Intermountain® Healthcare

ADHD: Talking with Your Child

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD, you may be wondering, "Should I talk to my child about the diagnosis, and what should I say?" This fact sheet explains why it's important to talk to your child about his ADHD, how to shape the conversation, and how to help your child adjust to the diagnosis and treatment.

Should I talk to my child about the diagnosis?

Most child experts say that yes, you should talk to your child about ADHD. Knowing what's causing symptoms can be a relief for your child, who may have been labeling himself as "stupid" or "lazy" as a result of not knowing why he's different from his peers.

Talking about ADHD gives your child a chance to ask questions. It also helps your child see why treatment is helpful, which increases the chance that your child will take an active part in it.

What approach should I take?

There's no one right way to talk about this topic, and of course as a parent you know what will work with your child. Here are some general suggestions that may be helpful:

- **Work with your child at his own pace,** looking for "teachable moments." A child may not be ready for a full conversation about this topic all at once.
- **Affirm your child's unique strengths.** Explain that everyone has unique strengths and weaknesses. Use yourself and other family members as examples.
- **Acknowledge the difficulties your child has been having.** To introduce the topic, focus on what your child has said he's concerned or frustrated about, such as waiting his turn or having trouble sitting still.

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD, it's important to talk with your child about what this means.

- **Gear the conversation to your child's perspective.** Stick with language that is familiar to your child and use metaphors to help create mental pictures (see the example conversation on page 2 for ideas). Avoid technical terms — just say "ADHD."
- **Discuss your child's fears.** Your child may wonder if ADHD is dangerous. It can help to explain that lots of people have ADHD — and they have great lives.
- **Emphasize positive goals.** Talk about the benefits of treatment — free time because homework is finished more quickly, getting along better with friends, keeping up in class, or enjoying more privileges.
- **Describe treatment as a way to help your child be in control, rather than the ADHD being in control.** See page 3 for ideas on how to help your child adjust to treatment.

An example conversation

The example conversation below is geared for an elementary school child — you can adjust it for your child's age and needs. Don't worry about covering everything at once. You'll probably find many chances to talk about this topic.

The reasons for the ADHD evaluation:

"This year has been kind of tough, and school hasn't been fun for you. And you know how I'm always getting on you about fighting with your sister and not staying at the table during dinner? We wanted to find out if there's a reason some of these things are happening. That's why we met with your teachers and went to the doctor."

The diagnosis and how ADHD works:

"Guess what? We found an answer that helps explain why you've been having these problems. You have something called ADHD. You know how you've said it's hard to stop yourself sometimes, and it's too boring to sit and read? That's because of ADHD.

ADHD means your brain is like a race car with a powerful engine, but with brakes that don't work perfectly. The sights out the window go by really fast, and sometimes it's hard to slow down to look at them or read the road signs.

Another way to think about ADHD is that it's like watching TV when the channels change every few seconds, or a bunch of channels all play at once! That can make it hard to pay attention."

Putting ADHD in perspective:

"I'm glad we know about your ADHD — now we know why things have been tough for you lately, and we can do something to help. Lots of kids have ADHD, and learn to manage it just fine.

ADHD is just one part of who you are, like the way you like strawberries and soccer, but can't do a cartwheel. We're all different — your dad can go up on the roof, but I'm scared to stand on a ladder. I'm a good singer, but your dad can't carry a tune."

Treatment and outlook:

"You'll start taking medicine every day for ADHD. Just like glasses help someone's eyes to focus, the medicine helps your brain to focus. We'll also work together on ways you can practice "putting on the brakes" and paying attention. We'll set some goals and you'll get better and better. I won't have to put you in time out so much, and things will probably go more smoothly at school, too.

I think things will start feeling a lot better for you. You'll always have ADHD, but you'll learn to manage it. Lots of successful people have ADHD — and they do great things in life." (See page 4 for examples.)

Adjusting to the ADHD diagnosis

Your child may wonder what the diagnosis might mean at school and with friends. Siblings also need to understand what this means for the family.

- **Give your child words to use for talking with their friends about ADHD and medication.** Your child might simply say, "I have ADHD, so it's harder for my mind and body to keep still and focus on things. I take medicine to make it easier."
- **Give your child words to use if ADHD-related behavior causes problems.** For example, your child could say, "I'm sorry about that — my ADHD sometimes makes things harder for me. I'm working on ways to do better."
- **Explain how teachers will be involved.** For example, "Your teacher knows you have ADHD — that's great, because she can help you with it. She might make changes in where you sit to make things easier. She might give you extra chances to practice focusing on assignments. And the two of you might work out a private signal she can use to remind you when you're having trouble focusing."
- **Discuss ADHD with other family members.** Help siblings understand what ADHD is. Be sure to explain that ADHD is just part of who their brother or sister is, and that it isn't "catching." Explain that treatment will help their brother or sister focus better — and that the family might set up some routines that will help things go more smoothly at home.

Adjusting to medication

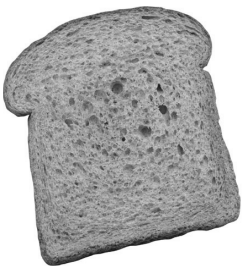
Children have special challenges in taking daily medication. Below are some age-specific tips to help you and your child develop a routine.

School-age children (6-11 years)

- **Prepare your child.** Explain why medication is needed, along with how often and when your child will take it. You may want to help her practice (see the panel below). Explain that the medication might make her feel different, that she should tell you how it makes her feel. Let your child know that you can try a different medication if this one causes problems. Your child's doctor can help you with this conversation.
- **Involve your child.** Let your child have as much control as possible over the process of taking medication. Talk with your child about how to make it more fun or easier to remember.
- **Offer rewards.** Award an age-appropriate token (such as a sticker or ticket) each time your child takes medication easily. Once your child has earned a certain number of tokens, trade them for an item on a "reward menu" you've worked out ahead of time.

Swallowing practice

If your child has trouble swallowing medication, try this:



- Roll a tiny piece of bread in a ball and have your child swallow it.
- Slowly work up to larger balls until they are the same size as your child's medication.

Because bread tastes good and won't scratch the throat, this is a great way to teach children how to swallow medication.

Adolescents and teens (12-18 years)

- **Explain medication and its benefits fully.** Don't assume that a teen knows the whys and hows of taking medication. Explain why medication is more effective if taken routinely. Explain side effects to watch for, and the importance of telling you about them. Involve your child's doctor in this discussion.
- **Agree on a plan.** Work together to create a plan to help your teen remember to take medication. If your teen resists taking medication or forgets it routinely, tackle the problem together.
- **Offer rewards if necessary.** Teens don't usually need rewards or treats to take medication, but you might try them if your teen has trouble staying motivated.

Solving medication problems

If your child isn't taking medication properly, you need to talk about why. Keep the tone positive and encouraging, and explore the problem together. Below are some tips on handling problems that may occur:

- **"I don't WANT to take it!"** If your child actively resists medication, find out why. Does it taste bad? Are side effects bothering her? Work with your child's healthcare providers to find ways to minimize these problems.
- **"I don't need it."** There are lots of reasons why children might think they don't need medication. They could be practicing "wishful thinking," deciding that their ADHD has gone away. Or they may not be able to see a difference from being on medication. You may want to explain that even if they don't see a difference, their teachers, friends, and family members can tell it's helping. (If you don't feel your child is getting much benefit from the medication, talk to your healthcare provider about an adjustment.)
- **"Aunt Jill says I shouldn't be taking medicine."** Other people might share their opinions with your child about whether medication is appropriate. Help your child understand that these are just opinions, and may not be based on understanding the situation fully. Reassure your child that many people — including kids — take daily medication for various reasons.

Resources

The books listed below can help as you talk with your child about ADHD:

- ***A Bird's-eye View of Life with ADD and ADHD.*** Chris Dendy and Alex Zeigler. Cherish the Children 2007. (Ages 13 and up)
- ***A Walk in the Rain with a Brain.*** Edward Hallowell and Bill Mayer. HarperCollins 2004. (Ages 4 to 8)
- ***All Dogs Have ADHD.*** Kathy Hoopmann. Jessica Kingsley Pub 2008. (Ages 4 to 8)
- ***Help 4 ADD @ High School.*** Kathleen Nadeau. Advantage 1998. (Ages 13 and up)
- ***Learning to Slow Down and Pay Attention: A Book for Kids about ADHD.*** Kathleen Nadeau, Ellen Dixon, and Charles Beyl. Magination 2004. (Ages 6 to 14)
- ***Putting on the Brakes.*** Patricia Quinn and Judith Stern. Magination 2008. (Ages 8 to 13)
- ***Putting on the Brakes Activity Book for Kids.*** Patricia Quinn and Judith Stern. Magination 2009. (Ages 8 to 13)
- ***Real Life ADHD: A DVD Survival Guide for Children & Teens.*** Chris A Zeigler.

Famous people with ADHD

It may help your child to know that many famous and successful people have ADHD. Here are a few examples:

- Albert Einstein (scientist)
- Ansel Adams (photographer)
- Bill Gates (founder of Microsoft)
- Bruce Jenner (Olympic athlete)
- David Neeleman (founder of JetBlue airlines)
- Howie Mandel (comedian and TV host)
- John Lennon (singer)
- Justin Timberlake (singer)
- Jamie Oliver (chef)
- Jim Carrey (actor and comedian)
- "Magic" Johnson (NBA basketball star)
- Michael Phelps (Olympic athlete)
- Richard Branson (founder of Virgin Airlines)
- Robin Williams (comedian)
- Terry Bradshaw (NFL quarterback and sports announcer)
- Ty Pennington (designer, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition)
- Whoopie Goldberg (actress, TV host)
- Will Smith (actor)

(Note: The people listed above have either been diagnosed with ADHD, or are believed by many to have ADHD based on its trademark signs.)

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