

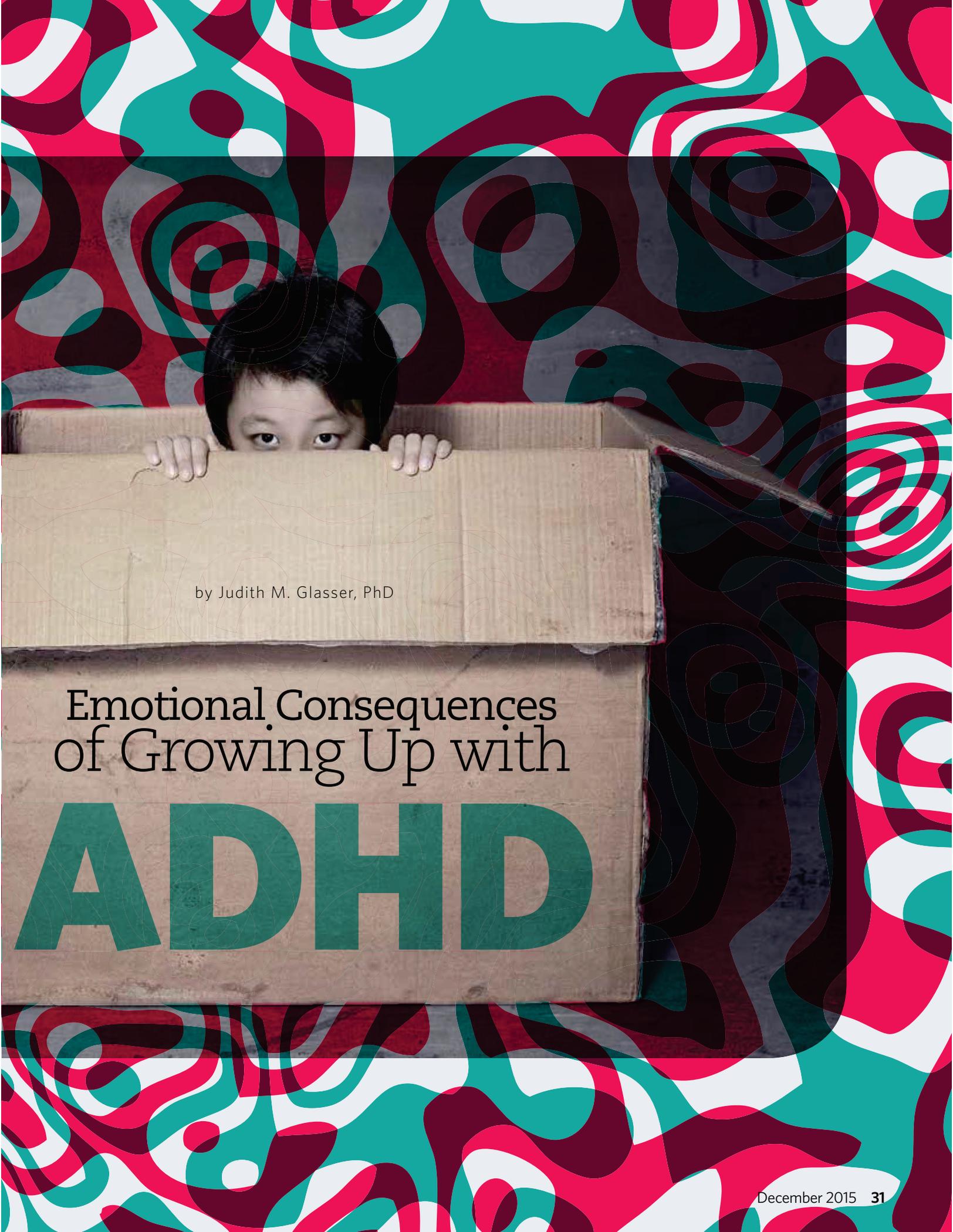
**S**AM (not his real name) was in my office last week with his mother. Sam is a very bright 11.5-year-old with ADHD as well as learning disabilities. I told him that I was speaking to a group of parents and teachers on Wednesday. Then I asked him what he would like me to tell them about what it is like for him in school. This young man, who is usually very quiet and sullen in my office, burst forth with the following statements.

“I get tired and I lose stuff. Every time the teacher calls on me there is a 25 percent chance I’ll get the right answer. I don’t like it when all the other kids have finished their tests and I’m still working. I get distracted. They do fun things and I didn’t finish my test and I’ll get all the last answers wrong because I’m distracted. And when other kids, when they yell and they aren’t listening, I don’t like it because they waste my time.” When I asked him how he feels about all of this he replied, “Upset.”

Sam expressed some of the feelings that are common among children with ADHD.

- Many kids with ADHD often feel ashamed and embarrassed. When I said this to Sam, he nodded his head as he cuddled with his mom.
- Also some kids feel sad and discouraged.
- It can be very frustrating to have ideas in your head and you can’t organize or find the words to say them. Sam nodded his head when I told him this.
- Many children with ADHD also grow up with a sense that they can’t learn and can’t have an impact on their lives. This can lead to having thoughts about themselves that are very negative, like the ones Sam had. (*I always lose things, I forget things, and I can’t finish my work like the other kids.*) They often blame themselves for their problems.
- These thoughts can lead to lowered self-esteem and to negative beliefs about themselves, such as *“I’m stupid and I’m no good at school work. I must just be lazy like everyone says. I’m never going to amount to anything. I’m inadequate.”*
- Negative self-talk can lead to depression. Of course, depression can also lead to negative self-talk. This can become a vicious cycle of negativity and frustration to everyone: the child, the parents and the teachers.
- Depression and frustration can lead to active or passive-aggressive behaviors. Active aggression can look like oppositional and defiance. Passive aggression is not doing what is expected. Both of these behaviors can be frustrating to parents and teachers alike.
- Children with ADHD can also become extremely anxious. They can worry about whether they have forgotten something and whether or not they can get things done on time.
- They procrastinate and get behind on their work, then get overwhelmed and feel like they have dug themselves into a hole they can’t get out of. Then they withdraw and give up and the world comes down on them hard. Parents ground them and they can get detentions at school.





by Judith M. Glasser, PhD

# Emotional Consequences of Growing Up with

# ADHD

Often parents have their own feelings about the child's difficulties, which can complicate the situation. By the time they get to my office, many parents are anxious and angry. They have often been told their child is not working up to potential. Parents may have had their own struggles with the same symptoms. After all ADHD is often due to genetic factors.

I have seen several situations:

- The parents did not have difficulty in school, were excellent students and have advanced degrees, and think their child is willfully not doing what they are supposed to do. They may be aware the child has ADHD but do not understand the impact of this disorder on the child. They may suffer with the misbelief that medication should be solving the problem.
- One or both parents had the same problem and may or may not already be diagnosed with ADHD. Sometimes in this situation the parent may desperately not want this to be the case for their child and may be very unhappy to see their own pattern developing in their child.
- One parent may also have ADHD and the other one doesn't and never had any difficulties in school and has no understanding of either the spouse or the child. This parent can be angry with both of them. There can be family dynamics that develop that can interfere with the family's ability to help the child.
- Parents may have never understood their own struggles in school. Their child's struggles can bring back painful memories that need to be dealt with.
- Or there can be the sense for the parent with ADHD that "I did it by hard work and so can she." They may not understand that much more is demanded of children today in school.



So what is a parent to do?

- First and foremost is to gain an understanding of what the child is good at and what the child is struggling with. This is where comprehensive diagnosis is essential.
- There are two questions that need to be answered: Are these symptoms due to ADHD or to something else like a learning disability or emotional problem? The second question is, if this is ADHD, is there something else that is also going on that is interfering with the child's ability to be successful?
- The parents need to gain a real understanding of their child. They need to learn everything they can about the issues that the child is confronting. They need to change their story about their child. It is not that the child is lazy; the child has ADHD and is perhaps demoralized.
- It is also extremely important that the child begins to understand the things he is good at and the things that give them difficulty. After all, everyone's brain is different. We all have things we are good at and things we need help with. The child may need to change the story he has about himself.
- Finding what the child is good at and letting the child engage in those activities on a regular basis is essential. Parents can become so involved in remediating the weaknesses that they can forget to let the child do the activities he or she is good at. "Over-therapizing" the child can be as harmful as not doing anything.
- That being said, emotional issues related to the academic issues and ADHD need to be addressed by parents and child in an ongoing way. It is often necessary to revisit these issues over time as the child develops and encounters different types of difficulties.
  - Family therapy can be helpful to assist the family with providing a supportive environment for the child.
  - Providing assistive technology can be very important to help the child be successful.

Many children with ADHD do not grow up with low self-esteem or negative thoughts about themselves. There are things that parents can do to help prevent these consequences, although, of course, we can't prevent genetic involvement. Understanding the child, learning about ADHD, and handling their own emotions about the child's difficulties are among the most important things a parent can do. CHADD is an excellent resource for information about ADHD, for resources and for emotional support from parents struggling with the same issues. 

**Judith M. Glasser, PhD**, is a clinical psychologist based in Silver Spring, Maryland.