

“Home Is Where I Belong, Right?”

by Sheila Blaine

AS PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD, we’re painfully aware of their social struggles at school and in group settings. We can see it unfolding right in front of us—first on the playgrounds, then in the classrooms, the sports teams, the group projects, youth group, and it goes on and on. Try as they might, our kids can end up feeling stupid, left out, not good enough, different, and generally just “not belonging.”

What we might not be so aware of is this: They can feel it at home, too. I don’t think I understood this until one night, while my eight-year-old daughter was showering, there was an unquestionably serious screech from upstairs. Blasting through the door, I

found her standing there, wet and naked, with blood running down her leg, and saying through sobs, “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry! I don’t belong in this family, Mom. I’m too stupid. I just don’t belong with you all. I’m so sorry!”

Just typing that sentence right now still drops my heart and opens the tear ducts. She had tried to shave her legs with her older sister’s razor. She knew it was wrong, and she knew we had asked her time and time again not to touch it (and asked her sister a thousand times not to leave it in the shower!). But there it was... right there in the shower... testing her impulse



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control, which is fairly nonexistent by late evening. I knelt down and wrapped my arms around her, and we both cried for a while.

After all the books on ADHD, the training, and the presentations; after fighting for her needs at school, and explaining her behaviors to friends and family; after all that, how could she not feel loved and accepted in our home? It broke my heart. But it also opened my eyes.

In his book, *Taking Charge of ADHD, Third Edition: The Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents* (Guilford Press, 2013), Russell Barkley writes, “Children with ADHD wish to present a more positive view of themselves to others than is realistic in an effort to be more liked and positively evaluated by others, and out of fear of admitting they are not as good as they believe they ought to be.” This is true at home as much as it is out in the world.

Kids with ADHD clearly see that their siblings are “in trouble” far less than they are. They deeply feel the blame laid upon them for the fights, the messes, and the general craziness of trying to get through the day. But many of them put on a brave face or adopt a defiant attitude. Still, that sense of not belonging swirls around in their heads like dry leaves in the wind. Until one day, that feeling surfaces in your child because she has done something so wrong and dangerous—something her siblings surely would never do—that she can’t defy it anymore.

Rather than go down the “What have I done wrong?” path, I chose the path less traveled—the “What can I do better?” route. I educated our two older daughters about ADHD, to the point of eye rolling and “I get it, Mom.” They are more patient with their sister and understand her not-so-apparent feelings. We never use the word “fault,” but instead talk about “accountability.” When she balks at chores, I tell her, “You belong in this family, and that’s what we do around here—chores.” And there’s a whole lot of “I love you” reminders, especially after discipline.

It’s these small changes that I hope quiet those swirling leaves of loneliness in her head. Yes, she’s in group therapy with other kids that have ADHD, and she’s on medication. These things help with focus in school and behavior with others. But with all the daily negative messages I know she’s receiving (or inferring), we’re trying to give this far-less-than-perfect family a more positive and accepting home. 🐾

Sheila Blaine is a writer based in Virginia.

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