

Attention Deficit Disorder and Low Self-Esteem

by Don Mordasini

Much has been written about Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)* that most people are aware of the general characteristics of this syndrome. For those of you who are not current on this subject the following brief review is given. ADD tends to be of three types. The inattentive type where distractibility, the inability to focus, pay attention, remember, follow through with instructions, absorb study material, and other focusing problems are troublesome. The second type is the classic hyperactive/impulsive type where the child constantly experiences excess energy and therefore fidgets, can't remain seated, interrupts others, gets bored easily, is self absorbed, acts wild, disobeys parents, and is frequently in trouble. The third type, which is most frequently seen in boys, combines both inattentive traits with hyperactive/impulsive traits. Both types tend to have wide mood swings, are more sensitive to their environment, and generally have a low tolerance for frustration.

Because of these characteristics the ADDer almost always has trouble in school and at home, or later, as an adult, maintaining stable relationships and achieving his potential.

The cost to the untreated ADD individual can be very high. Since the ADDer never accomplishes age appropriate tasks as well as his peers, he tends to develop low self esteem. The ADD child is compared, analyzed, evaluated, interpreted, reviewed and measured against social norms. The child is too clumsy, slow, loud, wild, disrespectful, aggressive, inattentive, unmotivated, unscholastic, misbehaving, and nauseam. His measure is never as good as others.

Parents, teachers, relatives, ministers, and the media all scold, and draw attention to the fact that something is wrong with these kids. As the ADDer moves through life it seems to him that his total environment has drawn the same conclusion.

This child is at the end of the pointed finger. Wherever the finger moves, it points at him. It is impossible for the child to protect or insulate himself from the idea that he lacks what others seem to possess. Loss of confidence, self-doubt and low self esteem breed rapidly in this environment.

Self comparisons occur very early in the child's mind. The ADD mind constantly processes these comparisons, sometimes repressing the thoughts, other times entertaining them. This is the curse of the child's mind and it continues for the most part until the adult becomes aware of his thoughts and begins to question their validity.

Recently a four year old girl told me she was a "bad girl" because she didn't behave well in preschool. Another four year old girl had scary dreams about being with the devil because she was not good. These children are not exceptions! The most frequent answer I receive from a young child when he is shouted at is that he feels mom or dad doesn't like him.

Many parents are concerned with the outward manifestations of ADD. They are worried about their child's behavior in class and at home, his lack of motivation, inability to progress academically mood swings, temper tantrums, obstinate behavior and so forth. These concerns are important. Learning new behavior is very important and I consider it a necessary part of the treatment process.

However, what concerns me deeply is what is going on beneath the surface. My concern is that the child learn how to trust himself, feel good about himself, and have confidence in his worthiness as a person. Eventually the child leaves school and steps

into the adult world equipped with his skills and attitudes. Getting A's in life is much more important to me than whether the youngster graduated with a high grade point average in high school. The young adult facing life leaves behind the school books of the past and stands before life equipped with the attitudes, confidence, values, and ability to accept responsibility he has learned during his developmental years.

As ADDer's go through life, if they have not had the chance to change their distorted thinking about themselves, their thinking infrastructure needs to be corrected. It remains distorted until it is confronted and disputed and more accurate ideas about self worth replace old thoughts. The older the person is, the more work it takes to unravel the measuring tape.

As children reach their teens and develop more independence, if they have not learned that they are okay, they are in danger of hurting themselves through use of drugs, teenage pregnancies, skirmishes with the law, and even substance addiction.

Many children that do not receive help develop other disorders, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder. ODD is a disorder where children disregard those in authority, deliberately annoy people, and actively defy adult's requests and rules. Others develop a more serious disorder known as Conduct Disorder. The behavior of these kids is more serious in that they repeatedly violate the basic rights of others. Typical behaviors include aggression to people and animals, destruction of property, theft, and serious violation of rules (runaways, school refusal, etc.). Many of these youngsters, if not treated properly, graduate to adult criminal behavior. Recent statistics have shown that up to eighty percent of all inmates in our prisons are ADD adults!

More parents of ADD children I meet are caring, giving, loving parents who are deeply concerned about their children. They care about their child's welfare. They are also bewildered and don't know how to help their kids. They become emotionally involved and get upset with their children. They also push, prod, pull and admonish their kids in an effort to help them. These very actions are misunderstood by the child and perceived by the child as further proof of their personal inadequacy.

Parents and children view reality through different visual lenses. They experience and interpret the same interactions between themselves differently. One of the saddest facts I encounter with ADD children is that the parent's effort to give love is not perceived or experienced by the child as receiving love.

What are parents to do? By the time most parents have read an article like this they are bewildered, worn out, and frustrated by their efforts to work with a "troublesome" child. Some wonder if their kids are bad. Others believe their situation, in which they have tried everything, is hopeless. Others shy away from a diagnosis of ADD because that may mean something is wrong with them or their kids.

My suggestion is to seek help and gain information where it is available. Find out if your child may be suffering from ADD and its complications. A number of good books are available at the book store. The Internet has a lot of information offered by C.H.A.D.D., which is the National Association of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorders. Ask in the community for referrals to professionals who are knowledgeable in this field. A number of psychotherapists, from psychiatrists to social workers, have special knowledge of ADD. Most communities have local C.H.A.D.D. chapters that can put you in touch with someone who can help you.

If your child is acting out and having attention and behavior problems, you should obtain an evaluation to determine whether he had ADD. Not all children with behavior disorders have ADD, therefore you don't want to try to diagnose your child

after reading a few books or getting a check list from the Internet. Approximately twenty five percent of the children I see do not have ADD. Their symptoms are caused by a variety of factors, such as specific learning disabilities, over anxious disorders, depression, and the like. A professional who works with ADD can help you determine if your child's problems result from Attention Deficit Disorder.

ADD is not difficult to treat properly, and significant gains in attitude and behavior are the rule rather than the exception. Most professionals agree that a combination of medicine therapy and behavior modification therapy yields the best results.

Remember, there is more at stake than just resolving conflict and the particular problems you and your ADD child struggle with. You can help your child begin to feel better about himself, learn a sense of responsibility and accountability, and help him develop the ability to value and esteem himself.

*For purposes of simplicity in this article I refer to both ADD and ADHD as ADD.

