



Managing Behavior & Building Self-Esteem for your Child with ADHD

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, better known as ADHD, is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts one's ability to sustain attention and inhibit impulses. Some of the classic symptoms of ADHD in children include the following:

Inattentive behaviors

- difficulty remaining focused during work or play
- being easily distracted
- daydreaming
- being forgetful in daily activities
- making careless mistakes
- challenges with organizing
- avoiding activities that require prolonged mental effort
- failing to finish assigned tasks

Hyperactive behaviors

- difficulty remaining seated
- often overactive and/or clumsy (e.g., playing roughly, running, bouncing, knocking things over, dropping things)
- talking loudly and/or excessively
- fidgeting when expected to sit still

Impulsive behaviors

- difficulty waiting (e.g., in games, conversations, in line)
- interrupting others (e.g., butting into conversations, games, or activities)
- intruding upon others (e.g., grabbing items from others' hands, using others' belongings without seeking permission)

Many of the behaviors associated with ADHD can be irritating and annoying to adults and peers alike. The hyperactive and impulsive behaviors, for example, are often disruptive in settings where appropriate behavior is expected (e.g., school classrooms, libraries, waiting rooms, religious institutions). As such, kiddos suffering from ADHD typically receive more criticism and negative attention from their parents, caregivers, teachers, and friends compared to their neurotypical peers. And a lifetime of criticism can have drastic effects on a child's self-esteem, social development, and subsequent mental health.

Given the neurological underpinnings of ADHD, it is important to keep in mind that kiddos with ADHD do not engage in the above-described behaviors on purpose. So what can you do to manage these challenging ADHD behaviors while also bolster your child's self-esteem? The key to this is attention.

Your **attention** – whether it be *positive* or *negative* attention – reinforces behavior. In other words, attention increases the likelihood that your child will repeat this behavior in the future. So when it comes to ADHD, the best way to minimize inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive behaviors is to completely ignore them. This is called **active ignoring** because you are not passively ignoring the child,

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but rather consciously removing your attention to the undesirable behavior. What does this look like in action? Avoiding any reaction – large or small – to the misbehavior. This includes making eye contact or a facial expression or outright commenting on the misbehavior. Just behave as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

Active ignoring is incredibly effective in reducing annoying, *attention-seeking* behaviors; however, it requires patience and distress tolerance. Because if you choose to ignore a behavior that you previously provided attention to, the behavior will get worse before it gets better. Think about a vending machine. What do you do when you put your money in and nothing happens? You might press the button 10 more times, start shaking the machine, or even raise your voice because what worked just about every other time isn't working in this very moment. So if you start ignoring your child's interrupting behavior, for example, expect them to raise the volume of their voice, continually repeat themselves, or physically intervene as a way to desperately get your attention.

When your child escalates their behavior in this way, continue to actively ignore the behavior as long as your child is safe and not in danger of hurting themselves or anyone else. If you do provide any form of attention at this very moment, your child will learn that all they have to do is amp up their behavior to get your attention. While you are disengaging from this undesirable behavior, it is essential that you simultaneously keep an eye out for praiseworthy, non-ADHD behaviors that are the opposite of the problem behavior. These are called **positive opposites**. The goal is to re-engage with your child when they are taking steps towards desirable behavior as this teaches them an appropriate way to get your attention. So as soon as an ADHD behavior stops, make eye contact with your child with a friendly facial expression and praise the positive opposite, desirable behavior: "I love how you quietly waited for me to finish talking to your sister."

Children with ADHD are rarely given compliments for their behavior. As such, it is up to caregivers to keep a sharp eye out for when children are engaging in appropriate behavior. In other words, catch them being good! Looking out for and praising positive opposite, non-ADHD behavior not only increases desirable behavior, but also helps your child feel good about themselves.

Try the examples below with your child and see their reaction!

Amazing job focusing on your homework!
Thank you for listening and getting ready for bed.
I appreciate that you played quietly while I was on the phone.
Wow! Great job sitting so calmly during dinner.
I love it when you walk quietly like that inside the house.
Excellent work playing gently with one another!
I like that you asked so politely. Nice manners!
Sometimes it's hard to sit for so long, but nice job staying seated at the computer!
This was a complicated assignment. I love that you finished your work!
Thank you for speaking softly at the table.
I am so proud of you for waiting patiently for breakfast.