

# Graduation

MY CREATIVE, TALENTED, BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER is graduating from high school tomorrow!

It's been a long, rambling road from the moment she joyfully entered kindergarten to tomorrow's celebration of recognition. Many friends have come and gone; many tests have been taken, many meetings have been sat through, many adventurous field trips have been taken by foot, car, bus, and plane. At times she has been fiercely proud of her accomplishments, at others she has cried through her failures; but through it all, she has persevered. And although her test scores and report cards have never placed her at the top of the class, and teacher meetings have sometimes been trying, I couldn't be prouder of her for completing her journey and achieving her degree.

You see, my daughter has ADHD.

We didn't always know this, of course. We didn't know it when she was kept in from recess in kindergarten so she could go over her alphabet with the teacher again. And we didn't know it when I was impatient and cross with her night after night for not answering her addition and subtraction problems correctly. And we didn't know it when she proudly wrote her first full page of an assignment and came home tearful because the teacher had handed it back bleeding red ink in corrections.

We began to suspect it when she started becoming so anxious at school that she was twisting her hair to the point that some of it was coming out. And when she would know how to do a math problem one day but not the next. And when her standardized test scores came back unusually low, even though she knew the material well when we discussed it with her. And when the comments on the report cards stating that "she is bright but needs to pay more attention in class" started to pile up year after year.

Finding out why this was happening was an unexpected challenge. More than one school assessment concluded that she was anxious, but nothing more. She was "quiet," "sweet," and "supportive of other students"—in other words, not disruptive, so she couldn't have ADHD. Because we studied with her every night at home, and she worked very hard, her grades were acceptable, so she flew under the radar. Many school officials said they had limited resources and other students that didn't have the support she had, so they needed to concentrate on them. In other words, they weren't going to help.

Finally, in middle school, we took her to a neurologist, where we filled out questionnaires about family history and her current behaviors, and he asked us all many more questions. And we had our diagnosis: ADHD, inattentive type. He explained

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how her brain processed information differently. At the same time, we read *Delivered from Distraction*, Ned Hallowell's book on ADHD, and all the pieces suddenly fit together.

With a diagnosis in hand, we were finally able to get her a 504 plan that gave her some breathing room and addressed her educational needs: more time on some assignments and tests, seating in class where she would not be distracted, focus from teachers that would help bring out her strengths. Some creative and understanding teachers helped; others less so.

Then she hit high school. As it does with many students, the increased workload overwhelmed her. And although she did fine in some classes, she did poorly in others, and felt depressed about that. Some teachers ignored her 504 plan, and one even claimed there was no such thing as ADHD—kids just needed to work harder. Thanks to my wife's strong determination, we finally forced the school to test her. The results showed her deficits and convinced the high school to develop an IEP for her. I was grateful for the effort that the IEP team put forth, but there was not much discussion of Emma's strengths, and we weren't able to stomach the idea of her having a high school career that focused on her weaknesses. We started shopping for a new school.

One charter school we found fit the bill. The students had, as a matter of course, meetings with a dedicated "education specialist" every month, to report progress, address any deficits, and revisit the path forward. The teachers were caring and creative. And the students were supportive of each other.

While my daughter's challenges continue to affect her life and grades, the school gave her a supportive, creative environment to develop herself, for which I am grateful. She has learned how to better organize her activities and responsibilities. She has developed an appreciation of and talent for photography. She has learned about the broader world around her and her place in it, and is protective of the natural environment and those outside of her small-town circle. Overall, it's been good.

Over the years my daughter has had to watch her peers receive accolades for their academic achievement, while her hard work and her gifts that exist alongside her ADHD—her creativity, her musicality, her ability to talk with people and bring diverse groups together, her talent for problem-solving, and so many more—were ignored, because we don't grade those things.

But tomorrow, she's going to walk on stage in front of her school community and receive the recognition that she so richly deserves.

Happy graduation, Emma! You've earned it. 🎓

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**Mark Wilson** is a writer and editor who lives in Nevada City, California. He continues to be challenged, amazed, enriched, and inspired by his friends and family members with ADHD.

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