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ADHD: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

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Time Will Tell. Almost any diagnosis of hyperactivity or attention deficit in preschoolers must be made tentatively. Highly active and impulsive preschoolers are not necessarily hyperactive. Such features are a normal part of early childhood development and do not necessarily mean that a child is ADHD. Indeed, many of the preschoolers who might meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD at age 3 would not at age 5. Any diagnosis at that age must be considered as tentative and only time will tell whether the diagnosis is truly accurate.

Be Realistic. By definition, ADHD preschoolers are going to have trouble controlling their behavior. Although it helps to be optimistic, it is unrealistic to bring an ADHD boy to a long church service or restaurant meal, expecting them to behave. It is better to make alternative plans (see below), than it is to find ourselves halfway through the service or part way through a movie.

One Day at a Time. With ADHD preschoolers, we are striving for small accomplishments or behavioral changes. If we set small goals to be achieved one day at a time, we will be successful. If our goals are too ambitious and beyond our child's capacity to achieve, everyone will be frustrated. Remember, we have years to teach our children what they need to learn about themselves and their behavior.

Small Steps, Simple Goals. We want to encourage cooperation and success by making simple requests and having very simple expectations. Start by asking a child to pick up only one toy and request more only when the youngster is adept at following through with that simple direction. It is better to put out small food portions that a child can easily finish, than it is for them up and down from the table. These small steps may not seem like much of an accomplishment, but over time they will build into important skills.

Plan Ahead. Parents with reasonable expectations and an understanding of their child's style, learn to plan ahead. They arrange for childcare at home or bring childcare with them. They order ahead at a restaurant or make plans to go for a short walk while waiting for dessert. They bring favorite tapes to watch when going to Thanksgiving dinner and have wrapped surprises or treats for emergencies. If parents do not plan ahead, they find themselves in virtually intolerable situations where their child simply cannot be successful.

Develop a Routine. A daily routine is the key to the success of an ADHD child. If a youngster is used to taking a bath every night after dinner and to brushing their teeth directly after every meal, they will learn more quickly. A consistent bedtime routine encourages cooperation and facilitates sleep. Proper routines, begun in the preschool years, helps build habits and skills that will be the foundation for self-control and responsibility in years to come. It is much easier for a parent to be consistent if they can refer to the family routine. Although no family has the same routine every day, there are always elements that we can refer to. In a sense, routines become "rules for the family" that everyone learns to follow. As children learn about the rules that guide our decision making (e.g., promoting safety, saving time and money, helping learn, being kind), they will ultimately become more cooperative and responsible.

Model the Routine. Preschool children learn a great deal through modeling of their parents. To whatever extent possible, you should try and model the routines that your children are expected to follow. It is best to go through the routines until our children can really understand and follow the steps involved.

Practice. There are certain things that are difficult for children to learn by discussion alone. They must practice, practice, practice. If you want to teach your 4-year-old to stay with you in the store or in a parking lot, you may need to make arrangements to practice these skills. If a child needs to learn to walk by the fish tank without reaching for fish, you may need to practice this many, many times.

Build Upon Interests and Talents. If you see that your boy or girl is interested in certain things (e.g., puzzles or drawing or listening to stories) build upon that interest. If they like to draw, find paints that they can use in the tub or drawing that they can do while in the car. Find paint games on the computer and draw with chalk on the driveway. Over time, we hope to build upon a child's interest and develop interests that will keep them busy and help them to interact successfully with their peers.

Keep Them Busy. ADHD children are much calmer when they have things to do. Children who can listen to story tapes in a restaurant or punch the calculator in the store are going to behave much better.

Develop Quiet Times. Every parent needs moments where they can have some peace and quiet or get things done. We need to develop some activities for our preschoolers that will give us moments of "free" time. Can the child take a 30-minute bath or watch a Disney movie? Will they dig in the dirt outside or play with their toy cars? Teaching children how to occupy their own time is one of the most important goals for ADHD preschoolers.

Simplify the Schedule and the Environment. ADHD preschoolers will get overwhelmed by their family's busy schedule. Too many toys and too much clutter makes it harder to build any sense of order and cooperation. If a child is having trouble, consider whether there is too much stimulation and too many changes for them to handle.

Finish What You Start. One of the important early concepts is "finishing" what we start. It is better for a child to complete a puzzle by doing the last few pieces than it is to do the first few pieces. Filling a small piece of paper with color is better than drawing a few lines on a larger piece. Small portions of a snack get eaten, while larger portions are left on the table. Children who get recognition for "finishing what they started", even if the goal is very short or very simple, will learn to complete tasks more readily and will become more goal oriented in school.

Build a Vocabulary. It is not too early to start developing the proper vocabulary. Concepts such as goals, rules, plans, finishing, "no big deal", etc. can become part of our vocabulary (and eventually part of our children's).

Be Positive. Almost everyone knows the importance of being positive with children and almost everyone finds that this is easier said than done. Try and build some type of routine or ritual or habit for giving positive feedback. When praising or complimenting your youngster refer to the routines or skills or vocabulary you are trying to teach, not just the behavior you are trying to reinforce ("Great Max, you got dressed before you turned on the cartoons").

Encourage Instead of Discourage. Almost by definition, ADHD preschoolers are told to "stop" or "calm down" or "behave." Although this is inevitable, the number of reprimands can be reduced by encouraging appropriate behavior. Rather than scolding for playing rough with the dog, teach a young girl to throw a ball for their dog or brush its fur. The more appropriate behavior we encourage, the less inappropriate behavior to respond to.

Your Child is Unique. One of the first things that parents do when an ADHD diagnosis suggested is search for information. Parents should be wary of anything that they read or hear, since much of the information is based upon stereotypes and generalizations that don't apply to their child. Books and articles about their youngsters and nothing they read should be accepted at face value. Parents know their children best.

Develop Your Own Approach. Friends, relatives, neighbors and even strangers will give you advice about how you should parent your child. The advice they give is usually the things that worked for them, not ideas that would help you. Some people will tell you to be less permissive, others will suggest that you be less strict. Some parents will advise a special diet, while others will suggest medication. Whether or not you listen politely is up to you, but you will drive yourself crazy if you try and take everyone's advice.

Consider the "Whole" Child. If focus is on a preschooler's behavior, we may overlook factors that have a powerful affect on a child's development. Nutrition, sleep, family schedules, time with parents, quality of day care, etc. can affect a youngster's behavior and exacerbate any problems with activity level or self-control. A lack of sleep seems to affect many of the children's behavior. Children who don't eat well may not behave well. Family stresses can affect a child's mood and may exacerbate an ADHD style. Too much daycare, not enough down time with parents can affect a child's activity level and mood.

Avoid the ADHD "Mentality." It is easy to get caught up in the ADHD hype, viewing everything that happens for a child through the perspective of an ADHD diagnosis. Not everything that occurs in a child is a function of hyperactivity or attention deficit. All children have good days and better days and not all troubled days are due to problems with self-control.

Nothing Works! Parents of hyperactive preschoolers will find that no one idea or approach is "the" solution to a challenging style that is both developmental and behavioral. The behavior of preschoolers is far too variable and fragile to permit any "solution." What parents should be looking for are strategies that appear sensible, even when they don't always change their child's behavior. Over time, parents will develop an array of approaches that they find helpful.

Consider the Medication Therapy Option Cautiously. Although medication is sometimes used with ADHD preschoolers, the medication benefits are usually less reliable and the side effects more problematic. If you are going to try medication, make sure that you are working with a very experienced physician and be prepared for some challenges. Also remember that medication may not help an ADHD 5-year-old but help that same youngster when he or she is 6 or 7.

Keep a File. It helps to start a medical and behavioral file that you have to share with doctors, teachers, therapists, etc. Keep copies of evaluation reports, test scores, report cards, etc. in a notebook. Insist on copies of reports and test data since it is your right and parental obligation to have the data and understand its implications.

Find Someone You Trust. Parents of ADHD preschoolers need to have someone that they can go to with questions and concerns. Consider a CHADD parent support group and find a clinician that is experienced in treating ADHD children, even if you are not considering medication therapy.

The Future is Bright. Many articles and books present a list of negative outcomes and speak discouragingly about the long-term prognosis of ADHD children. They point to the many problems they will incur in the teenage and adult years. Although ADHD presents some risks, many of the children do very well. Research following small groups of people treated 20 years ago will not tell us how the youngsters of today will fare tomorrow.