

## Parenting When the Parent Has ADHD

*A chat with Patricia Quinn, MD*



**"FAMILY MEETINGS ARE GREAT** for getting everyone on the same page," says Patricia Quinn, MD, a developmental pediatrician and well-known international expert and speaker on ADHD. Dr. Quinn has authored or coauthored bestselling and groundbreaking books on ADHD, including *Understanding Girls with ADHD*, *Understanding Women with ADHD*, *100 Questions and Answers about ADHD in Women and Girls*, and *When Moms and Kids Have ADD*.

A graduate of Georgetown University Medical School, Dr. Quinn specializes in child development and psychopharmacology and has worked for over thirty years in the areas of ADHD and learning disabilities. CHADD recognized her efforts with a Hall of Fame Award in 2000. For the last decade, she has devoted her attention professionally to the issues confronting girls and women with ADHD, as well as high school and college students who have the disorder. She is currently the director of the National Center for Girls and Women with ADHD. She lives in Washington, DC, with her husband and four children, three of whom have ADHD.

**My house looks like a bomb went off. As a parent with ADHD (who has a husband with mild ADHD and a daughter with ADHD), I understand how important organization is to helping us all function well, but no one else seems to fully grasp its importance. How can I enlist the help of my family so that they aren't unintentionally working against my efforts?**

Family meetings are great for getting everyone on the same page. Hold weekly meetings to decide what needs to be done and who will do it. See what can be delegated and what needs to be done on a daily or weekly basis.

Ask for suggestions. When someone volunteers or has an idea for completing a project, it creates more buy-in. If you find that something is not getting done, call a meet-

ing and try to address the issue and see what the problem is. Make sure that each person knows that if they commit to a job it is their responsibility to see it through. And then have a party! Remember, everything doesn't need to be perfect, only passable. Words of encouragement are far better than nagging!

**How often do you suggest having a family meeting?**

I suggest meeting once a week at a prearranged time each week. Make it formal, with someone taking notes, and have rules—for example, no complaining unless you have a suggestion for a solution. Everyone gets a turn to talk. You could discuss chores and well as where to go on vacation, etc.

**I dread mornings and the chaos of getting the kids and myself out the door on time. The usual morning-routine advice doesn't seem to stick with me and I frequently feel overwhelmed. Help!**

I would suggest that you think about some alternate solutions to this problem. First, try to enlist help from the kids. Set up charts of the morning routine and have a family meet-



ing to decide what everyone is responsible for.

Second, see what can be done the night before—showers for the kids, having them make their own lunches, get their clothes and books ready, and so forth. Remember, you don't need to handle *everything* by yourself. It's important that your kids learn the skills of getting out the door on their own in the morning as well.

Third, try to do as much for yourself as possible the night before as well. Set an example for the kids and try organizing things together.

**Is it possible to have acquired ADHD after you are an adult? I used to be very organized as a young woman at college with three jobs and was very proud of myself. But after I had my kids, my life became chaotic and I find myself with a lot of the symptoms of ADHD. It is very frustrating dealing the image that I had of myself and who I am now. How can I change this?**

There is no such thing as adult-onset ADHD. That being said, many women who actually do have ADHD have been able to cope over the years because they have developed elaborate coping systems. They work harder and longer, not letting anyone know how much they are struggling.

In addition, they may become perfectionists and use lists or other techniques to cope. These women are bright and do well until the stressors in their lives exceed their ability to cope, and then they have more problems. Symptoms were always there, but they coped. Some women can do well until their estrogen levels fall as they approach menopause—and then their ADHD symptoms get worse and they can no longer manage.

Parenting is a difficult job for which few of us are adequately prepared. Add ADHD to the mix and at times it becomes *extremely* difficult! There are lots of things you can do, however, to address parenting when you have ADHD.

The first thing is to get your own ADHD treated. We all try to look out for our kids first, but this is one time we need to take care of ourselves.

Second, try to keep everything in perspective. Each response we make is one of many hundreds of thousands that will occur in our lifetime. Step back and ask yourself: Is this important? And, how much time and energy should I give to this one?

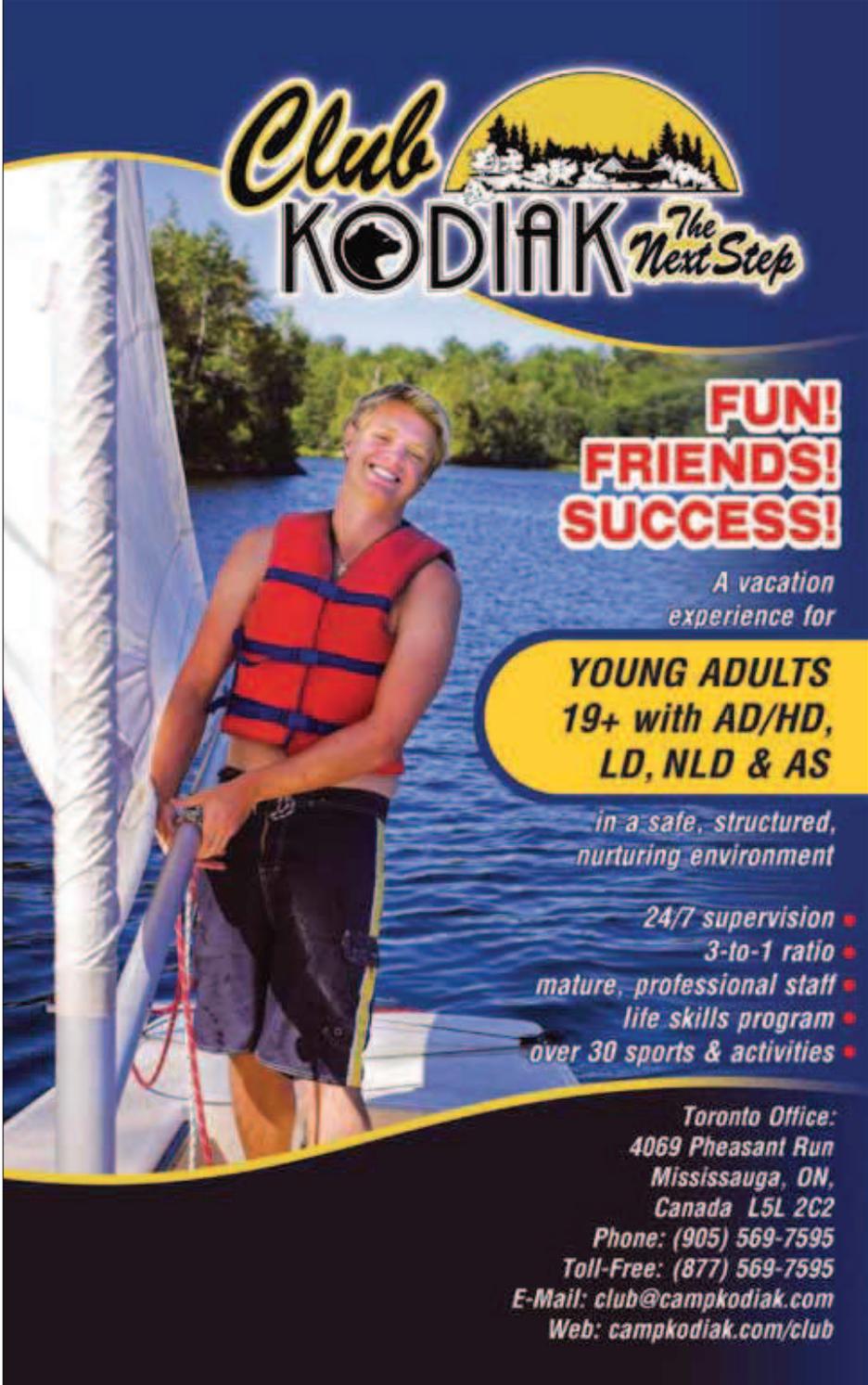
Develop a sense of humor and say to yourself often, It's only spilt milk! Appreciate your gifts and talents. I worked with one mom who said, My house may be chaos, but my kids have great Halloween costumes and we always have fun!

**My six-year-old has ADHD combined type and I have the inattentive type. How do parents in similar situations keep a balance between their kids and the family/dinner/cleaning? I especially struggle with the planning of things!**

Planning is always an issue and there is so much to do. The best strategy is to get your

ADHD treated but also to take some time for yourself each day to plan. Set up a routine as much as possible and remember to get help. You don't need to do it all by yourself.

That's where I find family meetings come in. Lay out what needs to be done and then discuss together who will do what. When kids and spouse commit to helping more will get done.



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**As a parent with ADHD of two teenagers who don't have ADHD, I am looking for help with relationship issues. My relationships with my teens were damaged when my ADHD and mood disorders were affecting our family life before I was diagnosed. Now that I have a diagnosis what can I do to improve our relationship?**

What a wonderful gift! Now I know it always doesn't feel like that, but you can be an example for your teens: first, by acknowledging how ADHD affected you and your relationships, and second, how you can all work together now to make things better.

Again, ask for suggestions on ways things can be improved. Be honest and open. Sometimes it helps to start the dialogue in a non-threatening environment. If your teens like to email or text maybe you can start there. Go out to a restaurant together—everyone is more likely to be open when eating in a public space. It helps keep emotions in check and it will seem like you are treating them more like adults.

The important thing to remember is that you have made progress and that you are trying. Ask them to accept that. If they don't, then you need to move on and do what is best for you. Once they see that, they will respect you for taking care of yourself and things will go on from there.

**My husband and I both have ADHD (me with anxiety, him with impulsivity). We have a four-year-old son, full-time jobs, and he has a long commute. We are both medicated and drowning. What strategies can we employ to establish and maintain a consistent routine and structure?**

*Simplify, simplify, simplify!!!!* Get together with your husband and discuss what you can eliminate and still be okay with your decision. Can you afford a house-cleaner once a week? Can you get rid of all the carpets? Can you use paper plates? Whatever works.

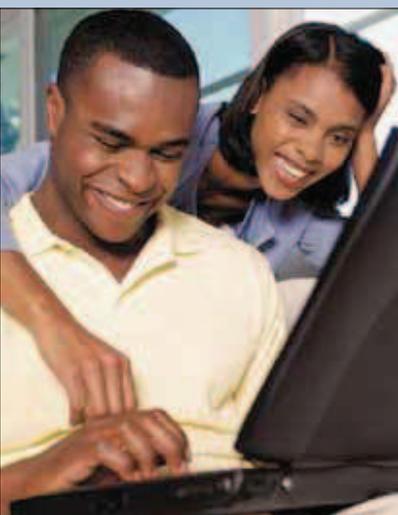
Also, try to divide household tasks based on who is better at them. And remember, just because you have done it that way, or because everyone else does it that way, is not a reason to continue doing it that way. Just have fun and remember to take time to enjoy each other as much as possible. It will make everything easier!

**I have recently been diagnosed with ADHD, which explains all the negative, confusing things I've had to deal with in my life. My nine-year-old daughter has all of my bad traits, and I think she might "suspect" something. She sees my inbox with all these emails about ADHD. I would like to "come clean" with her and try to move forward to help both of us. But I really don't want the neighborhood knowing about this, and my daughter can't keep a secret. Should I just wait to tell her until she's older?**

ADHD is only part of who you are. I would suggest that you take an inventory and discuss the idea of strengths and weaknesses with your daughter. While I would prefer to use the term ADHD and call it what it is, it is just a list that contains some of these strengths and weaknesses.

It's okay to be honest about them and it will help you daughter understand that it is part of life and that nothing is perfect. And when we have problems and face difficulties, there is always something that we can do about them. What a great lesson you can teach her by being honest!

**I have five children with ADHD. The most frustrating thing for me is I find it impossible to implement the structure they need. I am the one holding everything together but I can't even keep track of myself! I try and everyone else resists my efforts. I have yet to find really helpful advice if we aren't rich enough to hire tutors and coaches for all of us. School is especially draining.**




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I have three children with ADHD and some days were a struggle even for an expert on ADHD! My best-kept secrets were a family notebook and a family whiteboard in the kitchen. All schedules, due dates, field trip permission slips, etc., were kept in the notebook in the section for each child. All important information was on the whiteboard.

If it wasn't put there by the person who needed to be someplace or to get something done, it didn't happen. I also made my kids responsible and accountable from an early age. They could cook and do laundry and pack from themselves for trips from the age of four. If they forgot their underwear, believe me they didn't do it more than once! This gave them a sense of independence and accomplishment.

They were responsible for themselves and their work and their ADHD. They have all thanked me over the years and I feel very proud of them. Remember, you want to empower your children with ADHD, not enable them.

**My daughter has a lot of the same bad ADHD behaviors that I have—lateness, inability to keep places clutter-free, forgetfulness, emotionally reactive, and so on. How do I know if my daughter is just modeling my bad behaviors or if she really has ADHD herself? And if so, what do I do?** Why would she model your "bad" behaviors? She doesn't get much out of it, unless she gets more attention from you—but probably not positive attention. I would suggest that you discuss her behaviors with her teacher and then her pediatrician.

If indeed she has ADHD, you will have an opportunity to model the "good" behaviors of taking care of your symptoms and getting the treatment you need. You can work together on dealing with these issues and model behaviors for and remind each other of plans you have set. Also take time to enjoy each other. What a great role model you can be!

**I struggle with taking on everything for my family of five. My children (aged ten, eight, and seven) don't have too many true responsibilities. Of course, this makes having ADHD harder on me. If I work to empower my children and hold them accountable, when, as a parent, should I swoop in? I seem to swoop a lot, torn between feeling responsible and letting them fall on their faces.**

Here's where the family meeting comes in again. This is a time for you to air your feelings

and to discuss what needs to be done. When you ask the kids to be part of the solution, they are more likely to comply and buy into whatever program you are setting up.

Kids can understand that they need to face the consequences and are often harder on themselves and each other than you may be, and it takes you out of the role of being the "enforcer." They can decide when they need help and ask for it. Asking for help when we need it is a great skill that we all need to learn.

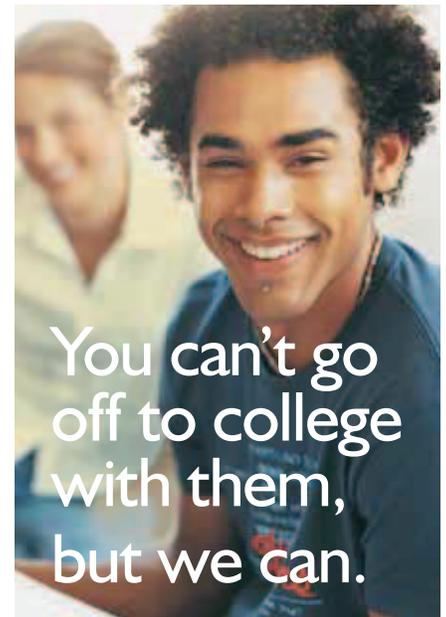
**I have trouble with following up with rules that I create. Do you have any tips for helping to enforce them? I'm afraid I am setting a poor example for my son, particularly since he tends to have a need for more structure than I have been able to provide. I am in grad school now, and feel bad that I am not able to provide as much structure as he needs. He said recently, "I forgot. If you forget, it's not your fault." I'm afraid that he's learning that from me, since I do tend to forget things and have said that as a consequence.**

How about using a star chart? Writing things down helps us to be accountable; you could both set up charts regarding what you need to get done with rewards and consequences. You are teaching him a positive way to handle "forgetting" and could plan a wonderful reward that you could enjoy together at the end of each day—such as a favorite video, an ice cream, or just a hug and storytelling. Go for it—be creative! See it as something you can work on together.

**I have two children and a husband with ADHD. I struggle with their lack of follow-through. My husband will, with the best of intentions, begin five or six jobs and leave four of them in various states of incompleteness. My kids often begin projects and also are onto the next thing without picking up what they finished.**

Let's hope your husband is being treated for his ADHD. If he is, it needs to be reviewed. If not, I suggest you discuss his getting treatment.

Regarding the kids' projects, it sounds like a rule is in order here. No dinner or snacks until after clean-up, or maybe they need a place to store unfinished projects. Or maybe a large bag or basket could be employed to make a clean sweep at the end of each day. All projects could either be thrown away at the end of the week or retrieved from the bag or basket as needed. I'll bet they learn to put away what they want to keep. Bring it up at your next family meeting! 



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