

Parenting Your ADHD Child

Biblical Guidance
for Your Child's Diagnosis

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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) shows up everywhere. At school, in parking lots, in the grocery store, at Sunday school, during meal-times, during playtime, with parents, with teachers and with peers—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is reportedly the most common label given to children today. The purpose of this minibook is to help parents whose child has received an initial diagnosis of ADHD to think through what that label means and where they need to turn for help.

As a special education public school teacher, a biblical counselor, and someone who works with children individually, I have taught and counseled many children who have been diagnosed with ADHD. As a believer I am persuaded that there is a spiritual component to the issues children with an ADHD diagnosis face. This is because no diagnosis can negate the fact that every human being is made in the image of God. Every child, ADHD or not, has a spiritual nature. Our hearts and our brains are both involved in the choices we make and the ways we think, speak, and act. Even if parents choose to medicate their child there are many other ways they can help their child, as one of God's image bearers, to deal with the behaviors associated with ADHD. I am confident that God's Word offers much wisdom, hope, and comfort for situations like these.

Problems are a part of every child's life. Deuteronomy 6 instructs parents to be continuously teaching and training their children—when they get up in the morning, when they go to bed at night, when they drive somewhere in the van (i.e., when they walk by the way). However,

this is not an easy task with an impulsive, easily distracted child. For many parents it is the toughest thing in their lives and something they face every day. God's promise in 2 Peter 1:3 that God's "divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him . . ." is a comfort, but it's also a challenge to figure out exactly how it fits this situation. As a Christian, I decided that if God's Word claims to deal with all of life, that's where I needed to look for answers. This minibook is my attempt to share what I have learned and to help parents see how God's Word does fit this situation.

You Are a Key Part of Helping Your Child

One fundamental thing I've learned is the critical importance of parents. One doesn't have to look far in God's Word to see the role God assigns to parents in bringing up and helping their children. Your perseverance, patience, and love for your child are crucial to help him or her move forward spiritually, socially, and scholastically. It can be especially difficult parenting a child who struggles with the behaviors in the ADHD diagnosis. But God's Word always gives hope. Remember that the promise in 2 Peter 1:3 applies to you as well as your child! God knows you and your child intimately. He will help you do the hard work of faithful parenting as you go to him.

Ask for daily help from the Spirit, and he will hear and answer you with the strength, perseverance, and faith you need as you work with your child. He will pick you up when you fail as a parent, just as he will do for your child. Whether you sin and fail or your child does, you

can be confident that God is ready to forgive, restore, and strengthen you to begin again. As Jeremiah wrote in a time of prolonged suffering, “Because of the LORD’s great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22–23). In light of the challenge, let me add one more thing: Please don’t try to do this alone. Ask friends and family to pray with and for you and your child.

Your Child’s Heart Is the Key to Change

A second fundamental truth I’ve learned is the importance of addressing the heart—that is, the child’s thoughts, attitudes, and motives. Matthew 15 explains that our actions come from our hearts. Just as a thorn bush can’t produce apples, we cannot expect good behavior to be produced by a bad heart. Just like every other human being, children with an ADHD diagnosis have sinful hearts that need a Savior who “is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). When children (like their parents) admit their need for forgiveness and trust that Jesus died on the cross to take their punishment, they will be saved. At that point we are promised, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus cleanses us from sin and gives us new hearts that want to please him.

Children who have trusted in Christ as their Savior can be encouraged to make it their goal to please him (2 Corinthians 5:9). Our heavenly Father wants his children to be like his Son (Romans 8:29) and his Holy Spirit

commits himself to help bring that about. Young people who understand their new identity and calling have a new motivation to reflect the Lord in their thoughts, words, and actions—and a new hope that they can succeed. This is important because some ADHD characteristics present significant obstacles to obedience. But God has compassion on us in our struggles. Second Corinthians 1:3–4 reminds us that we belong to “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” God doesn’t leave us alone in our struggles but loves us, strengthens us, and comforts us in our daily walk with him. As a child learns to trust in the promises of God and believes that God can help him obey, he will be more willing to consider his motives and his actions. Instead of saying, “Johnny, stop doing that,” the parent can help a child go deeper and ask, “Johnny, are your thoughts and actions pleasing to Christ right now?”

Even small children can learn to evaluate their motives—what they want—in a particular situation. They need to be taught that they choose their own desires, and wrong desires start the spiral downward to the path of wrong actions. During episodes of misbehavior, children need to learn to ask, “What did I want more than wanting to please God?” Children need to know what behaviors to replace those they are trying to stop.

Many other truths could be mentioned, but the point is that while the following information on specific behaviors of those with ADHD is important, it will only be useful for moms and dads who understand their child’s need for a heart changed by Christ. Moms and dads also need to understand the importance of using

God's Word to address the inner person, rather than just outward behaviors.

Understanding ADHD

Now let's look at ADHD specifically. It's been defined by eighteen behavioral characteristics in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV TR (hereafter DSM-IV TR).¹

According to the DSM-IV TR, ADHD is a disturbance of at least six months, during which at least six of eighteen characteristics are present in two different settings (for example, at home and at school). If a child displays at least six of these characteristics at home and at school for six months, that child will be given the label Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

I will review the behavioral characteristics as they appear in the DSM-IV TR and discuss biblical truths that could be used with a child exhibiting such behaviors. I think you will be encouraged by the relevance of God's Word to these problems. However, don't be overwhelmed by all the suggestions that follow. There are too many to implement all at once. Pace things for you and your child. Choose one or two ideas and begin to put them into practice. Add others as your child seems ready. Be willing to make adjustments if they don't work well for your family, and seek the counsel of others. As you consider the following suggestions, you will notice that our work with children starts with how God's Word applies to their struggles, and then we set small, relatively attainable goals for each child. You know your child best, so you can use

these suggestions as a starting point to help your child live out his faith in the details of his life at home and school.

1. Often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities.

Parents who take time to discuss this behavior with their children will often discover wants and desires (James 1:14–15) that led to such behaviors. For instance, the children may have the desire to finish first. Children with this desire often rush through their work. What is the goal here? I must win! In our day there are many children with this as their goal.

Another child (when asked why he rushed through his work) responded, “To get the work over with so I can do something I like.” The goal is to have pleasure and ease.

A third reason children rush is because they want to avoid the consequences of not completing the assignment. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with winning, pleasure, or avoiding consequences, we want our children to have a superior goal—to please God.

I had a child in counseling years ago who was always in a hurry. As a result his papers always looked messy. Sometimes he didn’t even bother to erase; he’d just take his pencil and black things out—not just with a single line but with great big black marks. When he did try to erase he wasn’t very careful and his paper was ripped and torn, and the presentation of his paper was terrible. Many times others couldn’t even find the answers.

His parents brought him to counseling and we shared with him 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” Then we asked him to evaluate his work using that verse. He said, “Ohhh!” He knew right away that his work did not glorify God. He had to learn that even the smaller details of life can honor God or dishonor him. That’s something all children need to learn.

To help this child, we made a simple checklist of four things and asked him to use it on every paper before he turned it in. We instructed him, “When you think you’re finished, look at your checklist and make sure your paper is consistent with glorifying God.” His teacher helped us by stapling the checklist to every paper he would need to hand in.

Did he like using the list? Not one bit. He often said, “This is good enough. My teacher doesn’t care.” We would respond, “Is that your goal?” He had to learn to put off the desires of the flesh (what he wanted) and to put on accomplishing his assignments by working at them “with all [his] heart, as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23).

2. Often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities.

We need to help children who struggle in this area learn to be good stewards of their minds. Paying attention for an extended period of time requires a disciplined mind. The apostle Peter assumed that this takes effort when he talked about “preparing your minds for action” (1 Peter 1:13).

With smaller children, parents may wish to use a kitchen timer to increase attention span. “Last week we worked on the puzzle for three minutes. This week let’s try for four minutes.” Older children can be instructed about the blessings of paying attention to those whom the Lord has brought into their lives (Proverbs 1:8–9) and the importance of developing the biblical fruit of self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

When a child is struggling in school, we need to find out what his mind is doing when instruction is being given. Some time ago I worked with a middle school student having trouble in literature class. He was flunking every test he took in literature, yet he was doing great in accelerated math and accelerated science.

The remedial reading principles we worked on did not seem to be of any benefit. One day I finally asked, “What was your mind thinking about when you read that story?”

His response took me by surprise. “My inner tensions,” he replied. When I explored this, he talked about unresolved conflicts with adults in his life—including his literature teacher and his parents.

Unresolved conflicts consume our thinking and prevent us from learning. That’s all this young man would think about when he was in literature class. He was so frustrated that it carried over to the tutoring room.

We taught him that God wanted him to resolve these conflicts. For him this meant going to his teacher to ask forgiveness for his part of the problem. The next week when he came for tutoring, I could tell by the way he walked that he had asked his teacher for forgiveness. That