

Parenting with ADHD: Seven practical tips for success

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Credit: Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often goes undiagnosed in adults—including parents—but it has a significant impact on family life.

A parent with ADHD may struggle with time management and staying focused. They may appear to be in control, but their daily life can be chaotic with missed appointments, trouble remembering and enforcing rules at home and a struggle to meet responsibilities.

When under stress, a parent with ADHD may be prone to moments of frustration and anger in response to minor provocations. This emotional struggle can lead to harsh responses to children, which parents often regret once the moment has passed.

Understanding ADHD in adults

ADHD involves patterns of inattention (forgetfulness, being easily distracted), hyperactivity (fidgeting, restlessness) and impulsivity (interrupting conversations or speaking out of turn). [ADHD is highly heritable](#), which mean parents with ADHD will often have a child with ADHD.

An estimated [8% of children worldwide have ADHD](#), while only [3% of adults meet criteria for ADHD](#). One reason for this difference may be that symptoms of ADHD become milder as individuals age, [especially hyperactivity/impulsivity symptoms](#).

While some individuals may no longer meet ADHD diagnostic criteria in adulthood, they can still experience significant life impairments. These include [poorer physical health and socioeconomic outcomes compared to those with no history of ADHD](#).

However, research has shown an increase [over the last decade in diagnosis of adult ADHD](#), potentially due to [increased awareness of ADHD](#) and/or availability of clinical assessments. Several anecdotal reports indicate that parents only realized their own ADHD symptoms when [seeking help for their child](#).

ADHD's impact on parenting

ADHD's tendency to be passed down in families has important implications because it can affect the way parents interact with their children. [Research](#) has found that ADHD symptoms in parents are associated with harsher parenting behaviors (like yelling at a child, overreactive and severe punishments) and more lax parenting practices (like inconsistent discipline or providing few or no boundaries).

This makes sense in light of the symptoms of ADHD, including difficulties with forgetfulness and impulsivity. [People with ADHD also often struggle with regulating intense emotions](#). Together, these symptoms can make it more difficult for parents to remain calm and consistent when interacting with their child.

However, [research also](#) indicates that parents' ADHD symptoms do not appear to impact their ability to be warm, caring, and loving.

Other research also suggests there is a "[similarity fit](#)" if a parent and child both have ADHD. In these families, parents with ADHD may also have more empathy and tolerance for their child's difficulties and may be able to play more effectively with them because they can follow the pace of their child's play.

Practical strategies for parents with ADHD

Raising kids with ADHD can be challenging. Children with ADHD often benefit from specific strategies like setting clear rules and consistent boundaries, using a system that rewards appropriate behavior, and spending lots of quality time together. These strategies [can be difficult to maintain for parents dealing with their own ADHD](#).

Here are some practical strategies that may be helpful to parents who have ADHD, or believe they might have ADHD:

1. Seek professional support when needed for your own symptoms of ADHD

If you suspect you have ADHD but have not been diagnosed, consult a health-care professional. Family doctors and psychiatrists can offer medication options, while psychologists can provide cognitive behavioral therapy, [a highly effective treatment for adult ADHD](#).

2. Seek out supports for specific parenting issues

There are some free [research](#)-backed courses available online such as [this one](#), and [this one specifically designed for dads \(though moms and other caregivers are welcome too!\)](#).

Another avenue of support is clinical psychologists or social workers who specialize in working with children and adolescents, and their parents. Look for someone who can provide [behavioral parent training, which is an evidence-based treatment for child ADHD](#).

It's helpful to let the therapist know that you are also struggling with ADHD symptoms. There is [some evidence](#) that adjustments—including flexible pacing (for example, focusing only on one thing during a session, lots of repetition), extra practice and supportive group therapy—may be particularly helpful for parents with ADHD.

3. Be gracious to yourself

ADHD involves certain areas of the brain, and remember, it's highly heritable. If you have a child with ADHD, it's not because of your

parenting or anything you did.

Also, parenting is a hard job that's made even harder when you are experiencing symptoms of ADHD and/or when your child has ADHD. It makes sense that things can feel out of control sometimes! You are allowed to experience [negative emotions](#), and to ask for support from family and friends if you are able.

Working on developing effective coping techniques (either with or without professional help) may have the bonus effect of providing an opportunity for your child to observe and learn through your example.

4. Use organizational aids to help manage your ADHD symptoms

Instead of relying solely on memory, individuals with ADHD often find it effective to keep a calendar, planner, daily agenda or a to-do list. Creating an external record of tasks and appointments, even if you don't check it constantly, can increase the chances of remembering these responsibilities. Research shows that, for individuals with high levels of ADHD symptoms, using these types of compensatory strategies was associated with [fewer negative parenting practices](#).

5. Think proactively about recurring situations

For difficult parenting situations that seem to happen again and again, it can be helpful to think back to see if there are common issues that can be addressed proactively. Think about specific problem behaviors you experience with your child, as well as their context (such as where you were, and what happened before and after).

This may help identify common triggers that you can modify proactively

the next time you are in a similar situation (see [this worksheet](#)). As a simple example: if you notice your child always acts out when bored, you can prepare an activity bag to take with you in these situations.

6. Consider how you think about your child

[Research](#) suggests that parents with ADHD tend to attribute more blame to children (for instance: "my child spilled the milk on purpose") compared to parents without ADHD. These types of attributions [can make a parent more prone to responding harshly](#).

If you notice yourself having these kinds of thoughts, it might be helpful to pause and think through other possible reasons for your child's behavior (for example, they were too excited and spilled the milk by accident).

Research also suggests that [it can be helpful to notice times when your child is behaving well, and give them credit for this behavior](#).

7. Remember your strengths

[Adults with ADHD are fully capable of being warm, loving and highly engaged parents](#). Positive parenting is [consistently linked with improved child mental health](#), so it is worth focusing on building these more positive aspects of your relationship with your [child](#).

By implementing effective strategies for managing ADHD, and seeking out resources when needed, parents with ADHD can create a positive and fulfilling [family life](#), and be a strong supportive source for their [children](#) who may be struggling with similar issues.

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