

## **How to Talk to your Kids about ADHD**

Preschoolers with ADHD- (Children ages 2-5 years old)

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Making a definitive diagnosis of ADHD in a child who is preschool age is usually a bit more challenging than with a child who is older and is in school. Preschool children are customarily more hyperactive and impulsive and it is often difficult to determine what is normal childhood behavior and what is not. Parents are often frustrated and confused as to what to do when their child is in trouble at preschool for hitting other children, moving from one thing to the next, never sitting still, and seems to get distracted over every little thing. Once parents are at the end of “their rope” and decide to seek help from a health care professional, they are told after their child is evaluated that their child has ADHD. It is very hard as a parent to accept that our children are not perfect. As parents, we like to feel that our children are perfect. However, we should never forget that no one is perfect and everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.

Parents often struggle with whether to tell their children that they have been diagnosed with ADHD or not? Parents do not want their children to be “labeled” with ADHD or any other problem for that matter. However, what we fail to realize is that your child has probably already been labeled as a “troublemaker” or as a “bad child.” Words like these hurt just as much if not more than being “labeled” as ADHD. The earlier your child knows they have ADHD, the earlier you and your child can make changes (behavior management, increased structure, changing their environment to include less distractions, and increasing positive reinforcement) to meet their needs. Children that are preschool age have extreme difficulty with self-control and parents and their teachers are often left without an effective way to manage their behaviors.

First of all, talk to your child about having ADHD. Talking to your child who is preschool age is much more of a challenge than with an older child. On the other hand, it becomes much more difficult to tell a child who is much older for you to now say, “Okay, you have ADHD and you are going to have to be more responsible with your behaviors.” Behavioral and learning strategies are more easily learned if they are taught at a younger age. Sooner is better. Children this age do not have the cognitive ability to understand exactly what ADHD is and how to better regulate their behavior, so it is up to you as a parent to help them by establishing routines and structure in order to make behavioral changes. Start by telling them that every single person has “good” things about them and “bad” things about them. Explain that nobody is perfect. Be open and honest about your own faults so your child does not feel like they are alone. Children even this age have an uncanny ability to see through adults when they are not being honest or genuine when talking to them. Also, explain to them that they are going to have to work on their behavior and at paying better attention. ADHD is not an excuse to be “bad.” Here are a few pointers of what to say and what not to say to them.

### **What to say-Do's**

- You have nothing to be ashamed of. “I love you no matter what.” “We love you more than anything.” Our love for our children is unconditional.
- “Your brain just works really fast”, let’s look at this as a gift. Emphasize the positive
- Their brain works like a really fast race car, however even a race car has to have brakes, so there are still rules to what we can do and what we can not
- Explain that all children are different and each one is “special” in their own way
- Children also have to do their part to help and you as the parent can not do all of this on your own. Enabling our children just compounds the ADHD problem later on. Children have to be held accountable for their behaviors no matter what
- Tell them that they can not make excuses for bad behavior
- When you behave good things happen, when you are bad, bad things happen.

### **What Not to say-Don'ts**

- Do not explain ADHD in technical terms that your child will not understand
- Never say that this is something they have no control over
- Do not criticize or admonish them for having ADHD. Parents get frustrated too and sometimes lose their temper. Have patience!
- Do not blame someone else for your child having ADHD in front of your child. ADHD is hereditary, so chances are someone in the family also has ADHD.
- Do not tell them that this disorder will also be more work for you as a parent. We do not want to instill feelings of guilt in our children
- If your child has a question about ADHD, make sure you are short and brief in your answer.
- Do not overload them with information on ADHD. They are already distracted enough with a mind that bounces from one thing to the next. Keep things simple for them.

Most of all, make sure that you convey to your child that ADHD is not an excuse for bad behavior. The earlier your child knows about having ADHD, the earlier you and your child can start working towards behavioral strategies and coping skills for them to succeed throughout their life. Children even at preschool age will feel more empowered if they are aware of what is going on and they can be part of the solution.

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