

Helping the Siblings of Children with ADHD

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I would like to acknowledge the inspiration of Nancy Hester, who wrote and spoke about helping siblings of ADHD children over a decade ago. Some of my ideas are based upon her article in Attention, February, 2003, and her talks at our CHADD of Eastern Oakland County, Michigan chapter.

Imagine.....

Imagine that there is an alien living in your home. He looks like a human, often acts like a human, but sometimes unpredictably flies into a rage of hatred and attacks you, knocking you down and punching you out. Other times you come home and find money missing, maybe a few coins or maybe \$100. Occasionally,

Alien....

you come home and find that he totally trashed your room or destroyed your computer.

You are powerless to change the situation. If you tell anyone, the alien either magically makes them disbelieve you or he attacks you further.

You have to live this way day after

Alien...

day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. *How would you feel?*

This is the way many of the siblings of our children and adolescents with ADHD feel. They are stuck living with a unpredictable time bomb—could be nice or fun, or aggressive, cruel, and destructive.

You know that parenting a child with ADHD is exhausting. But we are adults. Being the sibling of a child with ADHD can be very challenging and stressful. Remember, the siblings are children and don't have the same coping resources that we do as adults.

Impacts of a Child with ADHD on Siblings

- Strong anger, jealousy, & sadness over the loss of parental attention
- Disappointment over repeated disruptions of family activities
- Living in a household in a chronic state of chaos, frustration, and anger
- Destruction, stealing of possessions, invasion of privacy

Impacts 2

- Physical aggression, bullying, and teasing
- Strain on friends because they don't want to be around the sibling with ADHD
- Worry about the sibling with ADHD
- Worry about the health, mental health of parents
- Public embarrassment, humiliation because of behavior of sibling with ADHD
- Sense of security severely disrupted

Note that it isn't always this bad. Many of our children with ADHD, especially those with the Inattentive Presentation, are mainly spacey and "out to lunch," not mean and aggressive. They can be loving and kind. It is those with Combined Presentation and comorbid ODD/ CD/ or Mood Disorders who are the most difficult to their siblings

Helping the Non-ADHD Sibling Cope: An Overview

- Acknowledge and validate feelings
- Show empathy
- Explain the ABCs of ADHD
- Evaluate your expectations of the sibling relationship
- Help your child develop coping strategies
- Make your home user-friendly

Overview 2

- Redefine family outings
- Be fair with positive incentives
- Play to each child's talents/ strengths
- Seek and welcome external support
- Celebrate positive coping
- *Be developmentally appropriate. Helping a 6 year old is different than a 10, 12, 14, or 17 year old.*

Acknowledge & Validate

- Acknowledge & validate your child's feelings
- Let them talk about life with a sibling with ADHD
- Use open ended questions to encourage voicing hurt, anger, fears, hatred, disgust, even love
- Validate: tell them you accept their feelings, however strong they are
- Don't jump in to defend the sibling with ADHD
- Just listen and accept

Show Empathy

- Try to see things from your child's perspective
- How must your child feel, day after day, living with all the impacts of having an ADHD sibling
- Check out the accuracy of your suppositions
- Indicate that you truly understand
- When your child is upset because of a particular incident, be empathetic about it, then indicate what you will do to fix the problem

Ask for Input

- Ask how you can make things easier for them to live with their sibling with ADHD
- Be receptive to their ideas
- If your child needs you to stop aggressive behavior or teasing, offer a specific plan
- Act immediately
- Follow through consistently on your plan
- Insure your child's safety

Explain the ABCs of ADHD

- Explain the symptoms of ADHD as they apply to your child
- Explain ADHD as an inherited disorder based on brain chemistry
- Make sure your child understands that s/he is not the cause of the sibling's ADHD
- Describe how medication helps
- Enlist your child in judging whether it is working

Explain ABCs

- Explain other things you are doing to help the sibling with ADHD- therapy, educational interventions, CHADD, etc.
- Invite the non-ADHD sibling to participate in family therapy sessions focused on sibling relationships
- Encourage appropriate attributions: *“She can’t do her homework because her brain won’t let her concentrate”* rather than *“She is just lazy.”*

Realistic Expectations

- You need to develop realistic expectations for the sibling relationship
- Do you insist that your children be friends at all costs?
- Do you expect the child without ADHD to be the “peacemaker” who always gives in to a coercive sibling with ADHD?
- Do you expect the child without ADHD to behave perfectly?

Realistic Expectations- 2

- Do you expect your child with ADHD to treat his/her brother or sister nicely all the time?
- Are all family members held to the same standard?
- Or is the child with ADHD held to a lower standard?
- *Adjust unrealistic expectations*

Develop Strategies

- Help your child without ADHD develop strategies for specific problems with the sibling with ADHD
- Sibling aggression, teasing, meltdown, destruction of property: Discuss and rehearse ways for the child without ADHD to respond.
- Physical aggression: tell you or another adult, leave the room, call 911, talk him/her down, but don't fight back

Strategies 2

- Ridicule: Verbal retorts, ignore, tease back, tell you or another adult
- Anticipate & avoid aggression. Horseplay often leads to someone getting hurt because the sibling with ADHD can't stop
- Don't engage in horseplay or stop after a short while
- Teach child not to provoke the sibling with ADHD. They often provoke to get even.

Strategies 3

- Teach your child the steps of problem solving to generate new strategies:
 - Define the problem
 - Generate a list of solutions
 - Evaluate the solutions
 - Pick the best solution
 - Try it out
 - See if it works. If not, pick another one

Make Your Home User Friendly

- Make sure that your child without ADHD has a “safe haven,” a room to go to that won’t be invaded by the ADHD sibling
- Facilitate your child without ADHD having successfully play dates, sleep overs, or get together with friends not spoiled by the sibling with ADHD.
- Keep the ADHD sibling away during such times

User Friendly Home 2

- Take child without ADHD and a friend on an outing while your spouse watches the ADHD sibling
- If necessary, prepare friends and their parents for the behavior of the sibling with ADHD
- Interrupt misbehavior by ADHD sibling in the presence of your other children's friends
- Use positive incentives for appropriate behavior during such times

Redefine Family Outings

- The entire family does not always have to do everything together
- You don't have to be the Waltons- they did not have children with ADHD anyway
- Take your child without ADHD on separate outings from the sibling with ADHD
- Divide up. One parent takes each child.
- If single parent, hire a babysitter and take one child at a time. Call grandma.

Family Outings 2

- If going to the same place, the parent with the ADHD child can arrive late and leave early.
- Don't go places where patience is necessary- "fine dining," busy amusement parks
- Accommodations letter for Disneyland
- Don't cancel outings for the entire family because your child with ADHD misbehaved.
- Don't let the child with ADHD run the family

Use Positive Incentives Wisely

- Be fair- if you create a positive incentive system for your child with ADHD, also create one for the siblings. There is always something they could improve.
- Praise all of your children liberally
- Creatively use positive incentives to encourage the children to get along with each other

Use Negative Practice Wisely

- Bill & Amanda did “need” to squabble
- We established 10 minutes of *required arguing time* each evening
- Alice supervised
- They could not hit, but had to argue
- We made it playful
- But they had to keep going for 10 minutes
- They were to save up the day’s arguments for that time
- After a while they got sick of required arguing

Play to Each Child's Strengths

- Embrace each child's individual strengths and talents to decrease competition
- Help each child discover & explore their talents- athletic, musical, artistic, technology, even video games
- Emphasis acceptance of their differences
- Schedule One on One time with each child
- Even out the imbalance of time devoted to the child with ADHD

Playing to Strengths

- Amanda is athletically gifted. Even at age 8 she is a star soccer player & a great hitter in softball. She gets lots of attention for this.
- Bill is a “total klutz.” All his efforts to play competitive sports have failed. He is always on the bench. He can’t throw or catch a ball to save his life. But he loves computers & gaming.
- Fred & Alice found computer classes and gaming clubs for Bill to participate in.

One on One Time

- Approximately 20 min. Separately for each child
- Parent offers the child the opportunity to choose any activity to do with the parent
- Doesn't cost money, no transportation
- The child is completely in charge
- The parent does not direct, command, etc.
- Give child undivided attention. Don't involve siblings. Don't answer phone, pager, doorbell, watch TV, etc.

Seek & Welcome Support

- Draw upon all available resources
- Grandparents, relatives, friends, babysitters
- CHADD, ADDA, local support groups
- Books, DVDs, internet, CHADD chats
- Family Therapy
- Respite and vacations from your children

Celebrate Positive Coping

- Point it out when your non-ADHD child shows compassion, acceptance, tolerance, and patience
- Point out how such traits will be valuable as they grow up and face the world

Jeremy and Sally

Eleven year old Jeremy knew that if his 14 year old sister Sally, who has ADHD and Bipolar Disorder, has a meltdown before they were going out, his parents would punish everyone by cancelling the outing. By virtue of her problems, Sally often did this, especially if she would rather not go out. Jeremy came to hate Sally and found subtle ways to needle her and cause her to blow up and get in trouble with their parents. *What should be done?*

Just horsing around....

Jason, age 13 with ADHD, and his 10 year old brother Bill, love to engage in “horse play.” The arm wrestle, full body wrestle, play tackle football, jump on each other, and punch each other. The problem is that Jason does not know when to stop. Bill eggs him on and Jason gets too rough. Bill gets hurt, cries, & tells his mother, who punishes Jason. Jason calls Bill a “sissy.” Bill messes up Jason’s stuff. *What should their parents do?*

Jill and Alice

Seventeen year old Jill is often embarrassed by her 25 year old sister Alice's inappropriate behavior, poor college performance, & inability to hold down a job or care for herself. Alice has ADHD + high functioning ASD Spectrum Disorder. She still lives at home, is not independent, & has a lot of conflict with her parents. Jill is worried that in the future after her parents pass away, she will get stuck having to care for her adult sister. She feels guilty about her worries, but does not see it likely that her older sister will support herself and live independently. What should we tell Jill?

Summary

- Our children with ADHD may negatively impact their siblings
- We need to be on the lookout for such impacts
- We need to listen to our children's thoughts and feelings about their siblings with ADHD
- We need to take steps to deal with these impacts- seek family therapy as needed
- We need to encourage each child to develop his/her strengths