

Five Strategies for Talking to Your Child About ADHD



Emma's parents recently brought her to a neuropsychologist who diagnosed her with ADHD. Emma has been struggling to work to her full potential in school. Teachers will often describe her as chatty and overly sociable. Emma has started to get quite frustrated with herself because of her inability to complete her schoolwork in a timely and efficient fashion. She was beginning to think that there was something wrong with her. Upon receiving the diagnosis of ADHD, Emma's parents were concerned that this negative self-thinking would only continue. They considered how they could best talk to Emma about her recent diagnosis in a way that would allow her to understand what having ADHD truly means and how it affects her while not perpetuating this negative self-thinking.

One of the most difficult challenges facing the parents of children with newly diagnosed ADHD is figuring out how to talk to them about their diagnosis. Most children recently diagnosed with ADHD already have some awareness of their struggles and get the sense that something isn't quite "right." Most likely, they have been experiencing concentration problems at school, difficulty in following directions, and/or receiving negative feedback about their behavior. Beyond this, many children recently diagnosed with ADHD have been through some type of psychological assessment or have at least seen their parents discussing concerns with their pediatrician. So, for the most part, it is no surprise to children that something is going on. Nonetheless, parents benefit from having clear strategies for talking to their children about ADHD.

How parents frame their child's ADHD diagnosis in conversation

can have a powerful impact on the child's response to this knowledge and how they live with ADHD. For some children, the diagnosis of ADHD may provide an explanation of what makes certain situations difficult for them. It may also help them to recognize what they need to do in order to improve themselves. Unfortunately for other children, it could either perpetuate negative self-thinking, or it may serve as an excuse that allows them to rationalize their behavior rather than to learn how to improve themselves. Prior to having this discussion, it truly helps to have a strategy for talking to your child about ADHD.

Some parents do choose not to inform their child of their diagnosis, and simply provide their child with interventions at school and medication at home with no explanation of why. Though you may think your child doesn't realize this, they notice when they are doing things that none of the other students are doing. Many mental health professionals, such as child psychologists, strongly believe that restricting information does not help, but rather confuses, the child. Providing an age-appropriate explanation of ADHD would be more beneficial to both you and your child.

Because these children are most likely to have heard the terminology of "ADHD" associated with them, it is generally better to be upfront about what these symptoms are called. Children are aware of much more than we may notice. Providing children with a basic understanding of ADHD may help to avoid the confusion and fear that ADHD is something far worse than it actually is. Furthermore, it is suggested that you focus on the symptoms that your child may be noticing rather than on the name "ADHD," and that you describe trouble areas, such as short attention span, fidgetiness, or problems following directions.



As a general strategy, a multi-step approach over a period of time will help your child understand more about her ADHD. Initially, a small meeting with the child, parents, and either the pediatrician or the psychologist who made the diagnosis could be very helpful. Next, providing the child with some information about what is meant by ADHD could be useful. This could be in the form of books, [videos](#), podcasts, or even meeting with friends or family members who have been diagnosed with ADHD. There are many resources available through a number of different platforms. We, at South County Child and Family Consultants, create lists of books for children and teens diagnosed with anxiety, depression, ADHD, and more. [This link](#) will bring you to an article about books for children and teens with ADHD. Another helpful resource could be the [Learning Works LIVE program](#), which helps children better develop their executive functioning skills through game play with other children. Beyond this, explanations of strategies such as 504 plans at school, tutoring at home, or the use of medication or exercise should also be forthcoming and direct. Encouraging questioning is also very important in helping children to feel as though their diagnosis of ADHD is not a secret or a problem.

Beyond what is mentioned above, here are five strategies for talking to your child about ADHD. These include:

- 1. Honesty and transparency are important. Do not be**

afraid to use terminology such as ADHD or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder. Similarly, if your child is on medication, provide her with the name of the medication (even if they can't pronounce it) and learn enough about it so you can describe how and why it works.

2. **Normalize ADHD.** Help your child to recognize that others in the family may have been diagnosed with ADHD. Assist her in seeing that other people display many of the symptoms of ADHD and that they are perfectly fine. It may be useful for her to know about kids in their class, family members, or famous people who have been diagnosed with ADHD. For example, if your child is into sports, it may be helpful to explain to them who Michael Phelps and Simone Biles are, and explain that they both have ADHD, but that it doesn't stop them from being great!
3. **Talk to your child at an age-appropriate level.** While openness is always encouraged, too much information can be confusing and worrisome. You have to be able to judge your child's ability to understand the information that you are sharing. If you are unsure of how much your child understands, state things as simply as possible and listen for follow-up questions. In a similar fashion to how we talk to children about difficult subjects such as death, sexuality, and disease, we need to be careful about how we talk about ADHD.
4. **Talk about ADHD in the context of a growth mindset.** There are two types of mindsets, growth mindset and fixed mindset. Having a fixed mindset

means that you believe that abilities are fixed, and that you are simply inherently good or bad at something. Having a growth mindset means that you believe that your basic abilities can be developed through dedication, hard work, and ongoing practice. Therefore, even if a child has some difficulty with attention problems, they can be confident that they can succeed through effort and persistence. It should be noted that parents must be realistic about how ADHD can make some things more difficult for their child, while not making the child feel that they can never succeed at it.

5. Create and maintain an environment for open discussion. Once you have had a talk with your child about her ADHD diagnosis, do not simply forget about it but bring it up again in the future, encouraging questions and providing feedback. Help your child to see when they are making good efforts to overcome any limitations caused by ADHD.