

# Setting Realistic EXPECTATIONS.

by Marie S. Paxson

**W**ould you go to the hardware store for loaf of bread?

Sounds silly, doesn't it? But most of us have done this when we believe someone else has capabilities they don't actually have. For instance, your child's last three playdates ended in tears and you automatically organize a fourth. Perhaps you thought it was a phase, or you don't like to dwell on past mistakes. Maybe. Or maybe you are looking for bread at the hardware store...

The expectations we have for our children with ADHD may not match what actually occurs. What is the solution? After all, having no expectations is impossible. And it is important to have standards.

Consider the child's perspective. Your children know when you're feeling disappointed in them. How puz-

zling to know that you've let your parents down, but you're not sure what you did wrong. Or you know what you did, but you don't know why it was wrong.

There is also a difference between "having expectation" and "setting expectations." One is passive and the other requires thoughtfulness and action. Having

expectations is where things usually fall down a bit. Like assuming the abovementioned fourth sleepover will automatically be better than the past.

Parents of children with ADHD will want to keep a disability perspective. Those who feel there are gifts to ADHD also understand that it presents many challenges. Keep in mind that many experts believe that children with ADHD have up to a thirty percent developmental delay. This is important, because your child's chronological age may not match his or her emotional and developmental age. A real-life example of this is when parents do not allow their sixteen-year-old child with ADHD to get a driver's license because their emotional age is closer to twelve, and twelve-year-olds should not be behind the wheel.

Another thing to keep in mind is whether the expectation has been communicated, and whether the child understood it. This is helpful to the child, and you will have a better outcome.

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**What to ask yourself**

As parents, we also need to ask ourselves some tough questions:

- **How do you know whether this is a realistic expectation?** (Hint: Reality test it with parents of children *with* ADHD... not without.)
- **Is the activity or opportunity something your child wants? Or something you want for your child?** Is your child showing any interest in this activity? Or are you trying to make up for something your childhood lacked? Understanding your motives can be very enlightening.

Having your child participate in an activity for a better future may be perfectly fine. But setting realistic expectations will be crucial for success.

- **Ask yourself, "Who is influencing me?"** Are you pushing your child in a specific direction based on family, community, or societal norms?

When my children were younger, most of our peers were involved with three after-school activities per week. My fellow parents and I compared notes about music les-

sons, sports, and sleepovers. But my children didn't transition well between different activities. The segue from school to a music lesson, then homework, dinner, free time, bath and bed meant six opportunities for grumpiness. But it never occurred to me to accept that while this schedule worked for every other family in our neighborhood, it did not work for us. I never even considered making any changes.

Do you want to know the worst part? I see the elementary school moms from the circle that heavily influenced me back then, and I can't even recall some of their names (I remember their children's names, however). So basically we spent some miserable after school hours to be "equal" to people who only mattered to me for a short amount of time.

● **Are your expectations reasonable in other aspects of your life?** Do you fall for hype? Or participate in it? For instance, do you consider a holiday meal to be a life-altering, meaningful, memory-making experience, or is it a festive meal where gifts are exchanged?

What are your blind spots? I tend to be overly optimistic in life and I have to guard against that. I still want to keep my optimism and my hope because they're good qualities. But I have to guard against thinking that everything is going to be okay with no action on my part. And I have to prepare—without it turning into dread—that sometimes things go wrong.

**Setting expectations**

Let's say you've done the soul searching and you understand your motivation. Your child is about to take part in an activity or opportunity where ADHD symptoms might be a challenge.

Here's how to set expectations with your child:

- You will need to be very basic when you explain. For an outing or an event you might have to start from leaving the car.
- Give no more than three expectations.
- Incorporate your child's input.
- Include the "dos" as well as "don'ts."
- If possible, allow your child to "check in" to see if things are on track.
- Discuss afterward.
- You may want to include a small reward.

Here's an example: You have no choice but to take your child with ADHD for your new driver's license photo at the DMV. Definitely not an ADHD-friendly or child-friendly environment.

- **Start with an overview that includes WHY this matters.** You might say,

“For mommy to be able to drive, I need to have a new driver’s license. We are going to a place that has a lot of chairs where we will be waiting for our turn. It might be kind of boring. They don’t have any toys, so we will bring some with us. When we go in, you can help me take a number from the machine. We can only take one number.

We will sit in our chairs for a long time, but sometimes we will go up to the desk when they call us. I will have to answer questions and fill out papers, so I that is not a good time for me to talk to you. We might go up to the desk more than once. Near the end, I will get my license and you can look at my new picture.”

● **Set your specific expectations right before you get out of the car.** Here are some examples:

“We will all need to be quiet while we are waiting. They don’t allow anyone to run, jump, or climb on the chairs. But we can read and play quiet games.”

“If it takes too long, we can switch to another quiet game or play I Spy. It will help me if you don’t complain about how long we have to stay there.”

“Sometimes I will be watching the big screen for our number, so I might need to concentrate.”

“Which books and toys do you want to put in the bag we are taking with us?”

“I will help you follow the rules. If you follow them really well, we will go to the playground (or some other place that allows lots of movement) for a short visit.

“Is there anything you want to ask about going with me to get my new license?”

While the suggestions above will maximize your child’s chances for success at developing a skill, we all know nothing is foolproof. Each child, and each parent, is an individual. You may need to customize these guidelines when setting expectations.

If you are like me, when you read the above scenario you realized that you will have to set expectations again before going to the playground. Well, that’s true. And hopefully you only have to set ex-

pectations one time for each location or activity. With maybe a little reinforcement now and then.

But it is exhausting, isn’t it? This explains why at the end of most days I was either tired or wired... or a weird combination of both. What helped the most with setting expectations and not becoming depleted? Two things.

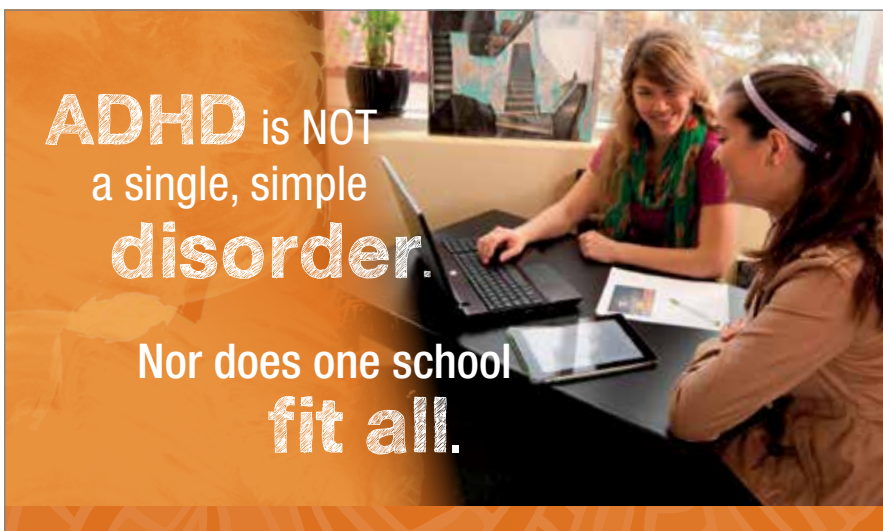
- **Mindfulness.** (I don’t have to enjoy a strategy to benefit from it.)
- **Peer support from CHADD.** Attending CHADD meetings helped me realize that I wasn’t alone. It helped me gain knowledge about my current challenges as well as prepare me for what was on the horizon. Sometimes I needed to vent, so that I could get back on the parenting horse with a better attitude.

Through my local CHADD chapter, I made friends with other parents. I attend-

ed some of the open meetings for adults with ADHD, so I could get a lifespan view. My whole outlook changed because I learned to have realistic expectations. I learned that my children could perform as well as neurotypical children; they would just need a lot of behind-the-scenes support.

Check out all that CHADD has to offer so that you can have an optimistic and balanced view of raising a child with ADHD. 🗨

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