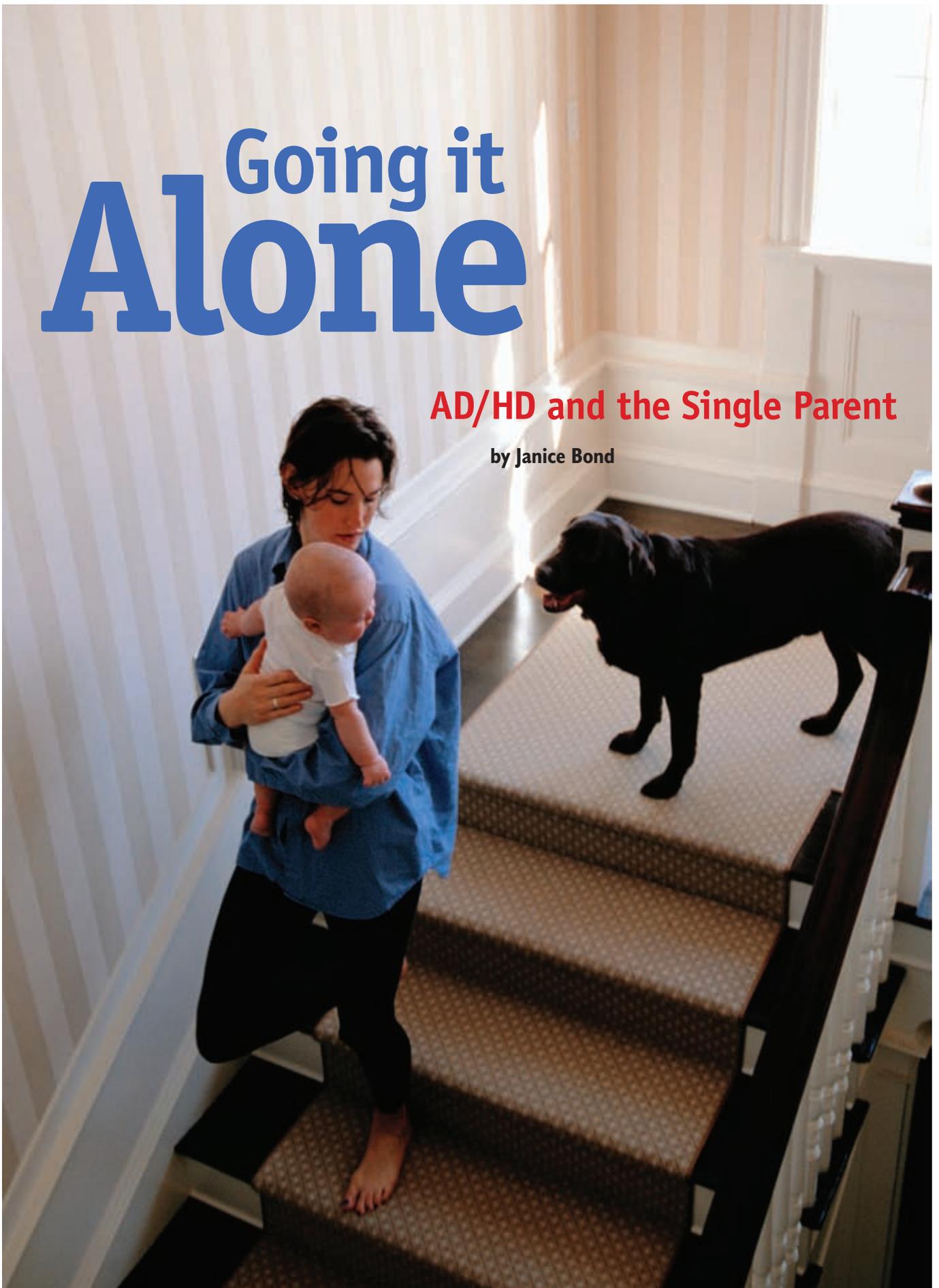


Going it Alone

AD/HD and the Single Parent

by Janice Bond



R AISING CHILDREN in a traditional two-parent home with adequate resources can be difficult in even the best of circumstances. Add the challenges of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) to the mix, and some interpersonal relationships fall apart. Many people find themselves in uncharted territory, going it alone as a single parent of a child or children with AD/HD, and completely overwhelmed with the added responsibilities. If you are already in the trenches, you are part of a unique group of parents whose strength and determination provide inspiration to us all.

My own journey with AD/HD may not be very different from your experience. Our son, Jeremy, was a bright, high-energy boy who never seemed to sleep or stay still. But in large group settings, many problems would emerge. When the first daycare center told us he could not return, red flags were raised, but we remained in denial. When Jeremy was five, his father and I divorced. Later that year, Jeremy was diagnosed with AD/HD and subsequently diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder, bipolar disorder and learning disabilities.

I both shudder and laugh as I think back on my years as a single parent. They were difficult, painful and hilarious. During those years of indescribable stress and hardship, I had four very important and positive sources of support: faith; unconditional love and support from my mom and dad; the gift of a friend's lifelong support; and the acceptance, tears and laughter from my local CHADD family. Even with these wonderful assets, every day was a delicate balancing act. There were periods of darkness and times when I needed someone else to take over because I could no longer do it. But since there was no one else immediately available, I learned to survive.

Although there is an abundance of research on AD/HD, there is still a gap in research—and thus information—on single parents with a child or children with AD/HD. Therefore, I am sharing the

following advice that I hope will be beneficial. Most of these tips can be helpful for all parents, but they specifically address areas that are critical for the family with a single caregiver. Although some of this information is not confirmed by scientific studies, it is based on my real-life experiences and those of other struggling single parents.

■ **Manage the multimodal treatment plan.**

Educate yourself about the science of AD/HD. Consult your physician, other health care professionals (HCP) or your local CHADD chapter for a list of recommended books, videos or tapes. Stay current with the latest research by reading publications such as *Attention!*®. Identify the doctors with whom you and your child can communicate and who can communicate with you. Discuss the treatment plan and alternatives, as well as how changes and successes will be measured. Remember that you bring expertise to the table. You are your child's best advocate, and you know your child better than anyone. When recommended, medication should be given as prescribed and progress should be monitored at home and at school. Prepare yourself and your child for changes; adjustments in dosage should be tailored for success. If counseling is suggested, find an HCP that both you and your child can respect, develop constructive dialogue and jointly work with to identify solutions.

You may be alone, but you don't have to do everything by yourself.



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Untreated anger can lead to destructive physical contact or other dangerous outbursts. Watch for warning signals and consult a professional at the first sign of intensely aggressive behavior. Remember that the safety of each family member is non-negotiable. Don't wait until you are in a crisis to seek assistance.

■ **Work with your child's school.**

Develop a positive relationship with school personnel. Be friendly to all teachers. Meet with each of your child's teachers before the school year begins, establish their preferred form of communication and make them aware of your schedule. Also, provide them with educational material on AD/HD. Give teachers specific feedback on what works, when it works and the best circumstances under which it works, as well as what does not work. If the teacher or school has major complaints that are difficult for you to believe, try to observe your child in a classroom setting without the child's knowledge. Learn as much as you can about the education laws. Take a friend or advocate with you to all major meetings. Place a framed 8" x 10" picture of your child in front of you if your child is not attending the meeting.

■ **Identify the best childcare option.**

If your child displays behavior challenges in a group environment, review the discipline policy of each program being considered. Be prepared for consequences and have a back up plan in place. My son was "booted out" of three different programs during his childcare years while I tried to maintain a full-time job. Options to explore include before and after school-sponsored programs, faith community resources, extended family, private facilities, other non-profit organizations and individual homes.

■ **Schedule time together and time alone.**

Set aside a regular time for family games or movies. Take turns choosing the activity. Schedule alone time with each child as well as private time for yourself. Identify other adult activities that interest you and participate in them.

■ **Minimize negative comments about your ex-spouse.**

Children have a difficult time trying to process hurtful expressions about someone they love. If you need to vent, talk to another adult when you are away from your children. As your children mature, they will be able to comprehend the failures and faults of the other adults around them without your help. If you are consistently critical, your child may point out your own disagreeable behaviors at a time you least expect.

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■ **Identify non-negotiable house rules.**

Establish house rules, phrased in a positive tone. Post these rules in multiple places within the home. Identify and discuss non-negotiable safety issues. Determine consequences and rewards. When working toward changing inappropriate behaviors, don't tackle everything at once. Start small, strive for success and build from there.

■ **Have a regular routine.**

Children with AD/HD need an established routine that is predictable and reasonable. Develop a list of who, what, when and where for each activity. If circumstances require you to change the routine, start reminding your child a few days in advance. This will also help your child prepare for changes in the school day, such as field trips, special visitors and doctor appointments.

■ **Become a master multitasker.**

Identify the strengths of others and yourself. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help. Children can be tremendously helpful when given developmentally appropriate and strength-based responsibilities. Solicit and include your children's opinions in creating family plans and schedules. Post a master family calendar somewhere in the home to identify appointments and other important happenings. Maintain a portable scheduler to incorporate additions and changes as the day progresses. If available, use technology—such as computerized calendars or personal digital assistants (PDAs)—to set up a reminder system for unusual events. Find a balance. Don't over schedule. Be creative and think outside the box.

■ **Get professional help if anger is a problem for you or your child.**

■ Allow for transition time from one household to another.

When children visit multiple households on a regular basis, they have to adjust to different parenting styles and household rules. Although caregiver consistency within different environments is preferred for children with AD/HD, this is sometimes beyond your control. After visiting other households, your children should be allowed a short grace period to re-acclimate to the routine and expectations of your own home and family.

■ Maintain your physical and mental health.

Get regular checkups from your physician. Exercise two or three times a week. Get fresh air on a regular basis. Locate a park that has a walking path with playground equipment within view and go for a walk. Remember how to laugh and do it daily. Use classical or jazz music to create peaceful, relaxing moments.

■ Seek flexibility in your job.

Find out if disclosing your child's diagnosis to your immediate manager or human resources liaison is in your (or your child's) best interest. Work with your employer to make up time for those unscheduled emergencies and always be sure to follow through.

■ Create a backup plan.

Identify stressors. Find resources and then utilize them. Helpful resources include CHADD support through local chapters and the national website (www.chadd.org), the National Resource Center on AD/HD (www.help4adhd.org), your community mental health center, employer resource programs, volunteer/non-profit support programs, and state or local parent support centers. Compare your family's needs to the assistance available, and create a couple of backup plans.



■ Prepare for assistance in times of extreme stress.

Ask a neighbor or friend to help. Trade nights with another parent whose child has AD/HD or other challenges. Identify a "Parent's Night Out Program" in your community. Do something physical, e.g. organize a closet, clean a room, etc. Put yourself in "time-out" when you are overwhelmed.

Meet with each of your child's teachers before the school year begins, establish their preferred form of communication and make them aware of your schedule.

My life has changed so much since those single parent years. I am remarried, and my household now has seven wonderful people spanning four generations, from six months to 83 years old. Given all these changes, I often smile when I think back on those times when Jeremy and I only had each other. It was just the two of us, and that fragile time of interdependence helped us get through many terrible times.

Take heart, be persistent, keep faith and never give up. You don't have to wait for a better life in the future. Today is a gift, and you can overcome the multiple hurdles and crises that block your way. Nothing about living with AD/HD is easy, but it is manageable with the assistance of loving family, knowledgeable physicians, other dedicated health care professionals, passionate teachers, positive mentors, faith and determination. You may be alone, but you don't have to do everything by yourself. My wish for you is to experience genuine love, peace and joy in your family's journey with AD/HD. May every new day bring you a renewed sense of hope for your children and yourself. ■

Janice Bond is co-director of Kindermusik at the First Baptist Church School of Fine Arts in Chattanooga, Tenn. She serves on the CHADD board of directors and is a member of the task force creating the new AD/HD training program, *Parent to Parent*.