. He finally decided to stop. While filling up his car, he called work and told the receptionist he would be five minutes late.

When he arrived at work, his boss asked him to come back to his office. As they sat down, his boss asked if he remembered their last discussion. My friend blurted out, “I have AD/HD.” He explained that his late arrivals weren’t due to a lack of respect but because planning out time is very difficult for him. Although his boss seemed a bit reluctant to hear him out, they discussed an action plan. My friend still needed to be to work on time; however, they agreed that if he was running late he could at least call the office to let them know. As long as it didn’t become a common occurrence, he wouldn’t receive any further corrective action.

When I think of disclosure, I think of educating people about AD/HD, destigmatizing the disorder, and generating tolerance. These are some very important byproducts of talking about all that AD/HD entails. There is no shame in saying, “I have AD/HD.” Perhaps with this approach we can diminish the negative and inaccurate perceptions many of us have faced. What a wonderful opportunity! 🗣️