


So You Have AD/HD in the Family

A tongue-in-cheek look at AD/HD and family dynamics

by Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D.

LIVING WITH A CHILD who has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) can be a trying experience for the rest of the family. Restlessness, impulsivity, inattentiveness, difficulty following rules and excessive emotional responses are personality traits that do not necessarily make for a peaceful coexistence. When AD/HD is involved, you, the parent, have to play the game smart, or temper outbursts, sibling rivalry, marital conflict, unbearable noise and general chaos will eat you alive.



While your coping mechanisms might be more extreme than those of other families, you don't have to give up vacations or time together.

Here are a few suggestions based on my personal and professional experience for minimizing the impact of AD/HD on your family:

1. Be realistic.

In families with AD/HD, the dream of a congenial, peaceful and enjoyable family life is mostly that—a dream. Accepting this can be difficult. Mom says to Dad, for example, “Wouldn't it be fun if we took the kids to Disney World?” The honest answer might be “No, it would not! The kids would fight on the plane, in the rental car and in the hotel room. When we tried to decide what to do, no one would agree. Sit-down meals would be aggravating, and our son with AD/HD would want to buy everything he saw. The whole

experience would be overly exciting, and his tantrums would be even more frequent than they are now.”

With AD/HD in the family, brutal honesty is required, because romantic notions of family life do not apply. This doesn't, however, mean you should merely sit around feeling sorry for yourself, or that your family can't have fun.

2. Divide and conquer.

Positive interactions between family members are possible, but usually not when the whole family is together. With the “Divide and Conquer” technique, we take advantage of a useful and proven fact about kids with AD/HD: These youngsters are much more manageable in one-on-one situations. So we recommend that the family group be divided up as much as possible. In this instance, minimum mass equals maximum enjoyment. After you've experienced the peace and joy splitting up provides, you will wonder how you ever got along without this technique.

The possibilities for Divide and Conquer are many and varied. Imagine this: a hungry family of four walks into a fast food restaurant. If the children do not have AD/HD, the family can probably sit at the same table and enjoy their meal together. But our imaginary family has one child with AD/HD and one without. After getting their food, the group splits up: Mom takes one child to a table, and Dad takes the second to another, preferably out of sight of each other. Parents and children share their meals and quality time together, enjoying pleasant conversation with no sibling rivalry.

Now let's imagine that a couple with a son and daughter, both of whom have AD/HD, in a moment



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of perversity decide that *no matter what* they're taking the kids to Disney World. These deluded individuals can use the Divide and Conquer method to maximize family peace and minimize tensions. On the ride to the airport, for example, if the children are old enough, one child sits in the front seat and one in the back; the seating arrangements will be reversed on the ride home. On the plane to Florida, mom and daughter sit in seats 23 E and F, while dad and son sit in seats 17 A and B. Halfway through the flight, the kids switch places, poking each other as their paths cross near row 20. In the motel room, both kids use sleeping bags, one sleeping on the floor on one side of the parents' king size bed and one on the other. At the park, mom takes one youngster for the morning and dad takes the other. The family meets for lunch, sitting at adjacent tables, and changes partners for the afternoon.

3. Be careful when opening your mouth.

Have you ever had this conversation at dinner with your child with AD/HD?

"How was your day?"

"Fine."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Did you have social studies?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what did you do today in social studies?"

"Nothing."

This isn't a conversation—it's a dead-end street. The problem here is that the parent's attempt at conversation is too obvious, as well as condescending. And many kids, especially those with problems such as AD/HD, misinterpret the parent's question and intent. Instead of hearing, "How was your day?" the child hears, "Did you mess up anything today that I need to know about?" Naturally, the child doesn't want to engage in a self-esteem-reducing contest, so his answers are vague and noncommittal.

Before opening her mouth, our parent in this example has to decide if she wants to actually talk to her child or conduct a mini-diagnostic of the youngster's day. If the goal is diagnostic, better to drop it, keep quiet and eat in peace. If the primary goal is real conversation, there are better ways to start: for instance, express an opinion about an interesting or controversial issue. "I think the school board was wrong to cancel the pep rally because of fears of vandalism," for example, might pique the interest of an otherwise reserved and moody pre-teen or teen. Parents must wait for a response, however, and not directly solicit communication.

Thinking before talking is an especially good idea when the parent is irritated by the child's behavior. We have to remember that some problems are irritating, but minor—in other words, not worth bringing up. A child whose room is always a mess and whose bed is always unmade probably has other problems as well: difficulty forming friendships, less-than-stellar grades and family problems. Face it—nagging and arguing will probably do no good as far as that room is concerned. And you've got bigger fish to fry here. Save your vocalized concerns for the really major problems, and let the small ones slide.

4. Reduce the noise.

You probably don't realize how much family conflict is caused by noise. When you're really irritated with your family, it's likely someone is talking too much, a loud argument is going on (and you could be one of the participants!), or the music or TV is blaring at a million decibels. You may be the unwilling recipient of all the clatter and clamor (incoming noise), but you

may also be the source of a good deal of it (outgoing noise).

With regard to your contribution to outgoing noise, see Item 3 above. With regard to incoming noise, consider headsets for the kids and earplugs for you. If you don't like listening to your kids' music, buy them a pair of earphones. It's well worth the investment! Then enforce this rule: after two warnings for ridiculous volume, the headset goes on or the music goes off for the rest of the day. The earplugs are for you. These little devices will not make you so totally deaf that you're dangerous, but they will reduce unwanted noise significantly. Beyond music, other handy uses for earplugs include extra-volume movies, loud restaurants and sleeping.

5. Further hints.

Here are a few other hints to help make your life with AD/HD more tolerable. Get out of the house on a

regular basis. Out, out! And while you're out of the house, get some regular exercise. Exercise helps burn off tension and aggravation and makes you easier to be with when you get back home. Finally, don't forget that while the new 8–10 hour, "all day" medications are very nice, "all day" is not 8–10 hours. It's 24 hours. Talk with your clinician about booster doses to help with late afternoons and evenings.

So you have AD/HD in the family? It's tough. But it's manageable. While your coping mechanisms might be more extreme than those of other families, you don't have to give up vacations or time together. Think clearly and do something about it. ■

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