

How to Talk to Your Kids About ADHD

Children with ADHD (Ages 6-10 years old)

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Okay!! Your child is in school and either you are frustrated as their parent, your child's teacher is frustrated, or both! You have most likely seen behavioral problems and your child's teacher has called you telling you that your child is disrupting the classroom and is not listening. You are at your "wits end" and finally decide after much deliberating to take your child to a health care professional to figure out what to do. A health care professional tells you that your child has ADHD. Now what??

Well for starters, let me tell you that your child is most likely just as frustrated as you are with constantly getting in trouble at school for not sitting still and not paying attention to what is going on in class. Your child may have also been called a "troublemaker", "the daydreamer" and has probably been generally "labeled" at their school. At least, we can define what ADHD is and know that there is hope and help for ADHD. No child wants to stick out from the rest of his/her classmates and they especially do not want to be made fun of. If a school-aged child knows what ADHD is and has learning and behavioral strategies to help with the symptoms of ADHD, they are better able to deal with it. This is a critical first step towards coping with ADHD! Many children with ADHD suffer with low self-esteem due to their inability to achieve the same level of success as their peers simple because they can not focus their attention for any length of time. This does not have to be the case.

Talking to your child about ADHD should be done in a very reassuring and constructive manner. Tell them the truth, but do not "sugar coat" things for them. The reality is that your child will have to work at this just as much as you as their parents will and his/her teachers. As parents, you have most likely taken you child to his/her pediatrician or a health care professional and your child was evaluated by them. Your child is probably by now wondering what is going on and if there is a problem.

Start the conversation in a very positive way and emphasize that their brain works “very fast” and even faster than most people around them. When you tell your child that they have ADHD let them know that they are not alone. Every single, solitary person is different in a lot of different ways and we should celebrate these differences. If you keep it a secret from your child that they have ADHD, this actually implies that to have ADHD is shameful and they should really be embarrassed. As with everything else in life, there are positive aspects and negative aspects to absolutely everything. Reinforce that ADHD is something that they also can get control of with help from you as the parent, but they have to do their part as well. Above all, be realistic in what you tell your child and make sure they understand what you are saying. If your child is looking at you with that blank stare, it probably means you lost them in your explanation of what ADHD is and how it affects them. Here are a few pointers of what to say and what not to say to them:

What to say-Do's

- Emphasize that now that we know that you have ADHD-we can work together as a team to help make things at home and school better. Be encouraging and positive!
- Tell them that lots and lots of people have ADHD. They are not alone.
- Explain that this can be used to their benefit. ADHD children constantly have new ideas and are full of energy.
- ADHD just does not go away, but parts of ADHD that they don't really like can be worked on with help from you and others in your child's life
- Identify that ADHD can be a strength to them, but make sure you don't convey that ADHD is merely an excuse for bad behaviors.
- Reinforce to them that they have a part in their success at home and at school and also in their life for the long-term

What to say-Don'ts

- Don't tell them they need to learn more about what ADHD is. That is the job of the parents and teachers that work with your child
- Don't tell your child that ADHD is who they are. ADHD is only PART of who you are, it does NOT define who they are as a person or who they will become as an adult
- Do NOT say that they have a disorder.
- If your child is being placed on medications, don't make this a big deal for them. Some kids are embarrassed that they will have to take medications and often even more embarrassed if their friends find out about it.
- ADHD is not a PROBLEM, it is a challenge in life that can be tackled like any other problem
- Don't get technical with them. If a health care professional has explained to you what ADHD is, reword it into language they can understand, but emphasize that this has positive aspects as well

You are your child's best ally! Even when you lose patience, remember that your child is struggling right along with you. ADHD affects them more than it affects anyone else. The moment of diagnosis provides you as the parent with the opportunity to help your child develop their talents and individual strengths. Overall, ADHD is a challenge and not a problem.

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