

4th Annual Michael Golds Memorial AD/HD Conference

Sibling Survival: Parenting Strategies to Help Non-AD/HD Children Cope.

Nanci Hester, M.S.

Parenting a child with AD/HD can be stressful, demanding and exhausting. Yet, being the sibling of an AD/HD brother or sister comes with a unique set of challenges and can be just as stressful. Non-AD/HD siblings often wrestle with a powerful range of feelings from anger and jealousy over the loss of parents' focused time and attention, to grief, sadness and guilt. Repeated disruptions of family activities can leave them disappointed. A household in a chronic state of chaos invites frustration and anxiety. A disruptive sibling might contribute to strained relationships at home and school. Many non-AD/HD children worry about the health of their sibling, wonder about their own susceptibility and are concerned about the visible wear and tear on parents.

Some will fret about where they stand in the family, confused about what role to take. Should they be the super-achievers, the perfectionists overcompensating for their sibling, or do they become the peacemakers and helpers, being as independent as possible? Others will weigh whether being the "good kid" is worth the effort. While undemanding and cooperative behavior may be welcomed by weary parents, it often gives the non-AD/HD child nothing in return. Inappropriate acting out may be a better bet to get the attention they crave, even if it's negative.

While it can be an enormous challenge to live with an AD/HD brother or sister, few siblings are readily equipped to effectively tackle it. Fewer parents are even aware of the challenge. Overwhelmed and completely consumed by the needs of the child with AD/HD; parents don't always recognize the effects on their other children. For the sibling without AD/HD, this means their needs are often overlooked. Unfortunately, it may take a crisis for their issues to get noticed.

It's often painful when parents realize how much an AD/HD child can impact the life of a sibling. But an informed parent is instrumental in helping a sibling learn to cope. Accomplishing this means looking beyond the needs of the child with AD/HD. Learning to recognize the needs of the non-AD/HD sibling enables parents to apply strategies which facilitate the coping process. When children are equipped with coping methods and survival tactics they become empowered. Confronting the challenge of an AD/HD sibling becomes less daunting and they can move beyond survival to effective coping.

Life with an AD/HD Brother or Sister: Potential Reactions of Non-AD/HD Siblings.

- **Anger:** Parents are too distracted, overwhelmed & exhausted; Sib demands and receives more attention.
- **Grief:** Loss of what is perceived as “normal family life”; Loss of parents’ focused time and energy; Loss of perceived idyllic sibling relationship.
- **Guilt:** Discomfort over negative feelings towards the AD/HD sibling/parents; Worry they contributed somehow to sib being AD/HD.
- **Survivor Guilt:** Wonder why they’ve been “spared” and what it means for them.
- **Embarrassment & Shame:** Sib’s inappropriate behavior subjects them to teasing and interrogation.
- **Confusion:** What is their role in the family? What are behavioral and relationship expectations?
- **Resentment:** Things seem unfair; Perceived differences in how siblings are disciplined and rewarded.
- **Anxiety:** Stressful and chaotic home environment; Unpredictable nature of AD/HD leads to worry about sib’s next “explosion” or “meltdown.”
- **Helplessness:** A belief there is nothing they can do to make the situation better.
- **Perfectionism:** The enormous burden of the “Good Kid Syndrome.”
- **Overachievement:** Need to compensate for the AD/HD sib and/or as a means to get desired attention.
- **Underachievement:** Attempt to avoid success and fail to take pride in accomplishments; Fail to reach potential because they’ll feel guilty about their abilities and fear hurting sib.
- **Depression and Withdrawal:** Failure to acknowledge feelings of sadness and anger may lead to depressive symptoms; Repressed feelings may produce an emotional shutdown.
- **Acting Out Behavior:** The need for attention, even negative, may be so great it fuels inappropriate behavior to get noticed. Anger may be misdirected towards friends, peers, parents or other family members.

Parenting Strategies to Help Non-AD/HD Siblings Cope.

- **Acknowledge and Validate your Child's Feelings:** Let them talk about life with an AD/HD sibling. Allow them to voice the fears, anger, hurts and concerns and validate what they say without making judgments. If talking is uncomfortable, have them put thoughts in a journal, write you a letter or draw a picture. They don't need to explain why they feel the way they do. Just let them know you accept their feelings. Fight the urge to jump in and defend the AD/HD sibling. Remember, your job here is to just listen.
- **Show Empathy:** Try and see life from your child's perspective. Imagine how it feels on a day to day basis to live with an AD/HD sibling and reflect this back to them. If your child is in tears because a carefully constructed tabletop project is in pieces, an empathetic comment from you might be, *"You look angry and upset. I bet it feels awful when your sister does things like that. It must be so hard."*
- **Ask for Input:** Ask how you could make things easier for your child to live with and understand their AD/HD sibling. Be receptive to their ideas, kids often have creative solutions. Knowing that a couple of friends are arriving for a sleepover party on the weekend, ask how you could help make the situation more positive.
- **Explain the ABC's of AD/HD:** Even a basic understanding of AD/HD makes it easier to understand and cope with the behavior of an AD/HD sibling. Lack of information only fuels irrational fears and misconceptions. Some children feel responsible for their sibling's AD/HD, believing they said or did something to cause it. Others worry about catching it, fearing it's contagious. Explain the symptoms, how it develops and what medications can do. Talk about things your family is doing to help the AD/HD sibling. They may even show empathy for their sibling and reframe some of the annoying behaviors. You may be surprised to hear, *"So that's why it takes him so long to do homework. His AD/HD makes it hard to concentrate. I thought he was just being lazy."*
- **Evaluate your Expectations of the Sibling Relationship:** Take an honest look at things and ask yourself if your expectations of how your children get along are realistic. Do you insist your children be friends at all costs and is the non-AD/HD child assigned the role of peacemaker, always "giving in?" Do you expect perfect behavior from your non-AD/HD child, or do they have the perception that you want them to be the "good kid?" Are all family members treated with respect, or is the AD/HD child held to a lesser standard? You may need to reassess what you expect from your non-AD/HD child.

- **Develop your Child's Assertiveness, Communication and Problem Solving Skills:** Help your non-AD/HD child respond with effective strategies when issues arise. Nurture feelings of empowerment. Coach your child and role-play to practice appropriate responses to sibling aggression, melt-downs or interruptions. Rehearse the use of "I" statements, e.g. "*I feel ____ when you ____.*" Practice the steps of problem solving: 1. Identify the problem, 2. Brainstorm all possible solutions, 3. Choose the best option, 4. Try it out, and 5. See if it worked. If not, try another option.
- **Make your Home User-Friendly:** Make sure your non-AD/HD child has a place in the house to escape and retreat from a demanding sibling. Take steps to assure your child has successful get-togethers with friends by planning *where*, *when* and *how* they will happen. Schedule visits when you're available to keep the AD/HD sibling occupied, or find a time when they won't be home. Offer to take your non-AD/HD child and friend to an out-of-the-house activity like the park, a movie or the mall. Before a visit, it may help to talk to friends, or their parents, about the AD/HD behavior of the sibling. Kids may be more comfortable knowing *why* a friend's brother runs circles around them, talks constantly and always interrupts.
- **Redefine the Concept of Family Outings:** Let go of the myth that your family must do everything together. Plan outings to accommodate your family's needs. Be flexible and creative. Not everyone needs to do the same thing at the same time. Arrive late, leave early and if possible, go in separate cars. Everyone deserves input for family activities, so don't allow the AD/HD sibling to always set the agenda.
Make other arrangements for the AD/HD sibling when your focus needs to be on the non-AD/HD child. Expecting an AD/HD child to sit through a sibling's music recital is a set-up for failure.
- **Be Fair With Rewards:** Are you often hearing the lament that things aren't fair? "*She gets money for doing homework and I get nothing.*" If using a behavioral incentive program with the AD/HD child, consider doing the same for the sibling. Since homework may not be their issue, help them identify another behavior and mutually agree on a reward.
- **Create Opportunities for Affirmation:** Encourage working to potential and embrace individual strengths and talents.
Schedule special, private time with your non-AD/HD child; go out to breakfast on weekends, run errands together or rent a movie and escape to another part of the house. Really focus on your child and listen to their ordinary concerns. Compared to their sibling, the problems may seem insignificant, but realize to them, their needs are just as important.

- **Seek and Welcome Support:** You may need to draw on other sources for help and support. National organizations can provide resources and help locate sibling support groups. Consider looking into CHADD, NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) and ADDA (Attention Deficit Disorder Association). Sometimes, individual therapy or family counseling may be helpful. Your pediatrician can make a recommendation.
- **Celebrate Positive Coping:** In the struggle of the journey, don't lose sight of the positive outcomes and inner strengths your non-AD/HD child gains through the coping process. Point out the compassion, acceptance, tolerance and yes, the patience being developed by having an AD/HD sibling. These positive traits may well generalize to other life situations. In their own small way, siblings can be terrific advocates for those affected by AD/HD. Talking about it is a huge first step in reducing the shame and stigma.

Nanci Hester, M.S., is an educator and writer of issues pertaining to mental health and the family. She has two children, one with AD/HD.

References

Faber, Adele and Mazlish, Elaine. (1990). *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*, Avon Books, New York, N.Y.

Greene, Ross. (1998). *The Explosive Child*, Harper Collins, New York, N.Y.

Hallowell, Edward M. and Ratey, John J. (1994) *Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood Through Adulthood*, Pantheon, New York, N.Y.

Meyer, Donald and Vadasy, Patricia. (1996) *Living with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.

Marsh, Diane T. and Dickens, Rex. (1998). *How to Cope with Mental Illness in Your Family: A Self-Care Guide for Siblings, Offspring, and Parents*. Putnam, New York, N.Y.

Secunda, Victoria. (1997). *When Madness Comes Home: Help and Hope for the Children, Siblings and Partners of the Mentally Ill*, Hyperion, New York, N.Y.