

Positive Parenting

for your Child with AD/HD



Positive parenting is not about
“fixing what is wrong” with the child.
It is about identifying and nurturing
children’s strongest qualities.

by Susan M. Sheridan, Ph.D., and Michelle S. Swanger, M.A.

A CHILD WITH attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) can be a tremendous energizer to a family—always eager to participate in activities and keep things moving. Many parents and caregivers of children with AD/HD would agree that in such families there is never a dull moment.

However, children with AD/HD can also present certain challenges for parents. Parents of children with AD/HD say their children “space out,” “never run out of energy” and “act without thinking.” Their children have problems paying attention, staying calm, sitting still and seeing alternatives. These challenges often lead to other concerns, such as academic underachievement, oppositional behavior, problems developing friendships and future difficulties as adults.

Don’t think all is lost, however; children with AD/HD can also be very kindhearted, passionate and enthusiastic.

The key to *positive parenting* is finding ways to channel children’s strengths into appropriate actions that help them build skills and self-confidence that they will use throughout their lives. A positive parenting approach that focuses on the child’s strengths and creates opportunities for learning can go a long way in this regard.

What is it like to parent a child with AD/HD?

Parents of children with AD/HD often report feeling tired, highly stressed and frustrated with their children and their parenting abilities. They may feel as though they have little control over their own lives, with few choices and not enough time to do positive and healthy things for themselves such as exercise, relax and socialize.

Children with AD/HD require more medical, educational and mental health care than other children. Therefore, parents must schedule additional doctors’ visits, medication times, mental health appointments and school meetings to the already busy schedule of soccer games, dance classes and scouting. In addition, family members, including parents, may begin to develop marital difficulties and mental health concerns such as depression.

Indeed, one of the challenges parents face in general is finding time for and taking care of themselves. When the child presents challenging behaviors and moods, it is even more difficult to focus on what the parent needs to do to stay well. For these parents, finding ways to help themselves should be a priority—in fact, a requirement—if they are to help their children. Parents should reach out to others, such as family members, friendship circles or other support groups where they can create personal relationships, ask for help and find respite. Support from families, schools, medical professionals and communities is crucial to the parent’s well being and to the healthy development of the child.

How can I help my child become competent and confident?

The life course of children with AD/HD can be variable. Although children do not “outgrow” AD/HD,

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many children with the disorder grow up to be successful adults. There are some notable differences in the experiences of children who continue to struggle in life and those who learn to channel their energy, enthusiasm and moods into positive outlets.

A very important factor in helping children with AD/HD develop competence and self-confidence is the degree to which they experience stability, structure and positive attachments early on in life. Parents and family members can be “protective factors” for children with AD/HD through the relationships, supports and guidance they provide. Parents’ responses to their child’s behaviors are also important. Parents who understand, respect and adjust to their child’s uniqueness and who encourage other family members (siblings, grandparents, extended family) to do so, send a message of unconditional love and support. This love and support set the stage for positive parenting techniques to have their greatest impact.

Positive Parenting Strategies

Positive, effective parenting is best achieved by focusing on the child’s strengths and providing support for

ongoing learning. *It is all about building the child’s competence and self-confidence.* Positive parenting is not about “fixing what is wrong” with the child. It is about identifying and nurturing children’s strongest qualities—what they are best at—and helping them find unique and positive ways in which they can live out their strengths. This is done in four ways:

1. Focus on relationships
2. Focus on strengths
3. Provide structure
4. Set children up to succeed

Focus on relationships. A positive, deep relationship with family members creates stability and a sense of security. Perhaps one of the most important things that a parent can do to form healthy relationships is to spend quality time with his or her child. Ironically, it is one of the most difficult things to give. Hectic schedules, work demands, other family commitments and child activities often get in the way of quality family time. Yet, opportunities to spend time together talking, playing and connecting in positive ways are extremely important in the child’s ability to grow up to be a secure, emotionally stable, socially skilled adult.

Quality time for very young children (preschoolers) includes one-on-one time coloring, looking at books, singing songs, playing games and going to the park. For older children, it may include having conversations over meals, finding opportunities to play together (card games, board games), and engaging in activities such as bike riding or jogging together. A few minutes of conversation about the child’s day when helping him or her into bed at night is a perfect time to connect. Parents can use this time as positive time. They should talk only about pleasant things, even if they feel like they want to reprimand or scold the child for things that did not go well during the day.

Focus on strengths. Positive parenting means it is important to find the “good” in the child and take every opportunity to “catch” him or her doing good things. This focus is important to build confidence, encourage the child to try new things and set a tone for positive interactions. If there is one parenting tool that can make the most difference in building the child up to

Positive Parenting Strategies

What You Can Do for Yourself

- Get support from family members, friends, support groups or organizations
- Find activities that you personally enjoy, and do them
- Be part of a team—collaborate with your child's physician, teachers and other support providers
- Educate yourself about how to help your child

Focus on Relationships

- Spend quality time with your child
- Do things with your child that he or she likes to do
- Use positive comments
- Develop positive parent-child relationships
- Create a pact with other family members so everyone is “on the same page”
- Maintain family stability
- Stay calm

Focus on Strengths

- Catch your child being good
- Praise your child at least 10 times each day
- Find your child's unique interests and cultivate them
- Use encouraging words to build your child's competence and self-confidence
- Work toward success
- Focus on your child's efforts, not just outcomes

Provide Structure

- Exercise effective management strategies at home
- Make a schedule
- Make simple house rules and enforce them
- Make sure your directions are understood
- Supervise your child
- Set up routines for daily activities, such as homework, bedtime and meals
- Establish a plan for rewarding positive behavior and correcting negative behavior

Set Children up to Succeed

- Encourage social contact and interactions
- Observe your child around his or her friends
- Use opportunities to teach new skills and responses
- Help your child learn a structured way to solve problems
- Prompt your child to engage in positive behaviors by reminding him or her of what to expect and how to respond
- Model appropriate behaviors
- Coach your child when he or she needs help on the spot



be the strongest young person he or she can be, it is the power of praise. There are lots of strategies that are important, but none will be effective in the long run if the individual does not feel worthwhile, valued and confident.

Parents can also use the child's strengths to build new skills. For example, if the child is particularly good with younger children, parents can use opportunities he or she has with a younger cousin to teach the rules of a card game and what to do if there are disagreements. This activity not only provides a positive social opportunity, but it also requires the child to explain problem-solving strategies. If a child likes building things, parents can invite a friend over and allow them to build a fort in the yard. Use this as an opportunity for the child to organize needed materials, develop a plan, compromise with the friend and cooperate regarding the steps needed to execute the plan.

Keep an eye on how things progress and encourage problem solving, but only if assistance is absolutely necessary.

Provide structure. Along with positive parent-child time and rewarding interactions, another family characteristic that creates opportunities for a child's developing competence is structure. Children with AD/HD need help organizing virtually every aspect of their lives, but once they have that support, they are often able to respond appropriately in a variety of situations. They appreciate routine and knowing what to expect in their environments.

Routines for many general activities, such as doing chores, watching television, doing homework and going to bed help a child learn how to go through the day in an orderly fashion, which sets the stage for his or her ability to manage daily tasks as an adult.

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Positive Parenting

Indeed, children with AD/HD like knowing that there are some things that are predictable (such as a set time and routine for completing homework). Under these conditions they are able to learn effective social skills and decision-making strategies, which are important tools for life.

Set children up to succeed. Structure and routine is important to create a predictable and manageable environment. However, it is what children *do*—how they behave and interact with others—that determines how they get along with their peers. Children with AD/HD do not always think before acting. They are often impulsive and do not always know what to do or how to respond when faced with challenges. “Setting children up to succeed” means making sure that they have the tools to get along when they need them, that they use the tools when necessary, and that they receive positive feedback for their efforts. “On the spot” learning is very powerful for the child with AD/HD, as it gives meaning to the instructions and directions that parents provide when it matters most.

To set the child up to succeed, the parent or caregiver should first *talk* with the child about situations where he or she may need some help getting along with others. This might include situations where he or she needs to ask someone for help or solve a disagreement with a neighborhood friend. Parents should teach the child the steps for getting along in these situations. Then, when the child is about to face real-life situations where these skills are needed (such as soccer practice or when a friend comes over), parents should *remind* their child how to handle the situation should it arise and *practice* to make sure he or she can go through the steps.

It is easier to practice when the situation is not real, and it is easier to deal with something real after it has been practiced a few times. Parents can say something such as, “Do you remember what to do if you and Zach get into an argument? Let’s practice.” Parents should *reinforce* the skills during practice, gently correct if needed, encourage the child to use the skills as necessary and ask the child to check in at the end of the activity.

If parents are present during such situations, they can *prompt* the child on the spot if he or she needs a

reminder. A statement such as, “This would be a good time to use problem solving,” can stop a negative interaction and encourage positive solutions. Parents should *coach* or *guide* their child as needed by reminding him or her what to do, “Remember, the steps of problem solving are...” And be sure to *praise* both children when they effectively deal with problems.

Conclusions

Parenting can be one of the most rewarding as well as challenging experiences in one’s lifetime. Positive parenting is not an oxymoron; it is a way to help children establish secure relationships, develop skills and competencies and get on a path for success. ■

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