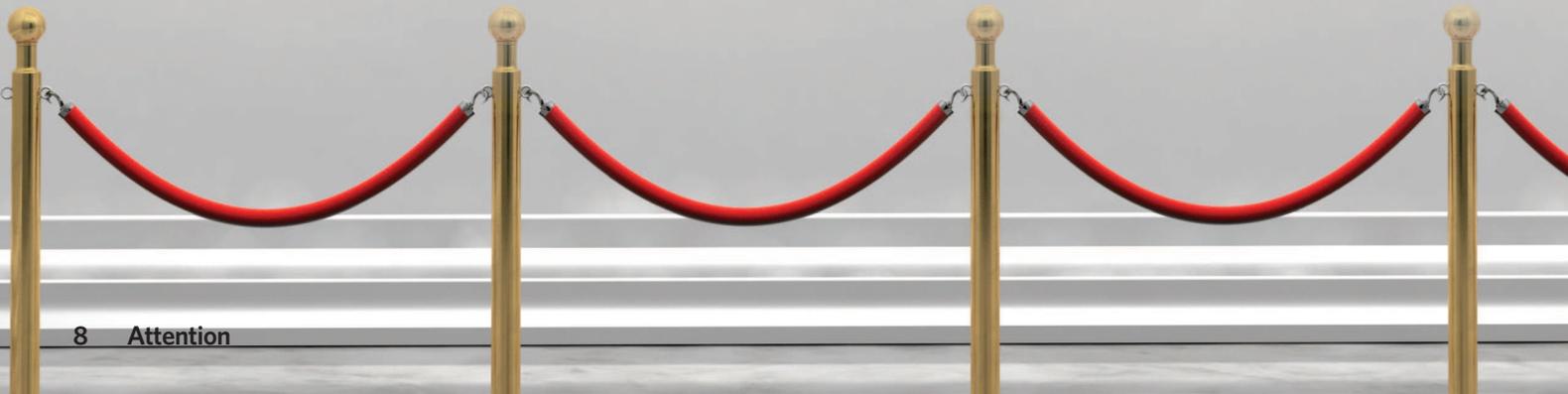
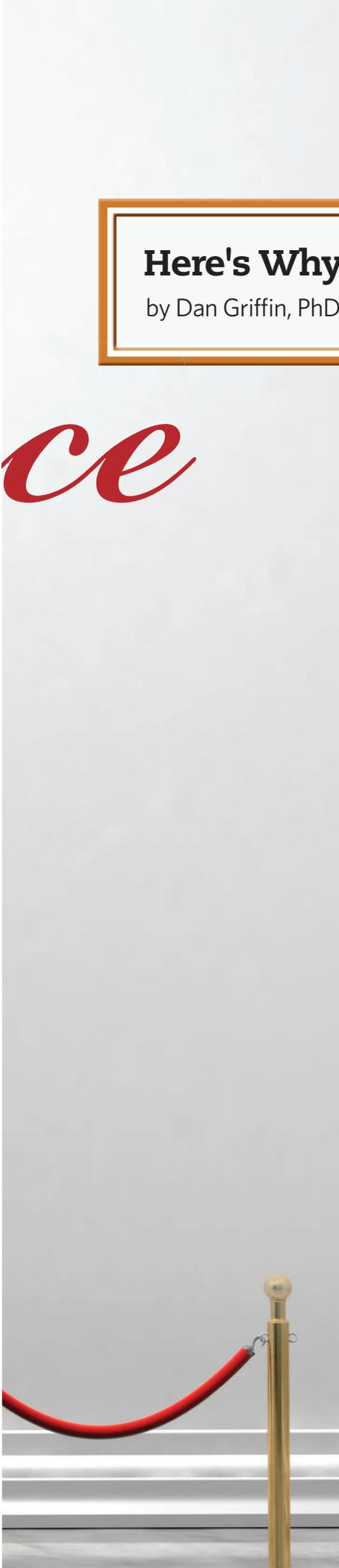


*Your Family
is a
Masterpiece*





Here's Why

by Dan Griffin, PhD

"THE FAMILY IS ONE OF NATURE'S MASTERPIECES,"

someone once noted, and, as a family therapist for thirty years, I agree. But most masterpieces are not fully realized at once; it can take a long time to get even little things right. And things always take a little longer in a family affected by ADHD.

Although an individual is diagnosed with ADHD, I find it more useful to think of the family as "having" ADHD, with most of it concentrated in one person, and often, two. A family-systems approach is often the most effective way to help with the more stubborn ADHD-related problems, especially when behavioral approaches and medication don't seem to be enough.

Most beleaguered families relentlessly strive to solve unrelenting problems, and they often get stuck. That is, the solution they are using becomes more problematic than the problem itself. For example, many people assume that parents should be able to control their kids' behavior, and that a good parent is consistently able to do so with the typical child-rearing repertoire. ADHD is an unyielding challenge to that assumption. The more parents try to control the behavior of a kid with ADHD by the usual methods, the worse they feel, and the kid's behavior doesn't get any better.

In need of a new perspective

George and Sharon were desperate. Their six-year-old son, Ethan, was diagnosed with ADHD four months prior to entering first grade. During the winter break, however, Ethan's behavior turned increasingly defiant—he "ignored" his parents when called, ran endlessly from room to room, and became physically aggressive when chased. Ethan let out bloodcurdling screams when forced to stop playing a game on the iPad.

While all family members hated this, it was most disturbing to Ethan's maternal grandmother, Gail. Sharon was often reminded of how "good" she and her brother had been at Ethan's age. Her mother

tirelessly pointed out how she would never allow the behaviors that seemed to be Ethan's defaults. When George tried to support Sharon by standing up to Gail and pointing out to her that Ethan is a different kid than the ones she raised, Sharon immediately felt compelled to defend her mother. These folks were stuck.

Family therapists look for "re-frames"—new ways of considering old patterns to evoke different behaviors, to get things unstuck. For example, some fortunate parents like Gail have the task of raising a kid who came into the world with an "easy temperament." These kids respond to transitions smoothly, focus efficiently, and cooperate easily. These parents often attribute their child's enviable assets to their own excellent parenting. To borrow from baseball, their kid was born on third base and the parents go through life thinking they hit a triple.

Other parents, like George and Sharon, are "drafted" into raising a kid with ADHD. That experience can make parents feel like they are playing way out of their league. Unlike those with kids who are "born on third base," these parents often feel anxious and stressed. And if a close relative is blaming them for the difficulties, these parents can feel like losers and downright incompetent.

The baseball frame heartened George and Sharon—it made the fact of temperamental difference more tangible. Even though they already *knew* Ethan was anything but an easy kid, the baseball metaphor made them *feel* something different—hope. That didn't solve their problems overnight, but hope prompts renewed effort, patience, and often, creative problem solving.

The early phase of parenthood

Most new parents are eased into the ride of their lives. The infant years are harrowing, but delightful. In exchange for enduring too much anxiety and too little sleep, parental newbies are rewarded with enchantment on a daily basis. This is a key time for rookie parents to develop their chops—the skills they need and a growing feeling of competence. Experienced nearby help is a big factor in this parental evolution. Even today, the median distance adult Americans live from mom is eighteen miles (*New York Times*, December 23, 2015). In Sharon and George's case, Grandma was about a block away.

The early phase can be really tough. Ethan came into the world a handful, preciously labeled a “fussy baby” by the developmental specialists his parents consulted. Fussy babies are infants who have sleep and eating problems or cry excessively. For most infants, this is a transient phase, but there are babies who remain inconsolable. A baby

While grandparents' input is valuable, a couple's move into parenthood often includes some tension with the grandparents, who are also learning new roles. This tension initially emerges as little declarations of independence—assertions that the new parents are in charge, despite their inexperience. For example, “We decided to not have Luca look at anything with an electronic screen until high school or eat anything with sugar in it... and it's ‘Luc-a’ not ‘Luke.’” It's not easy, but most parents and grandparents eventually make it through this period, and grandparents learn to respect their children's authority. This didn't happen in this case, though.

Fussy babies do not always grow up to have ADHD, but it can happen, and it happened with Ethan. His impulsive behavior and emotional reactivity became more problematic as he grew from toddlerhood to school age. As often occurs with such frustrating behavior, his parents lost their patience, yelled, threatened, and punished—with few positive results. This is hard enough for parents, but, this situation was worsened by Gail's criticism that George was “scaring the baby” when he raised his voice in frustration at an unflinching Ethan, who was also no longer a baby. At the same time, Gail indulged her grandson when he was on her watch. Getting to do what he wanted when he wanted decreased Ethan's defiant behavior—there was little to defy. Sharon was torn. Her mother had helped her survive the fussy period, and Gail still seemed as assured now as she did back then.

Getting things unstuck

Getting into the room with a whole family is a little terrifying, and many mental health professionals will work diligently to avoid it. Rapidly occurring interactions and intense feelings are chaotic and disorienting. To help make some sense of the complexity, family therapists will often rely on various orienting maps, like thinking in threes. Most of the time we think of relationships as between

two people, but nearly all of our important relationships are dynamically affected by a third party, and sometimes that triangle can prolong problems. The Sharon, George, & Company predicament is a good example of such triangulation. The most important triangles in this situation were Sharon-George-Ethan and Sharon-George-Gail.

Ethan's inflexibility and outbursts demanded his parents' attention, and he became anxious and harder to manage when there was tension in the house. Sharon and George, stuck in that triangle with Ethan, were prone to



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who cries for six or more hours a day and fails to respond to heroic soothing efforts makes caregivers feel utterly incompetent. Sharon was worried and desperate. While Gail had not raised a fussy baby herself, she maintained a sense of calm and confidence that astonished Sharon. Sharon was grateful that her mother was close by and relied heavily upon her in those early months. Unfortunately, the experience did not allow for the new parents to feel in charge. Even though a grandparent, Gail was the ranking officer in Operation: Ethan.



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their own intense emotional reactions—especially anger toward each other, in addition to not feeling in charge of Ethan. The Sharon-George-Gail threesome diverted Sharon and George from relying on each other in stressful moments with Ethan. Sharon felt like she was betraying her mother if she defended George. Sharon also feared that she might lose her mother's support, something she still needed. Sharon wanted a full partner, but defending George felt too risky.

This state of affairs improved slowly when George was able to grasp how difficult a spot his wife was in—having to choose between aligning with her mother or husband is a no-win situation. Sharon helped him appreciate this by avowing that she wanted him as an equal partner in raising Ethan and in life, while revealing her terror of losing her mother's support and even love. By being patient with her as she learned to set boundaries with her mother, George helped Sharon avert some of the guilt she felt while gaining confidence. The increased feeling of collaboration lowered the stress level in the house and the more friendliery climate kept Ethan calmer.

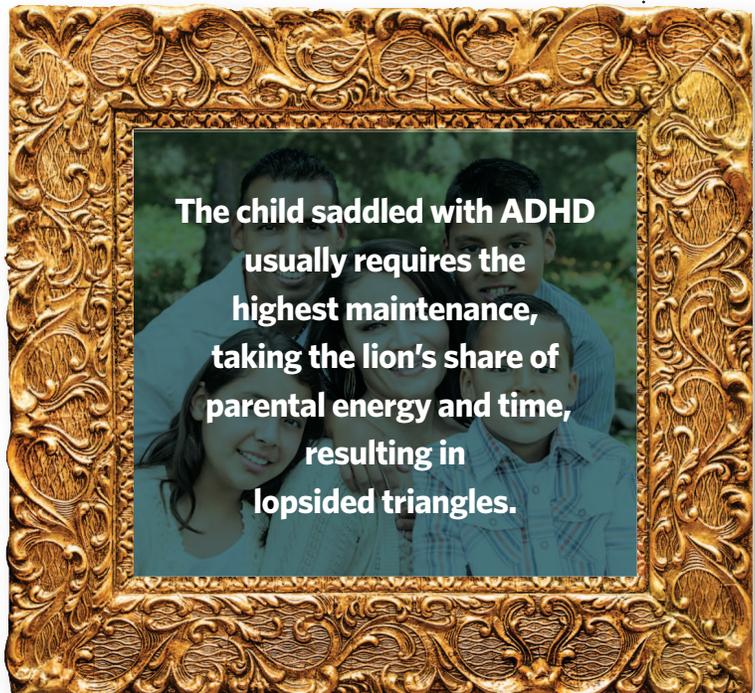
Reaching a tipping point

In this family, Ethan was the only child. The situation can be even more complicated in larger families. The child saddled with ADHD usually requires the highest maintenance, taking the lion's share of parental energy and time, resulting in lopsided triangles. Some siblings feel cheated and resentful, others feel compelled to assume parental roles, and others attempt to become independent before they are ready. The parents in these larger

families usually recognize the imbalances, but need help finding ways to wean their youngster with ADHD from nearly constant availability while avoiding train wrecks. It's hard to carve out ADHD-Free Zones to engage with their other kids.

In these and most family struggles, it usually takes a number of behavioral tweaks to reach a tipping point—the necessary number of small changes that bring about greater and more enduring change. The good news is that families naturally lean toward growth, once the most significant obstacles are removed. New hurdles, snags, and complications keep coming, though.

Raising kids is more like a baseball career rather than any single game or even an entire season. A slugger can make it into the Hall of Fame with a .333 batting average. That means he struck out two thirds of the time he was at the plate. Family members, too, can achieve major league wins even if they only get it right a third of the time. Just like in baseball, there's no clock. The game will take as long as it has to. But, with patience, persistence, and a new perspective, even a family with ADHD can get unstuck. 🍌



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*A licensed psychologist based in the Washington, DC, area, **Dan Griffin, PhD**, has over thirty years of experience helping people improve their lives. A senior teacher and trainer of clinicians, he has taught at Children's National Medical Center, New York University Hospital, Hofstra University, George Washington University, Washington School of Psychiatry, and the Minuchin Center for the Family, NYC.*