

QUESTION: My son's teacher tells me that he demonstrates many of the characteristics of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and wants me to have him tested. I feared sending him to school because he has been a difficult child almost since birth. What are the characteristics of ADHD and other related conditions?

ANSWER: Parenting a child with ADHD or other related conditions is like being at the center of a pinwheel. You watch the brightly colored blades whirl around and you remain firmly in the center. You lead the way by arming yourself with information and wise professionals committed to helping your family. First, you must start with a proper diagnosis.

Children with ADHD have trouble with attentiveness. They are often called "spacy". When given directions, they will be asking for help before they have completed the first step, already uncertain of what to do. They have difficulty focusing on the work at hand, often wandering around the room while other children are hard at work. Other children can get them off task readily. Even the sound of a fan in the room or a barking dog can distract them. If asked a question, they will not hear it, off in their own world.

These same children can be very impulsive in their actions as well. If the teacher is asking the class a question, they will blurt out the answer without raising their hand. If they are thirsty, they will search out a drinking fountain while the others are patiently standing in line for recess. They may be playing with their pencil sharpener or talking to the girl one desk over when other students are taking a test.

Children with ADHD also have more energy than both their parents and teachers. They are whirlwinds of motor activity from the minute they get up until they drop, usually still on their feet. They fidget in their chairs and have difficulty staying in their seats or in line. Yet when it comes to school assignments, their pace is much lower than others,

often still on page one of a five page assignment when others have it completed. Fine motor skills are in slow motion as large motor skills are in high gear. Their assignments are filled with many erasures and many blanks.

Organization and planning are definitely stumbling blocks for the children of ADHD. Their day planner is incomplete if not missing. Their rooms are in disarray even minutes after they cleaned them. Their desks at school and their closets at home will look dismayingly similar. Bubble gum wrappers rest on top of their three page book report, finished but not handed in. Inside their reading books will be half completed math assignments, an invitation to a birthday party, and a progress report from two weeks ago that never made it home. With five teachers in middle school and each teacher having daily expectations, these children have difficulty finding, completing, and returning these assignments.

To add to their concerns, children with ADHD seem to have short fuses, often losing their temper and arguing with adults. They tend to disobey the rules and requests of the “power” people in their lives. They also tend to blame others for their problems. “The dog broke the lamp”; my brother spilled milk on my homework”. They can switch from being aggressive and annoying others to passive and helpless, often frustrated because life always seems to trip them up.

Because making friends is difficult for them, ironically, children with ADHD will submit to other children’s directives, and hence, find themselves in trouble for doing something on a dare from their “friends’. At other times, these children dominate their classmates, and become bullies who tease and torment others. They struggle with reading the social cues of their peer group and can overreact over minor events. If they lose, a board game may be upended, spilling pieces all over the room.

Emotionally, children with ADHD struggle as well. They are very self-conscious and often feel worthless. When doing school work, they can quickly become frustrated and want to give up. They need consistent reassurance and fear losing the connections they have. They worry excessively. Their mood is often irritable leading to losing their temper and getting angry easily.

If many of their traits remind you of your child, it may be time to get help from a psychiatrist or a physician who specializes in ADHD and other related conditions to get an assessment. As a parent, you will want to arm yourself with many resources as well to strengthen your resilience to support your child. Many good books are available for you and your child. A good website for parents and children with ADHD is www.chadd.org.

Next week, I will write about another condition, often confused with ADHD in children, Early Onset Bipolar Disorder. Learning all you can and never giving up on your child is key. Remember, you are the shaft around whom their blades spin.

Questions may be sent to the Samaritan Counseling Center, 1850 Colfax Ave., Benton Harbor, MI 49022, faxed to (269) 926-6780 or emailed to

pbambrick@samcounseling.org. Diane Kopp, a therapist at the Center, answered today's question.

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