

Parenting the Child with ADHD

Self-esteem

Given the toll that ADHD can place on a child's self-esteem, parents should consider what are reasonable expectations in the major areas of their child's life to protect and enhance self-esteem. Can your child go right from school to doing homework? How long can they do homework without a break for something they enjoy and succeed at—eg, video games, television, athletics, art? How much additional sitting-still time can they do? Dinners? Religious services? How much of their room can they keep neat or organized? How neat? Setting reasonable expectations means taking *all* the factors—severity of the ADHD, IQ, child's personality, family functioning, and other stressors—into account. It is also important to remember that no one, not even parents, function at peak all day every day. To be reasonable and assure some success, take 10% or 20% off the peak.

TRY THIS *If your child, at peak, can focus on her or his homework for 30 minutes without a break, consider an average "win" or success to be 20 or 25 minutes.*

Parents may regret that what they wanted their child to achieve might not be reasonable because of ADHD, or perhaps other factors (eg, not studious, too short to be a basketball star, etc.). These imagined losses feel real, but create a path for greater feasible success based on consistent reasonable expectations agreed to by both parents.

TRY THIS *Parents should "look into the mirror" to recount their own past expectations, recognize what expectations or hopes (fulfilled and unfulfilled) from their own childhood are being placed on their child, or what expectations derive from the wishes of the extended family or broader community.*

Parents often state, "Just do your best!" This statement sounds simple and child-oriented, but it is often a false promise of tolerance and acceptance. "Just do your best" allows parents to avoid setting a clear, reasonable expectation, and no one does his or her best frequently or by intention. Case in point: A parent's best pace for a run, lowest golf score, or biggest sales month happens most often by surprise, not by design. And few of us exceed our best the next time we try.

TRY THIS *The concept of "just do your best" is often an unreasonable expectation that is likely to lead more often to a sense of failure rather than success, so avoid using it.*

Family life

The relationships between siblings can be deeply impacted by the different requirements and characteristics that a sibling with ADHD brings. Non-afflicted siblings, for example, may feel disenfranchised about the extra time/attention paid to their sister or brother.

TRY THIS *If possible, create special opportunities aimed at compensating for feelings of resentment between siblings, or note special activities or plans designed to meet every family member's needs.*

Some families work tirelessly to compensate and remediate ADHD, and even more so if there are associated learning disabilities. The child's whole life becomes continuous schooling with inevitable tension. Children with ADHD need more time than most for fun."

TRY THIS *Promote fun in a pool instead of swimming lessons. Rather than buying a novel for your child, try comics, magazines, or sports pages. You can also encourage surfing the Web (with parental controls).*

Research has shown that children with ADHD often have a very positive use for computers. Personal computers are unconditionally accepting, produce neat results, never criticize, offer second and third chances under the child's control, can help with spelling and organization, and provide much-needed fun and relaxation. Therefore, many children with ADHD really enjoy playing video games.

TRY THIS *Keep an open mind about the use of the computer and other electronic supports, with the caveat that they should not be used to the point of social isolation.*

School

School can be a powerful stressor for children with ADHD. Fortunately, there are some simple questions/requests that parents of children with ADHD can ask of their child's school to create a more positive environment for him or her.

TRY THIS *What grades are reasonable to expect in specific subjects? What kind of teacher optimizes performance and supports self-esteem? Are there opportunities for structure in seating, or posting homework assignments and reminders on a blackboard or Web site? Are there friends in the class to serve as back-up for notes or assignments? Is there a period available for extra help from the teacher? Can study halls, recess, or a lunch period be used to break up longer periods of required attention?*

Activities

For many children with ADHD, sports are a haven. But it is important to keep in mind that some sports are better than others.

TRY THIS *Remember that sports such as baseball can be more stressful than ice hockey, football, and soccer, which are more action-oriented and tolerate some lapses in attention, making them better suited for a child with ADHD.*

Extracurricular activities such as summer camp, or even a job, can bolster self-esteem and relationship building.

TRY THIS *Enroll your child in a summer camp. This might be a standard youth camp, or even an intense sports camp. Older children might benefit from sleep-away camp, which would allow them to immerse themselves in a world where ADHD might not matter as much.*

Parents often wonder if ADHD is a lifelong condition. Some children may grow out of ADHD completely; others will have their symptoms change over time, but will have lifelong difficulty with a key feature of ADHD such as sustained attention. Others will continue with ADHD and associated comorbid conditions (anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, etc.). However, it is likely they will all do better if their parents, along with the child's pediatrician, focus on the major areas of functioning—self-esteem, family, school, activities, and friends.