

What It's Really Like to Parent When You Have ADHD

Raising children while managing ADHD comes with a unique set of challenges on top of the usual difficulties of parenthood.

By Caroline Bologna

December 8, 2022

ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in children. According to [data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) from 2016 to 2019, an estimated 6 million children in the U.S. have been diagnosed with ADHD.

As a result, there's a lot of helpful research and literature to guide parents who find themselves raising a child with ADHD. However, less is written about parents who themselves have ADHD.

The demographic certainly exists. In fact, researchers believe that roughly [10 million American adults](#) (and over [365 million adults globally](#)) have ADHD. [A small study](#) published in 2016 found that, of 79 children with ADHD, 41% of their mothers and 51% of their fathers also had the disorder.

To shed some light on the experience of parenting with ADHD, HuffPost spoke to experts about the challenges that parents with ADHD face as they raise children while trying to manage their own symptoms.

ADHD is underdiagnosed in parents.

"Parents are absolutely under or misdiagnosed, as are many adults in general, because there's still this misunderstanding that ADHD is a 'kid' disorder," said Michigan-based psychotherapist and ADHD coach [Terry Matlen](#), who herself is a parent with the disorder.

Although the perception has been shifting, we still have a long way to go in giving parents and other adults better access to evaluations and treatments. A number of factors contribute to this issue.

"Many ADHD symptoms overlap with the common experience of parenting," said therapist [Rachael Bloom](#), who practices in Los Angeles. "All parents talk about dealing with being distracted, overwhelmed, overstimulated, etc. Parents who in fact do meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis of ADHD often talk themselves out of seeking a diagnosis by telling themselves that what they're experiencing is normal."

“The executive function challenges of ADHD and the tasks of parenting are like a double whammy, a setup for overwhelm.”

- DR. LIDIA ZYLOWSKA, AUTHOR AND PSYCHIATRIST

Someone who grew up in the '80s, '90s or earlier was less likely to get a proper diagnosis when they were a child than kids are today. So over time, parents with undiagnosed ADHD likely learned ways to compensate for their symptoms or make themselves seem more “normal” to others.

“A lot of adults have learned to ‘mask’ their ADHD symptoms and often function ‘well enough’ on the outside to have symptoms overlooked,” said Billy Roberts, a therapist at [Focused Mind ADHD Counseling](#) in Columbus, Ohio. “In addition, ADHD is challenging to diagnose in adulthood, especially if someone is seen by a provider who does not specialize in adult ADHD. Commonly occurring mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety can mimic symptoms of ADHD and often a thorough testing process is needed to confirm the diagnosis.”

As a result, it's quite common for parents to receive an ADHD evaluation after their child is diagnosed, as they often recognize their own struggles in their kid's experience.



Parents with ADHD may feel like they have to work harder to hold it all together.

“Adults with ADHD can struggle with planning, organization, prioritizing, and focusing in the moment,” Roberts said. “However, for most parents, they find that there isn’t a day that goes by in which they do not need to plan, organize, or problem-solve at a moment’s notice. Consequently, adults with ADHD often feel like they have to work ten times harder to ‘hold it all together,’ as they must compensate for the frustrating parts of ADHD.”

People with ADHD generally have problems with executive function — the skills related to planning, organization, time management, decision-making and all the other things it takes to get stuff done.

“As all parents know, having children means managing not just yourself but also your children, often with increased stress or sleep deprivation,” said Dr. Lidia Zylowska, a psychiatrist with the University of Minnesota Medical School and author of “[Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD](#).” “The executive function challenges of ADHD and the tasks of parenting are like a double whammy, a setup for overwhelm.”

In addition to feeling generally underwater, parents with ADHD may feel like they’re unable to pass on organizational skills to their children or teach other lessons.

“Parents tell me, ‘How in the world do I help my child if I can’t help myself?’” Matlen said. “That could include difficulties with their child getting homework done, paying attention in class, etc. The parents suffer the same problems but in a different setting. For example, a mom with ADHD may forget to sign her child’s permission slip for a field trip, while her child may forget to hand in homework.”

They may struggle with emotional regulation.

“The biggest challenge parents with ADHD face are challenges regulating their emotions,” said [Cristina Louk](#), a clinical psychologist based in Washington state who also has ADHD.

She compared the experience to a snow globe. When your emotions run high, things are a bit like a snow globe that has been shaken.

“The image is hidden,” Louk explained. “You can’t see clearly. Things are cloudy. This is what it’s like for ADHDers to experience ‘overwhelm.’ When emotions are high, our brains get cloudy, we can’t see things clearly. This can be really challenging as a parent when we need to tend to our child who may be acting out or experiencing their own emotion dysregulation.”

Reaching this point of overwhelm means you struggle to be fully present and at full capacity. The situation is especially tough if you have a child with ADHD and you both experience this dysregulation at the same time.



“If the child is having a meltdown, the ADHD parent may lose patience quickly or join in the meltdown,” Matlen said. “Patience runs thin.”

Sensory overload can be an issue.

“Another area where parents often struggle is sensory overload — feeling overstimulated, ‘touched out’ — experiences that are common for all parents, but the severity and impact on a parent with ADHD is much more significant,” Bloom said.

Researchers have started looking into the connection between sensory processing disorder and adults with ADHD. The conditions of living with children can present extra challenges to these adults.

“Many with ADHD are hypersensitive to noise and chaos,” Matlen said. “How does a parent with ADHD manage with a chaotic disorganized house with hyperactive, loud children?”

These struggles bring up feelings of guilt and shame.

“Parents often have a lot of guilt about how their ADHD impacts their children,” Bloom noted.

Being late to school drop-off or pick-up, forgetting to sign a field trip permission slip or otherwise not being organized can affect kids and make parents feel terrible.

“Parents with ADHD may find many aspects of parenting difficult and may not always meet the expectations of what ‘good parent’ is,” Zylowska said. “Such moments can bring up feelings of self-criticism, shame or blame for parents with ADHD and overall increase stress and negative emotions in the family.”

Parents with ADHD may have additional sleep challenges.

Parenthood isn't typically associated with healthy sleep patterns, but ADHD can make it worse.

"Since I am a parent with ADHD of a now young adult child with ADHD, I can attest to the problems experienced in such families," Matlen said. "I could write quite a bit about that, and my heart goes out to these families. It is exhausting, which brings me to another topic: sleep issues. We tend to see exhausted parents and children."

Indeed, [studies have suggested](#) that adults with ADHD might be predisposed to sleep issues. They may have problems with the nerve pathways that regulate wakefulness and sleep-wake transitions or biological disruptions to their circadian rhythm. These issues can lead to trouble falling asleep, frequent waking in the night, difficulty waking up and other struggles.



Conflicts with partners might arise more frequently.

Parenthood presents a whole new set of obstacles for couples to navigate together. When one parent has ADHD, however, this new chapter can feel particularly complicated.

"Conflict over household responsibilities or different parenting styles can arise between the ADHD and the non-ADHD partner," Zylowska said.

You may take different approaches that feel imbalanced or have trouble understanding your partner's mindset at times. That's why it's extra important to have big conversations about parenting, your shared goals and values, and logistical approaches to raising children together.

Parents with ADHD aren't always able to take their medication.

Many adults with ADHD have found that medication is an effective way to manage their symptoms and live a more well-balanced life. But this treatment generally isn't an option for expectant parents.

"Most of that drugs that help people manage their ADHD are contraindicated for pregnancy and breastfeeding," Bloom said. "So from the minute someone finds out that they're pregnant, they have to stop taking the medication that they might've been on for years and figure out how to manage without any type of pharmacological intervention."

If you suspect you have ADHD, here's what to do.

"ADHD is a heritable condition. There is a 50% chance that one of the parents of a child with ADHD also has ADHD," Louk said. "So, if your child was diagnosed, I would also consider getting an evaluation. I would also advise getting siblings evaluated."

Even if your child doesn't have ADHD, talk to your primary care physician if you suspect you might. Look at the [signs of ADHD in adults](#) and see how many feel familiar to you.

A full evaluation of your symptoms, family history and other relevant data, as well as psychological testing, can help lead to a diagnosis. And when it comes to ADHD, the diagnosis is a major step toward taking back control of your life.

Read the article [online](#).