

# COLLEGE PREP



**BREAKING  
the CYCLE of  
DEPENDENCE**

by Judith S. Bass

**AS THE PARENT OF A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WITH ADHD,** you may wonder if your child will ever be ready for college. If he is reluctant to ask for help or use his accommodations in high school, how will he succeed in college? Convincing an adolescent to make use of support services is a source of contention in many families. However, laying the foundation at an early age can go a long way toward encouraging your child's acceptance of his ADHD, teaching good self-advocacy skills, and fostering independence.

Mr. and Mrs. Westin recently came to my office for assistance in finding a college for their son, Sam, a high school junior with ADHD.

The parents are panicking because Sam's grades are slipping and they have heard that junior year grades are supposed to be the most important. They are doing everything they can to help—waking up Sam each morning so that he gets to school on time, making him a good, healthy breakfast, giving him his medication, and sitting with him each night doing homework. Mom is in touch with Sam's teachers on a weekly basis to make sure he is handing in work. She monitors his grades through the high school's online system. The parents are worried that if his grades don't improve, Sam will not get into a "good" college.

Sadly, this is a common scenario, and one that does nothing to help a student like Sam become ready for college. Many parents focus on grades and test scores as a way to prepare students for college, but what they are missing is that readiness goes far beyond grades. Academic preparedness means being able to work independently, study for tests, ask for help when needed, and use accommodations that help students perform to the best of their ability.

By assisting Sam in every aspect of his daily life, the Westins are unknowingly undermining the very independence they are trying to create. The scaffolding they provide to ensure Sam's success in high school is actually holding him back from developing college survival skills. The message Sam receives is that he's not ready to be independent. Many times we impose our way of doing things on our children. When it doesn't work, we take over, because they cannot do it the way we think they should. Once parents start down this path, it becomes harder and harder to step back.

How can families break this cycle of dependence? If Sam's parents had allowed him to make mistakes from an early age and learn from them, Sam might have begun to develop the independence and self-advocacy skills he needs to succeed in college. Most parents view failure as a negative, or perhaps a reflection on themselves; however, without experiencing failure, children do not develop resilience and confidence in meeting challenges.

## How does your teen's brain work?

While we all receive information differently, we only truly understand how our own brains work. I remember years ago battling with my then-teenage daughter over listening to music while she studied. I have always needed complete silence to concentrate, so I assumed she did as well. Once I understood her need for white noise in order to concentrate, I was able to let go of my interpretation of the “right way” and let her do what worked for her. This is often difficult for parents to comprehend, but it is so important to do whatever you can to understand your child's way of thinking.

In the same vein, children with ADHD need to know that their parents love and accept them unconditionally, despite their missteps and perceived faults. A child with ADHD can be incredibly resilient with the strong support of parents and other family members. The child already knows when he has forgotten to study for a test or forgets to do an assignment. He is often his own worst critic. What he needs is acceptance, understanding and an offer of help.

Punishment does not work because a child with ADHD doesn't always understand consequences. He also might feel that a punishment is unfair, because he didn't intentionally forget to do his project; he just ran out of time. In my experience, children with ADHD love to learn, but not in the traditional way. Grades do not motivate them; their interest in the topic is more likely the motivator. Try to suggest fun ways to do school work or projects or ask your child how he would like to approach the assignment. You might be surprised at his level of creative thought!

Many parents are uncomfortable with the diagnosis of ADHD, as if it means their child is damaged in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. We should celebrate our children's strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses. Think about what you would do if you found out your child needed glasses. You might say, “Let's pick out a nice pair of glasses that will look good on you.” You wouldn't say, “Let's find some glasses that no one will notice, so they don't discover you're nearsighted.” Discuss ADHD as you would a pair of glasses. Explain to your child that this is just how her brain works. If we treat ADHD as a matter-of-fact condition, then children will not feel shame or embarrassment. Children pick up cues from their parents, so our words and actions need to be believable. Children in middle and high school almost always feel a sense of relief once diagnosed, because they now have an explanation for their actions, and can learn how to manage their ADHD.

ADHD can be the elephant in the room. We cannot ignore ADHD or make excuses for it by attributing the characteristics to something else. The child knows something is happening, and if no one is addressing his behavior or explaining why he might be struggling, he begins to worry that something must be seriously wrong with him. The secrecy and/or denial might even exacerbate his symptoms, causing undue stress and anxiety.

## Model and encourage self-advocacy

Julie Bulitt, LCSW, an ADHD coach in Montgomery County, Maryland, says parents of middle and high school students should give their child the tools he needs to do his best and let him figure out through trial and error, with guidance, what works and what doesn't. Bulitt recommends asking what she needs help with and then listening to her response. You might ask what part of an assignment or task he would like to do himself and what part he would like you to do. Allow the child sufficient time to accomplish the task, and then check back to see if there is anything else you can help with, while being careful not to take over the task.

Bulitt advocates finding a teacher, coach, or case manager who is on your child's side, with whom you can communicate when needed. Ask this person to keep an eye out for any issues, or to encourage the student to seek help from teachers or tutors. Meeting with an ADHD coach can be helpful if the student really has not grasped the concepts of time management and organization by high school. It is important that the coach find out what tools the student is comfortable with and not try to force one particular organization method on the student.

Similarly, the earlier you model and encourage self-advocacy for your child, the more likely he will seek out help as he enters high school and college. If he finds success, he will continue to use the support available to him. Students should attend IEP and 504 meetings beginning in middle school and be encouraged to explain their needs. Parents can model this by starting the conversation and asking the student ahead of time what he might want to say. By high school, your child should be meeting with her counselor and teachers to discuss any issues that come up. Parents can also attend initially, but should allow the child to interact with the teacher or counselor. By junior year, your child should be comfortable advocating for himself.

The overall goal is for your child to develop into a self-reliant, self-sufficient young adult, with the daily living skills needed to function independently in college and in life. Keep this larger goal in mind at all times. If that means your child will not be a straight A student, but will be one who has the internal motivation to learn, can advocate for him- or herself, learn from mistakes, and develop good work habits, he or she will be a much stronger student over the long term. Despite what you might hear from the media, he or she will also have many college options. 🍎

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**Judith S. Bass** is a leading national expert in the field of college placement for students with ADHD and learning differences. She is a past board member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association and is currently vice-chair of the Commission on Credentialing for the Association of Independent Certified Educational Planners. Bass is an instructor in UC-Irvine's Educational Consultant Certificate Program and serves as a consultant to several independent high schools in the Washington, DC, area. She is a frequent presenter at national and regional conferences as well as to parent groups throughout the United States. A longtime member of CHADD, she maintains offices in Olney, Maryland, and Vienna, Virginia, and meets with students from all over the United States.