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PARENTING A CHILD WITH ADHD: START WITH YOURSELF

Parenting an ADHD child or teen is a daunting challenge. Prepare for this challenge by getting your own psychological well-being in order.

Here are a handful of tips to help yourself prepare to guide and assist your child with ADHD.

1. Parents are usually confused about what ADHD is and what it is not.

They are often buffeted by advice from family, neighbors, teachers and the popular media. This confusion and plethora of advice prevents parents from creating a solid game plan for how to proceed with their child. I recommend parents of ADHD children read three short articles I have prepared. The first is entitled: "Correcting Misconceptions About ADHD With Research." The second is entitled: "Correcting Misinformation About ADHD and Medication." The third is: "ADHD: Exactly What Is It?" All three articles are available for reading or downloading on my website: www.drrichardformica.com. Additionally, be sure to consult with your child's pediatrician about anything related to ADHD that is not totally clear in your mind.

2. Identify and acknowledge your frustration and demoralization.

Parents feel frustrated and demoralized after repeatedly failing to get their ADHD child to function well at school, do their homework reliably, and keep their room in some semblance of order. Parents also feel frustrated at their child's disorganization, forgetfulness, impulsivity and emotional dysregulation. They are fed up with their child's yelling and arguing. They feel guilty because they know they respond poorly oftentimes to their out-of-control child. Therefore, the first order of

business is to resurrect your hope. There are answers, there is medication, and there are psychologists who know how to guide you and your child through the labyrinth of ADHD challenges.

3. Work on your own emotional self-regulation:

Parents need serious work on their own emotional regulation. Day after day with an ADHD child can wear a parent down, downgrading their emotional balance and eroding the parent's emotional well-being. A parent who is out of control emotionally will not be able to help their child develop their own emotional self-control and self-regulation.

4. Address your guilt and renew faith in your ability to change:

Parents often need to work on their guilt for "losing it" so often with their child. Most parents of ADHD and ADD kids lose it often and intensely. That provides poor modeling for your child. However, commit yourself to releasing yourself from useless guilt, and instead replace guilt with healthy humility and healthy remorse. Healthy remorse directs a parent to finding scientifically grounded, positive, healthy parenting approaches to put in place of their negative patterns. Remind yourself that there are better ways to approach kids than you are using. Become totally committed to helping yourself learn these better ways, no matter how long it takes and no matter how much patience you need to see yourself through the process of change. And, of course, reach out to both your child's pediatrician and to a psychologist who specializes in guiding parents of ADHD children.

5. Reflect on your current parenting behaviors and patterns:

Review and survey your general parenting patterns and approaches with your kids. Ask yourself if you are treating your ADHD child very differently than you treat other of your children. There may be a good reason for these differences. Or there may not be a good reason. The differences may be due to your thoughtful efforts to adapt to each child as they are. Or the differences may be born of your frustrations and resentments. A common parenting pattern is to give in to the ADHD child far more than to their siblings because the ADHD child

protests so intensely when parents make ordinary demands for compliance. Thoughtful adaptation is good. Reactive, emotion-based patterns born out of intense feelings, though quite common, are usually not useful.

6. Apply the same review to your co-parent's patterns with your ADHD child.

If you are part of a two-parent family, you don't have to agree on all approaches to your child with your co-parent, but communication is essential. Give feedback and solicit opinion from your partner. Most importantly, proceed with the utmost respect when communicating with your co-parenting partner. Marriages are profoundly challenged by problematic children, including by ADHD children, as the parenting and co-parenting issues can become intense. Respect is the glue and the balm that keeps co-parents working together.

7. Look through a wide lens when reflecting on your parenting approaches with your ADHD child.

Conduct an historical survey of the kinds of parenting approaches and patterns you were exposed to when you were a child. Do your parents' patterns adequately prepare you to raise this ADHD child? Remember what additional advice you have recently been given by your own parents, friends, neighbors, relatives, and media articles. If the examples and advice you have been given are not sufficient, speak with your pediatrician and consider consulting a psychologist who has experience in guiding parents of children with ADHD.

8. Commit to the idea of psychological science as your guide:

Scientific research and clinical psychological practice regarding ADHD has come a very, very long way over the past two decades. We know a lot more about ADHD than we knew years ago. We also know that parent education and parent counseling can be highly effective in the treatment of ADHD. Commit to being guided by the knowledge and the parenting principles which have been endorsed by both research and

clinical practice. If possible, find a psychologist to guide you in the application of this knowledge and these parenting principles.

9. Identify any of your own personal problems which interfere with healthy parenting:

Start by identifying any recurrent or persistent patterns which regularly interfere with parenting your ADHD child effectively. Research has demonstrated rather conclusively that a parent's psychological problems affect his or her children. And it has also demonstrated conclusively that when a parent straightens out a personal problem, whether an issue of anxiety, depression, substance use, anger management, or marital fighting, the child directly benefits. For example, a parent who has a generalized anxiety disorder may be inadvertently transmitting very fearful attitudes to their child.

10. There is no need to blame yourself and no value in blaming yourself for experiencing a personal problem.

But you can help yourself and your child simultaneously by addressing your personal problems. When you notice your own anxious, or depressed or angry attitudes and behavioral patterns, you might seek to change them. You may also work on not transmitting these attitudes and behavioral patterns to your ADHD child. As you do this, you can bring about very positive improvements in yourself and your child as well.

11. Cultivate an attitude of kindness and self-acceptance towards yourself.

This is the first step in preparing to communicate an attitude of kindness and acceptance towards your ADHD child. I recommend you read a short article I have prepared for parents entitled: ***“Learning How To Accept Yourself.”*** If you don't accept yourself, you will not be able to accept the parts of your child which mirror or trigger those rejected aspects of yourself. Rather, you may unintentionally be critical of your child when they remind you of the parts of yourself you don't like.

12. Dynamically integrate acceptance with fidelity to your values.

There is a balancing act in being a parent, especially a parent of an ADHD child. You are called upon to engage in balanced thinking. On the one hand, ADHD children need to be accepted as they are, with all of their frustrating, annoying, dismaying behavior. On the other hand, when your child acts in ways which contradict or violate your values, your task is to help your child change. Your values are the North Star which should guide both your actions and your child's character development. But if you do not accept your child, they may either learn to hate themselves or learn to hate you and rebel against everything you stand for. If you do not challenge your child to change, they will not develop the healthy character which is the goal of all parenting. Neither acceptance nor value-driven change should be sacrificed when guiding your child. Both must be held simultaneously in a dynamic, balanced, dialectical approach.

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