

Understanding and Supporting Girls with ADHD



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What are some of the unique factors for girls with ADHD?

Most girls do not show full symptoms of ADHD until puberty when estrogen levels increase in their body systems, affecting cognition, mood, and sleep. In addition, they are more likely to have the inattentive type of ADHD. They don't always show noticeable symptoms related to hyperactivity that others see as distressing. Instead, they have more internalized symptoms.

In general, the societal expectations for girls are to accommodate the needs of others and be passively compliant, cooperative, neat, and organized. Most girls feel compelled to strive for these expectations and as they struggle to achieve them, they internalize their feelings and then experience constant anxiety about being judged as inadequate.

How can I show affection to my daughter, who is sensitive to touch and does not like being hugged?

Often girls with ADHD have a physiological sensitivity that results in their not wanting to be touched or feeling really sensitive to physical affection, such as hugs. The best thing to do is to find out what type of interaction will work for them, because they do want affection.

Start by communicating about it. Ask your daughter about what is okay and what is too stimulating. Remember that since this is a physiological response, it isn't something that they have control over. Talk about ways other than a hug that you can use to express affection.

Why is conforming so hard for girls with ADHD?

Conforming behaviors require a perfect choreography of executive function. Girls must organize themselves, prioritize, and plan what they're going to do and say. They have to be on time and listen quietly without tuning out, getting bored, or interrupting. They also have to self-monitor by asking themselves, "What did I do or say?" and "How did they respond?" and then be able to make small changes.

Even when all these skills are intact, they can't always orchestrate them to work together when they want. Conforming is literally difficult because of how their brains work.

How can we help our girls prosper?

You can help girls thrive by paying attention to the type of message you give them to help them change their view of themselves relative to the world. People with ADHD often have strengths in terms of interesting and novel visions of things because of how their brains allow them to think outside the box. Embrace the fact that this is how their brain works, and help them realize that conforming is not necessary or healthy. Help them to accept who they are rather than hiding their true qualities and adjusting for other people.

Strive to help them create a sense of self where they feel good about themselves. You have to help them believe that they have the potential to do what they want to do. If they feel confident that they can have an impact in the world and it can be on their own terms, that's about as good as it gets. ADHD will not stand in the way of that. 🗣️

Robyn Maggio, MSW, is the education and training coordinator at the National Resource Center on ADHD.

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