

Doing Things at a Different Pace

by Kelly Cavanagh

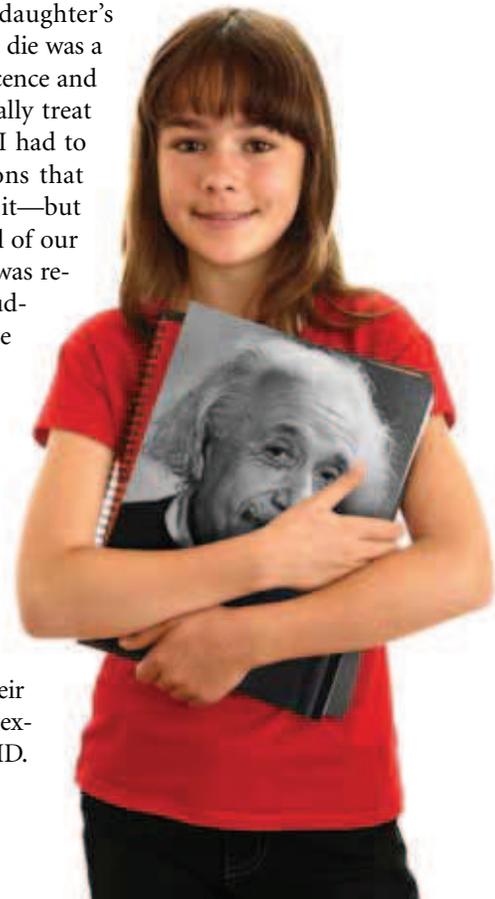
"I WISH I WERE DEAD." It was a sentence spoken by my daughter, who was twelve years old at the time. Her sentence would change how I treated this disorder, ADHD.

Four years earlier her second-grade teacher had suggested to me that she probably had ADHD, based on what she could see in the classroom. I thought ADHD was just an excuse for bad parenting. Sure, I had to drive her back to school every day to get something she missed for homework. I thought I was teaching her that she couldn't just forget her papers so she could get out of doing the work, so every day I was there. Not that I ever saw any other parents there picking up forgotten schoolwork.

Fast-forward to fourth grade, when she couldn't make any friends in her new school district. When the girls she'd invited to her birthday party made her cry and I had to scold them for doing so. Looking back, I was no better in my ignorance. Discipline and punishment were daily. I'd long ago given up on star charts and the like. My neighbor recalls the time my daughter's grounding extended from one week to two months (grounding for what? she didn't have any friends except the shy little boy next door, who had Asperger syndrome). Grounding was impossible to implement anyway, and speaks more to my determination that I was to blame for her behavior rather than her neurobiology.

Sixth grade was hell. Middle school and all the organization issues that go with it are notorious for messing with our ADHD kids. My daughter's statement that she wanted to die was a flashback to my own adolescence and a wake-up call for me to really treat this disorder for what it is. I had to change my long-held notions that I could fix it. I couldn't fix it—but I could get help and make all of our lives better, because no one was really happy in my house including me. And that is quite the understatement.

I've come to accept this ADHD for what it is. I've come to accept that we naturally do things at a different pace and differently than a lot of other people. We are not a Stepford family. We are individuals and we are creative, and if others can't accept it that's their issue. I've tried to educate my extended family regarding ADHD.



I am patient in their acceptance of it because I was like them once, too. I do what I can to educate others and find that more people, especially the younger generation, are more understanding of our struggles. They grew up knowing kids who were treated for it or had siblings with it, so it's not such a foreign concept to them.

My concept of treating ADHD has changed considerably. I've picked up some pearls of wisdom from others who have gone before me. I'll share them with you in the hope that you find some comfort in them. This is a marathon, not a sprint. You must pace yourself or burnout is inevitable, and burnout isn't good for you or your child.

Nowhere but our schools are you expected to do well in all subjects at all times. Adults usually gravitate to where their strengths are. So help your child find his or her strengths. If she can graduate high school feeling good about herself, she should be able to find a place where she succeeds and is happy. Do all you can to minimize his homework load while he is in school. That alone takes a huge stress off family life, in my opinion. When my daughter switched to a vocational school that had minimal homework she began to get As and Bs. She is a smart girl, but not turning in homework gave her failing grades and a sense of personal failure which she didn't deserve.

As a parent, I've changed my primary focus from grades to making sure my children are moral, ethical individuals who know they need to contribute to their world. Not that grades aren't important, but my kids are more than the sum of their school grades. Just because they may fail a subject doesn't mean they themselves are failures, and don't let anyone make you feel that way. Remember, Einstein's teacher once called him a "dumb ox." Oops! Try to always have someone physically at and on your side at all IEP meetings. You can thank me later. I used to think the teachers and I were gathered together to find ways to help my kid. I no longer feel that way and we'll leave it at that.

Remember that, in general, our kids are behind their peers developmentally by three years on average. They play better with younger kids and with other children who have ADHD. Don't push them into relationships that are too "old" for them. Likewise, put boundaries on them that are developmentally appropriate if not age appropriate. Just because everyone else gets their

driver's license at sixteen doesn't mean my kids will. Eighteen is the rule in my house and has been since they were little, so there's no discussion about it.

Work on getting a thick skin for yourself. Be educated enough to know when other people aren't, and don't get too defensive. It's exhausting. Surround yourself

with others who know your struggles and appreciate them. The laughs I share with my friends who struggle with the same issues are incredibly therapeutic. Sometime in the future, I'm sure there will be a definitive test for ADHD and other neurobiological conditions, and then there will be no need for arguing or defending. 🍌