

Parenting Your Child  
with ADHD for  
**Career  
Success**



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## **W**HAT DRIVES A PERSON TO CHOOSE A MAJOR, A FIELD, A JOB?

This is an extremely complex question. Research shows, and my experience supports, that several factors weigh into early career decisions—including teacher and parent feedback, interests, known aptitudes, as well as some healthy fantasies about what the day to day will look like.

Often feedback from parents and teachers is on target. Unfortunately, however, sometimes negative messaging, particularly for people with ADHD, can get stuck in a child's or adolescent's head like a broken recording. Unfortunate comments such as *"If you don't improve your grades, you'll never become an x, y, z"* or *"What's wrong with you?"* can have long-lasting and devastating consequences. Positive messages and support can make all the difference, but it is hard to know how to direct our kids. Parents are in a very tricky position when it comes to offering advice and support. How much is just enough? Too much? Too little?

When people describe their ADHD and its relationship to career choice, they often mirror other dynamic and creative high achievers who get their work done in a pressure-prompted nonlinear manner. Instead of focusing on the unique challenges of ADHD, an individualized strengths-based approach is essential, one in which a person can identify their multiple strengths and interests. While limitations should be acknowledged and understood, everyone should find that place for work where alignment with skills and interests is found and energy can flow.

Would you encourage someone who fears water and can't swim to become a swimmer? You would instead encourage them to find a land sport. Some people insist that work should be "hard" and that we each have a responsibility to push through limitations. But work should not feel "hard"; one should focus on areas that come naturally. Nobody should be watching the clock from boredom or lack of engagement.

Temple Grandin, now a prominent author and speaker on autism and animal behavior, had an extraordi-

narily difficult childhood filled with various diagnoses to explain her "different" behavior. There is an unforgettable line in the movie that depicts her life in which her mother, who was a huge advocate for her, speaks passionately on her daughter's behalf. She says, "She's different—not less."

Explore this notion as it relates to attention and career. Paying attention differently and struggling with executive functioning doesn't always mean less overall ability. While it is true that people who have ADHD struggle more in traditional learning environments and in sedentary, repetitive, data-driven roles, it is so critical to question the notion that people with ADHD will struggle in traditional careers.

### **Ten tips for parents**

A parent's role can be integral to their child's career success.

Parents consciously want the best for their children, but because of unconscious patterns, current pressures, and concern for their children's well-being, they may have trouble discerning what that is. We should want our children to reach for the stars and surpass our success. Sometimes, we may also, unconsciously, want them to fulfill our unfulfilled dreams. The dynamics between parents and children can get complicated as parents assert their opinions, and adult children try to assert their independence.

There are multiple ways parents can positively impact their child's career growth. The following are ten best practice tips for parents who want to help their children succeed in the career journey—without compromising the relationship.

**1 Allow your child room for error.**

Are you the parent who sets the alarm so your child won't miss class? Children whose parents do everything for them can end up quite compromised and not be able to make their own decisions. Our kids need to skin their knees and get back up; they need to learn about consequences and responsibility. It can feel like an impossible ask to let your child fail a course, take an extra year to finish school, or take a job that you feel is misaligned, but allowing them to make decisions, and learn that they can thrive and survive the consequences of their actions is a great gift. It can take a lot of restraint.

**2 Encourage exploration of interests.**

Don't insist that your child study something just because you believe it will further their career. Let your child find what interests him or her, then explore career opportunities within that discipline. It can come as a surprise that our children are very different from us—but whether it's math, dance, psychology, business, or literature, our children are born with unique temperaments and personalities. If you watch them closely—observing the television shows or movies they choose, the hobbies they love, the websites they visit, and the topics they chat about with their friends—you will learn something very important about their unique interests.

**3 Do not impose your values on them.**

Values are defined by what is important to us. In a career, this can mean anything from money, work-life balance, intellectual achievement, security, helping people, etc. We are all seeking various things from the workplace. So often we confuse our values with those of society, culturally and from our parents. Children are given so many messages about what is important in a career. It is often difficult for them to discern their own. Be mindful of where your values might conflict with those of your children. Often you will have shared values, but often values can be a reaction to the environment of early childhood. For example, if a family experienced struggle around finances, the child might unconsciously repeat that struggle (because it is familiar) or make choices to ensure that they never have to struggle with money again.

**4 Don't expect them to fulfill your unfulfilled dreams.**

Unfortunately, unfulfilled parental dreams can show up as advice. Many people have limited opportunities due to financial or educational limitations or other life circumstances. When they see potential in their children, parents may have difficulty separating their dreams and

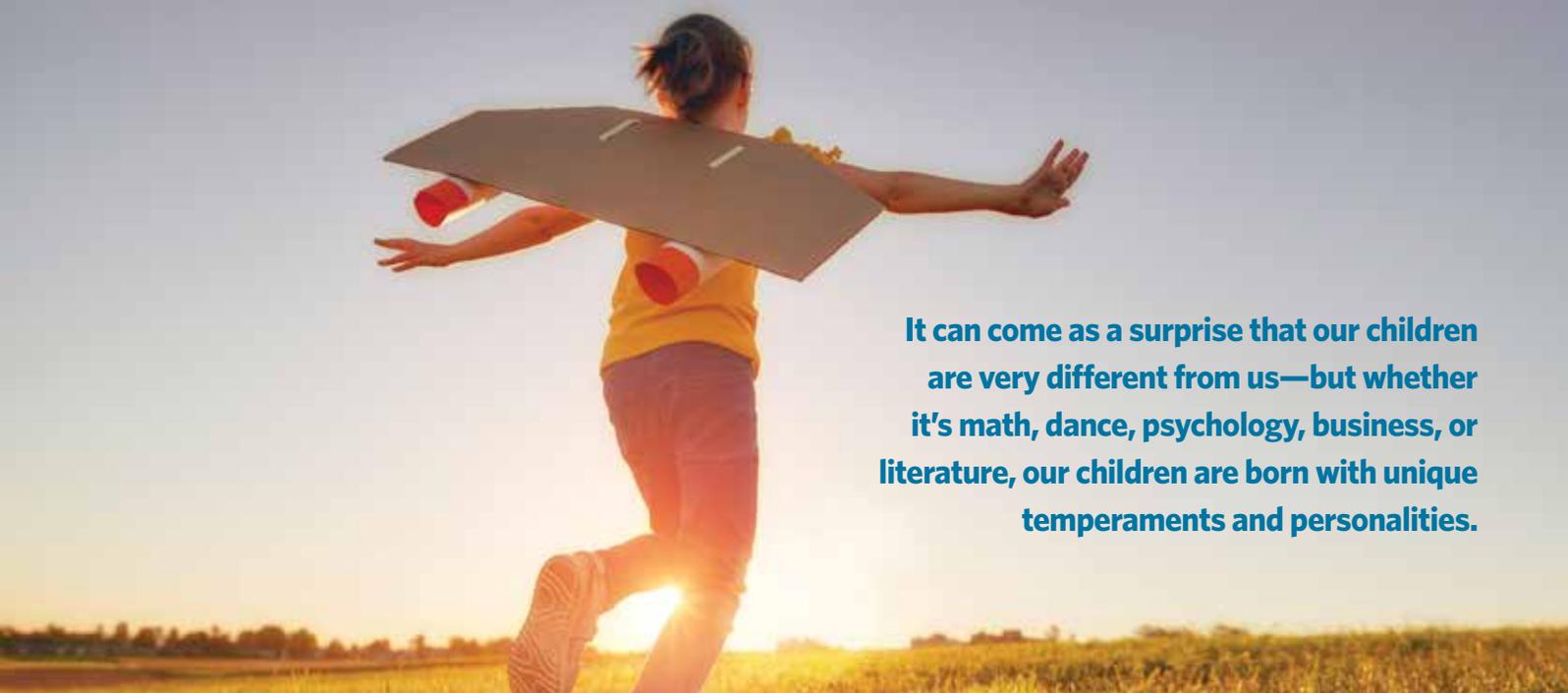
wishes from those of their kids. A child's desire to quit dance, baseball, or choose an alternative career may cause great rifts in families. There are clearly emotional ties to particular dreams that parents have had, and perhaps this is not even a conscious part of the equation for parents.

**5 Separation is not rejection.**

Developmentally, it is the task of adolescents to explore their own identities. So why does it feel so much like rejection when they explore interests, relationships, or cities, and make decisions that are so foreign to us? Separation is tricky. We nurtured them, instilled values, have grand plans for their lives, and feel dismissed when they veer too far. Separation is not rejection; it's a healthy and normal process on our children's journeys to becoming themselves. They might very well return to more familial and familiar ways, but maybe not. It's so important to allow this separation as long as it is not dangerous or destructive. When parents criticize their children during this time, it can lead to incredible self-doubt and anger, and most likely they will push the parent away. The conflict is too great. Trust that all the great seeds one planted in childhood are dormant inside and when the time is right, they will come back, a more mature version with glimpses of your similarities shining through.

**6 Minimize pressure to settle down.**

When my son turned three, we had a wonderful birthday party with a local singer who performed great age-appropriate interactive songs with the kids. One of their favorites was "When I grow up I want to be..." We think nothing of it. Work, career, and profession are an integral part of a healthy life, and we want to role model and instill ideas early on in life. The only problem is that society is sending the message that kids should know what they want to professionally at ages when it is developmentally impossible to know. We might all agree that three is too young, but frankly, so is thirteen—and for some people, twenty-three. The intentions are good, but the reality is that career decision-making evolves. Parents can help minimize the stress and pressure by helping with the decisions that are right in front of their children. After all, everyone's careers are a bit circuitous, does anyone have an exact plan and see it executed in a linear way? We want to have a growth mindset, be open to the teachers from whom we learn, and opportunities that arise along the way. Time can only tell how we navigate the workplace toward advancement. Life is not a race; let's help our kids pace themselves. Finding a career is a process, and we should join the journey with them, not push them toward some artificial end.



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### **7** *Be their mirror, show their strengths.*

Be your child's support system and remind them of their strengths, even if they are struggling. Parents have the unique opportunity of seeing their children grow up, watching those unique and special moments when their children shine. These moments provide the perfect opportunity to highlight these strengths verbally and maybe even in writing directly to them. Often people don't see their strengths as strengths; because they come naturally to the individual, they assume everyone and anyone can excel. Even if your child is reluctant to ask for career advice, pointing out their strengths can be incredibly empowering and can nurture the relationship.

### **8** *Create opportunities.*

Parent's might be accused of being helicopter parents if they try to use their professional or nonprofessional networks to help their children, but the reality is that networking is the best way to secure jobs and internships. Whether one is using LinkedIn or verbal introductions, this is one way parents can be helpful. It is important that they not recommend their children for particular jobs, but stop at the introduction and let the children earn the role themselves. Not only can it compromise the parent's relationships, but keeping a distance from the process will benefit everyone. There is great nuance to networking. Neither the parent or job seeker wants to portray a sense of desperation or extreme neediness; people want to hire people who are fully employable. A parent's life and professional experience can benefit or hinder their child's journey; creating opportunities from one's own network can be a positive intervention.

### **9** *Encourage them to find mentors and role models.*

There is never one person who can model everything our children might want to emulate. Teach-

ers, friends, relatives, leaders in religious institutions—all can serve as mentors and role models. Encourage participation in formal mentoring programs; encourage conversations and informational interviews so your children can learn about various fields. Everyone needs occupational information to fill in their knowledge gaps about a particular career and to see the day-to-day reality. Parents can be essential in making this connection.

### **10** *Remember that it's never too late to advance your own education or career.*

It's never too late to get a degree or to switch jobs and careers. Seeing their parents succeed will motivate their own success. Children observe their parents closely—food choices, communication style, power dynamics in relationships, and particularly career motivation and satisfaction. Hands-down the best way to manage the boundaries and not overstep is to focus inward. The return on investment will be immeasurable, for many generations to come. **A**

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#### **FOR MORE INFO**

For more information on career assessment and resources, visit [www.ncda.org](http://www.ncda.org).

Find other highly recommended strengths-based assessments at [www.youscience.com](http://www.youscience.com), [www.viacharacter.org/www/](http://www.viacharacter.org/www/) and [www.gallupstrengthscenter.com](http://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com).