ADHD AND YOU...

How To Talk To Your Kids About ADHD

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER!

Kids need to know if they have ADHD – otherwise, they will only internalize things. They might think there is something wrong with them, but without understanding what is wrong, they might label themselves as stupid or bad.

They might make up their own fantastical stories to make sense of what is happening for them. These negative coping mechanisms aren't helpful and can be hard to separate from the child's self-image. When you talk to your kids about it, use the word ADHD – they will hear it at some point, so it is best if it comes straight from you.

Some experts say to *focus on your child's other strengths*, implying that there is something wrong with ADHD. But, ADHD has actually helped many, many, many, MANY people become extremely successful in their field. The problem is that others don't really understand it very well and don't know how to set up certain places, like some classrooms, to help the traits of ADHD shine.

Part of the problem is that ADHD is mislabeled. First, it’s more of a difference than a disorder. Yes, there are neurological differences in the brain, but, when manage effectively, ADHD can be an asset.

Second, we know kids have no problem paying attention to things they enjoy. They have difficulty paying attention to things that are not as engaging - usually the things we want them to be doing.

Reframing how we think about ADHD is important, especially if we want to protect and promote our kids' self-esteem. Before you go into any conversation...before you go into any conversation about ADHD with your child, enter it with a positive attitude. ADHD is awesome!

CONGRATULATIONS, YOU HAVE ADHD!

To start, I like to use Dr. Hallowell's analogy of the supercharged ADHD brain. It is like the fastest car in the world – much faster than brains of people without ADHD.

Kids with ADHD have so many ideas, things they want to see or say or do and are always checking things out. (Throw in examples here specific to your child).

I literally say to kids, "Congratulations, you have ADHD! That's awesome because you have an incredible, super-charged brain! It can go really, really fast. The problem is we only have bicycle brakes for our super-charged brains – the brakes aren't powerful enough to slow us down when we need to! Sometimes we might spin out of control when they can't help slow us down. So it's really important to help strengthen those brakes."

This last sentence is a good transition to explain why your child may have extra support people, strategies, medications etc.

USE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

When we have a great idea, we might end up yelling out in class *(or another example relevant to your child)* so we don't forget it *(because our brain will go on to the next idea and won't be able to remember that first idea)*. Our brakes don't kick in to remind us we need to put up our hand first, even though we know we are supposed to, until after we've already called out. And then it's too late and we might get in trouble.

There are so many interesting things going on in the world and your brain really likes to soak it all in and watch everything that happens. Which is great, except when the teacher needs to tell you something important. Our brain wants to keep thinking of other things and the brakes aren't strong enough to help us focus on what we're supposed to be doing. This medication will help strengthen those brakes to help you pay attention in class when you're supposed to.

Everyone's brains are different, just like our fingerprints. No brain is very good at keeping information – brains prefer to have ideas. But ADHD makes it even more tricky to remember things, especially things that aren't very fun to us, like remembering where we put our mitts or remembering to brush our teeth in the morning. That is why we have the morning schedule to help you remember so your brain can keep having ideas.

ADHD makes your brain want to fall asleep whenever you're supposed to do something you don't want to do or when you're learning something hard. That is probably why you find it really hard to sit still in your desk – the brain wants to wake itself up! That is why you get to have that cushion to help you rock in your chair a bit to keep your brain awake.

FOCUS ON THE GOOD!

Not just the areas they have a hard time with. For example, my daughter has incredible energy. She can go to school all day, go to a friend's sleepover, stay up late, and still get up early the next morning bounding with energy to play a solid ringette game.

In follow-up conversations, use examples kids bring up themselves or experiences you have yourself (if you have ADHD too). For instance, my daughter came to me once asking why she always "freaks out" over little things. Use these times as a way to get into specifics about ADHD and how it affects them to make it more meaningful.Bring up the positive too! Not just when something negative happens; highlight their great ideas, their innovative problem-solving efforts, and their great burst of energy.

Think about other things that your child might be motivated by in learning more about ADHD. They are not alone – many famous people have ADHD too. Pick people they might look up to. Walt Disney was so full of wonderful ideas and had a dream he was so focused on that he created Disneyland! Research other people with your child and highlight all of their accomplishments and incredible ideas.

If you talk about medications, talk about its importance and how it will help your child, especially if there is reluctance to take it. It helps strengthen the brakes so you can listen to the teacher, focus on your math better, think about what you want to say and put up your hand first, think about how to be a good friend, or think about how to make a good choice when you get frustrated.

FOCUS ON THE GOOD!

You can also use an analogy of other medicines. Perhaps a grandparent takes a medication to make their heart stronger. Or perhaps other medicine taken to help get their bodies healthy and strong again.

Kids (especially those with ADHD!) do well with visuals. I love making Venn diagrams (specifically, I draw three side-by-side circles that slightly overlap) to talk with kids about ADHD. This diagram can always be something they can come back to track their successes too. On the far right side you can put all your child's strengths. On the far left side are things kids might find tricky. In the middle are things that kids are working on (or would like to).

Involve your child in creating this list and strategies to help them work on the middle section. I recommend making one for yourself too, and even other family members. Everyone has strengths and things to work on (and chances are pretty good someone else in the family has ADHD too). Making it a family project will help normalize things and reduce the chance children will think there is something wrong with them. Keep track of everyone's progress regularly.

And of course, no matter what, whether ADHD or not, always focus on how awesome your child is and how much you love him!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dealing with ADHD on your own can sometimes seem overwhelming. What we shared with you in this document will help you get started.

For additional resources, make sure check to check out some of these resources I personally curated:

ADHD Families resources: www.adhdfamilies.ca

30 Essential Ideas Every Parent Needs to Know: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCAGc-rklfo

Additude Magazine: http://www.additudemag.com

Children and Adults with ADHD: https://chadd.org/

Hello! I'm Dr. Caroline Buzanko.

I am a Registered Psychologist, and I work primarily with kids & families dealing with ADHD, Anxiety, and other neurodevelopmental disorders. I help diagnose, develop and implement management plans that set kids up for resilience and success.

As someone with ADHD myself (and a parent of a child with ADHD), I know firsthand what effects ADHD can have on the lives of individuals and I believe passionately in helping kids and their families thrive after diagnosis.

I hold a PhD from the University of Calgary specializing in applied child psychology.

For additional resources, courses, and speaking inquiries, please visit me at: http://drcarolinebuzanko.com/