

MOTHER, DAUGHTER,  
GRANDDAUGHTER:  
THREE GENERATIONS  
IN ONE FAMILY  
TALK ABOUT LIFE  
WITH AD/HD

by Bryan Goodman, MA

# Family TIES

Many people can tell you about their own experience with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. But for Joan Teach of Atlanta, Georgia, AD/HD is a family experience, affecting at least three generations. Teach has the disorder. So does her daughter, Danette, and granddaughter Bevin. And we won't even talk about the men in the family.

The Teach women have stories that are at turns sad, triumphant, and inspiring—the things of which books are made. Their stories offer a multidimensional view of the disorder through the eyes of three people with varying educational backgrounds, interests, and personalities. There's Joan, who comes across more like a favorite aunt than a grandmother. There is Danette, who is very direct: What you see is what you get. Then there is little Bevin, who has the dazzling personality of a child star. All three deal with one disorder that has at times presented each of them with incredible obstacles that they still struggle with to this day.

#### A gift like no other

Joan, now 69 years old, remembers taking a call from a doctor at the local emergency room on her birthday in 1966.

A young woman had walked into the hospital after seven the night before, given birth to a baby girl, and left the facility before seven the next morning, leaving the baby behind. Suddenly, Teach had one of the best birthday presents of her life: Danette. She also had her work cut out for her.

The doctor was clear. There had been no prenatal care. “He told us that we needed to take her home and start working with her right away,” she explains. Teach wasn't new to adoption, as she had already adopted a son. (Years later she would adopt twins.) But at the time, Teach was juggling career and family. Little did she know how intertwined the two would become.

#### Learning about AD/HD

At the time, Teach was working at the Achievement Center for Special Needs at Purdue University, under the tutelage of Newell Kephart, PhD, who wrote *The Slow Learner in the Classroom*. She explains that many of the students at the center had AD/HD, though no one really knew it at the time. “They were labeled, at the time, as slow learners. But in reality they had AD/HD. They were your original wiggly wigglers,” she says with affection.

While at the center, Teach was seeing some similarities between herself and the children with whom she worked. While she is well educated, holding a doctorate, her achievements came after years of struggling. “I was bright. I had good grades, but no one realized that I would lock myself in my room and study all

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Joan Teach with daughter Danette, granddaughter Bevin and grandson Jared.

# Family

night because I have no short-term memory,” she says.

Her work with Dr. Kephart helped her better understand herself. She recalls feedback he provided that she considers her first real clue about her own AD/HD. “Every time I would be concerned with working with a child, Dr. Kephart would say, ‘Well, Joanie, think about how you would do it, because you don’t operate like everyone else,’” she said. Her official diagnosis would come years later, as Teach and the rest of society developed a better understanding of the disorder.

## The first evaluation

In the meantime, young Danette was experiencing many problems. She had difficulty swallowing, and her speech and language were delayed. Her ability to put sentences together and explain herself was highly delayed, according to Teach. She attended preschool at a church nursery school, where she was not socializing with the other children. By kindergarten, the Teaches had moved to Atlanta, where Danette would have her first evaluation.

“The response was that she was environmentally deprived,” Teach explains. “They explained that we should begin to read to her and begin to bring books and magazines into the home. We should expose her to more culture in the environment.”

Teach, who at the time was working on a doctoral dissertation about language acquisition of children with learning disabilities, knew the information was not accurate. “I said, ‘Perhaps it’s a language processing disorder.’ The person doing the evaluation said, ‘Maybe that’s the case. Let me look again.’ I almost laughed at him.”

Teach says her daughter was a classic child with inattentive AD/HD and a co-occurring language-based learning disability who didn’t make waves in the classroom. Danette was later placed in a self-contained classroom that Teach says was good because she received one-on-one assistance for the duration of the time she was in school.

Teach explains that, like so many children with AD/HD, Danette’s self-esteem suffered because of her struggles with the disorder. “You can feel the struggles and that’s painful, and then you see the gifts and that’s hopeful, because you see that there are many things that this child can do. That gives you a lot of hope for the future.”

Danette dropped out of high school in tenth grade, earned her GED several years later, and went to college ten years after that. By that time, there was a better understanding of AD/HD among educators. At her mother’s urging, Danette was evaluated and diagnosed with the disorder. She began treatment, and her grades shot up.

Then, with only one credit hour left until graduation, Danette dropped out to begin a family.

Her son Jared was born, followed soon after by her daughter Bevin. Danette, who now lives in rural Georgia, saw a lot of herself in Bevin. “We diagnosed her with AD/HD the day she came out screaming,” Danette says jokingly.

## A third generation

Recently, Bevin, now seven years old, was evaluated and diagnosed with AD/HD. Danette sees her daughter going through the same things she did. But while Danette and her mother struggled with a society that, at the time, knew little about AD/HD, Bevin is up against a small-town school system that at times is resistant to change.

Danette and her mother, who visits frequently from Atlanta, try to help educators and other parents in the community. “Teachers don’t want to go above and beyond,” explains Danette. “I am bringing my mother down here to snap them in gear.”

A great deal of their time is spent with Bevin, who struggles with self-esteem issues. “She wants to read so much, but she struggles so badly. There are multiplication tests, and she doesn’t pass them,” explains Danette. “She runs around saying she’s stupid all the time.” Danette says the family will begin treating Bevin with medication, while seeking accommodations through an Individualized Education Plan.

Like her mother and grandmother, Bevin is learning already how hard the world can be when the odds are stacked against you. After Bevin talks about the difficulty of remembering her homework, reading big words, and seeing how frustrated her teachers can get with her, she then turns to the real hurtful aspect of feeling different: the rebuke of her peers. “Other kids... they are mean to me sometimes,” she says. “When I ask them to play with me, they won’t. They just walk away and don’t say anything. It makes me feel really upset and sad.”

Mention her grandmother, and Bevin’s voice suddenly grows stronger. “Sometimes we cook together,” she says fondly. “I help her cook.” The grandmother, whose steel was tempered by coming of age in a society that didn’t understand AD/HD, stands over her beloved granddaughter, who is just beginning to learn the ways to cope with her own AD/HD. While one spent countless nights locked in her room studying the night away just to make it, the other faces the unkindness of her peers and teachers and a lifetime of challenges. But for a few hours all of that doesn’t matter. They lock the problems of the world outside and enjoy being together in grandmother’s warm and loving kitchen. **A**