Parenting

Being a parent is a difficult job, but it is even more challenging when you have ADHD. Managing and organising a family can be overwhelming when it is hard enough organising your own life. On top of that, it’s estimated that there is a high chance that at least one of your children will also have ADHD.

How does ADHD affect your parenting?

Your feelings about parenting

Your own experience of being parented may have been troubled because your parents found it difficult to handle your symptoms, leaving you with perhaps unhelpful ideas or uncertainty about how to be a parent. Others may comment on your parenting and the behaviour of your children, without understanding your unique challenges. It is easy to lose confidence in yourself. You are well aware that your problems with impulsivity, organisation and structure can hamper your parenting. If you have difficulty regulating your emotions, you can find yourself overreacting to your child’s behaviour, and later feel bad about this.

What do you bring to parenting from your background?

Accepting the situation and focusing on the positive

Adults with ADHD are often “the fun parents,” who have a lot to offer. They can be energetic, enthusiastic and creative. If you have had a diagnosis of ADHD you may re-evaluate the way you see your family life, and become more accepting of some of your difficulties, and have different expectations. Expect that there may be more chaos, disorganisation and tension in your home. Allow yourself to take a step back, be prepared to alter your standards if necessary, and forgive yourself when you feel that you’re not doing a “good enough” job juggling everything. Remind yourself that having ADHD is not your fault, but on the other hand, it should not be an excuse for the problems your family may be facing.

Following are some of the main issues for a parent with ADHD, with some tips that might work for your family.
1. **Structure and consistency**

Keeping a structure, and being consistent in your expectations and responses, helps both parents and children, reducing stress for everyone.

The number-one way to help your days run more smoothly is to have a routine. Keep this basic and similar for every day. This can be a challenge at first when you (and perhaps your child) have ADHD, but routines get easier with time.

Mornings will run more smoothly if you **plan ahead for the next day**. On school days, pack lunches the night before, help your child select an outfit for the next day and lay out every item of clothing, including shoes and accessories. Help your child pack his/her school bag and put it near your front door.

Put a list up in the bathroom as to what the child needs to do to get ready in the morning: wash face, clean teeth, take medication. If your child takes medication, put the pills in an obvious and visible place, and check that they have taken it. Have an alarm set for perhaps 30 minutes and then 10 minutes before you are due to leave the house, as you and your child may have difficulty keeping track of time.

Both you and your partner, if you have one, should be united and show a consistent set of responses to house rules. You don’t want to be strict one day and then give in to every whim the next; you don’t want to react impulsively to every behaviour in a way which is confusing to the child. Decide on just a few family rules and have them available to remind you of the agreed-on responses when facing difficult behaviour.

2. **Remind yourself of the positives**

Learn to see the positive in all family members and remember to tell them when you do. Catch your children out doing the **right** thing and reward them – this is more powerful than any punishment, so make sure that the times you give praise far outnumber the times you criticise.

Keep a sense of humour, laugh and have fun together as a family! One of the virtues of being an ADHD parent is that you can be spontaneous and fun! Find creative ways for the family to do chores (e.g. singing/dancing at the same time). Have contests to see who finishes first; offer weekly prizes, etc. Think outside the box to do things in a way which works for your family. Enjoy being unconventional if you are!
Remember that if both you and your child have ADHD, you are in a unique position to understand and help them through their difficulties. You are likely to have learned how to compensate for your own symptoms, and you can model these skills for your children. How you manage your treatment can also be reassuring to a child who might feel different because they have ADHD.

If some of your children have ADHD, the needs of the neuro-typical, and perhaps easier, child can sometimes be forgotten. Take care to give the non-ADHD child the time, praise and encouragement that they also need.

3. Keep rules and instruction simple and clear

Have reasonable expectations of your child, bearing in mind their personalities and whether they have ADHD. Don’t worry about the small things, but decide which issues are not up for negotiation. Tidy bedrooms may not be important to you, but completing homework is.

Children with ADHD need to know what parents expect, so explain this in advance. For instance, before going to the supermarket, explain to your child how they need to act. Reward appropriate behaviour.

Use positive phrases when giving instructions and avoid beginning with the word “Don’t.” Rather than saying “Don’t touch the fruit at the supermarket,” tell your child to keep his/her hands in his/her pockets. Notice and appreciate it when he/she does this.

Present choices, so that the child buys in to the task, and you don’t have an unnecessary argument. For example, “Shall we go to the shops on bikes or walk there?”

Instructions to the child should be given in a quiet place with few distractions, and one at a time, as several instructions at once can be confusing and overwhelming. Ask them to repeat what you have said so you know they got it.

4. Communication

Find time to meet as a family to discuss problems. Try to keep this informal, perhaps over dinner. Be careful of how these issues are discussed, and avoiding sounding critical. Don’t say: “You did such and such,” but try using phrases like “I felt frustrated when you . . .”
Encourage your children to be open with you about their feelings and needs insofar as they are able to explain them. Do they need to talk about their day, have a biscuit and a hug, or want space on their own? They may not know why they are upset, but your care for, and interest in, them makes all the difference.

If there is a behaviour that you are trying to work on with your child, ask them for their ideas. The usual rewards like star charts often fail with children with ADHD, who get bored easily. They may well have the best solutions for themselves, and, of course, they will be more likely and happy to go along with these.

5. Take care of your own needs

You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of your children, but many parents spend so much time and energy on their children that their own needs are neglected.

**Give yourself a break** if you feel you’re about to lose control of your temper. Explain to your child what you are doing, and teach them to do the same if they need to. Find a quiet place and use a breathing or relaxation technique, or distract yourself to calm down. If you have a partner, ask them to take over when you feel overwhelmed. Have somewhere quiet set up in the house to retreat to.

**Make regular breaks for yourself** part of your routine, and make time for your own interests. You could go for a coffee for 15 minutes on the way home from work to recharge before seeing the family. Spend time away with your partner or friends without the children, or just have a chance to be on your own. Your children will also benefit from a break, staying with grandparents or friends.

**Find a club, sport or hobby** which you enjoy and that makes you feel you are still a person in your own right with your own interests. Ideally, this would be something that refreshes you emotionally and physically. You may feel that you don’t have time, but making time for yourself is especially important for a parent with ADHD.

**Looking after yourself** includes getting help for your ADHD, taking your medication if you need it, and taking time to see your doctors or other therapists. Get enough sleep and exercise.

**Say no** – People with ADHD tend to take on too much, and then get overwhelmed. It is important to learn to say “no”, or at least to say: “I’ll think about it and get back to you.” There will always be unlimited demands from school, work and wider family and friends. You cannot do it all. Simplify your life and do not overcommit yourself.
Maintain good self-esteem – It is easy to feel defeated at times and to think negatively about yourself. You need to argue back to such thoughts and focus on your strengths. What do you do well? This is especially important for parents, as children learn so much from your attitudes, including your attitudes toward ADHD traits that they may also have.

Seek all the support that is available

Inside the family

Don’t do all the family jobs yourself, but delegate some to each family member. Get your children into the habit of helping and, if you have a partner, negotiate with them who does what, depending on preference and talents. Work as a team.

If you have a partner who doesn’t have ADHD, it is important that they understand the disorder and how it affects those members of the family who do.

Outside the family

Support organisations that you may find helpful:

Living with ADHD: www.livingwithadhd.co.uk
Add+up: This organisation was set up to bring families together, to guide parents in the right direction, to find practical help for their children, and to promote both public and professional awareness of ADHD. www.addup.co.uk
ADD/ADHD Online Information: www.adders.org
ADDISS, The National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service: www.addiss.co.uk
ADHD Foundation: www.adhdfoundation.org.uk
Homestart: Support and friendship for families of children under 5: homestart.org.uk

Resources to consider

• Join an online support network, or take parenting classes to acquire specific parenting skills or strategies.
• Pay for help with cleaning or gardening if you can, or for babysitting/childcare even if you do not go out to work.
• Pay for a tutor to do homework with your child. This can relieve stress for the whole family.
• If money is an issue in getting outside help, consider swapping chores with friends, relatives and neighbours, or pay them back with something else you can do for them. You could also ask an organised friend or relative, or even a professional organiser, to help declutter your house.
and set up good systems. Some areas have a Time Swap scheme where you can exchange your skills for skills of those locally.

- Work with the mental health professionals who are involved with supporting you and/or your children with ADHD, to identify any specialist help that may be available.

Family organisation

- Organise simple daily routines for getting ready for the day, mealtimes, homework time and bedtimes.

- Use a large master calendar for the family – write all appointments, school functions, birthdays, etc. down on the calendar. Colour code the activities of each member of the family.

- Make to-do lists for each day. Be careful not to over-schedule your time with too many to-dos. Leave extra time to allow for unplanned interruptions.

- Keep a white board and markers in the kitchen, and note down the week’s meals (keep them simple). Hang a pad of paper and pen by the white board and use this for your shopping list. Note down anything you need and encourage other family members to do the same.

- Reduce clutter! There is something about clutter that can make a person feel completely overwhelmed with all there is to do. Get someone to help you de-clutter initially, and then have strategies to keep on top of it.

- Use alarms to remind you of things such as the time to leave for the school run. Set these for before you have to leave to allow for time to find everything you need, de-ice the car, find the children’s coats, and so on.

- Designate specific areas for important items, like keys, glasses, school bags.

Babies and teenagers

The issues of parenting vary considerably depending on the age of your children.

The baby and toddler years

With very young children, there is often a lot of chaos. You may find this particularly difficult on top of your own chaos, or else find that you ride it better than others because you are used to it! Set a few key priorities such as your child’s safety, basic cleanliness, nutrition and your sanity, and try not to worry about the rest!
Teenagers

Parenting teenagers is about boundaries and negotiation, with a goal of slowly letting them establish their independence. Keep rules to a minimum, and choose which battles are worth fighting. Do follow through with consequences when important rules are broken.

Remember that teenagers can also be fun! Spend time getting to know the people that they are becoming, and encourage them in their interests and positive friendships.

If your child has ADHD, they are more likely to have problems with school work and perhaps with poor peer group influences. Make sure that they get diagnosed and properly treated, but remember that their difficulties are not your fault. You are not solely responsible for fixing these difficulties, but you can guide and assist them in getting the right help.