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Revisiting Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

A truly insightful definition given by Professor Russell Barkley, a leading clinician involved in research and treatment of ADHD, encapsulates the difficulties faced by so many of our children. He states that ADHD is a disturbance in a child's ability to inhibit immediate reactions in the moment. This means that the child is not able to stop and think, even sometimes just for a split second, using information that is held in mind, to guide them in making appropriate decisions. Those with ADHD suffer from an inability to use their sense of time and the information they know about the past and the future to guide their behaviour. What is not developing properly is the capacity to shift from focusing on the here and now to a focus on preparing for what is likely to come in the future – either the immediate future (the next few seconds, minutes, hours) or the more distant future (days, months and years).

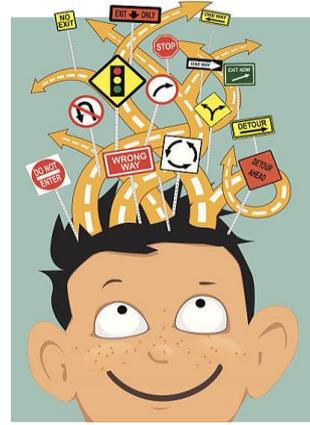
In his book *Taking Charge of ADHD*, Professor Barkley states that the growth in research in ADHD over the last 30 years has been remarkable. In the last 10 years alone, advances in genetics have confirmed the neurobiological nature of ADHD confirming that there is a genetic/hereditary basis. The disorder affects both girls and boys and continues into adulthood. Genes for the disorder have been reliably identified and brain imaging research has also shown the regions of the brain implicated in the disorder.

Despite the far-reaching effects of ADHD, many remain sceptical about the seriousness of the disorder. There is much credible scientific literature that reveals the fallacies in this scepticism. This view of ADHD as a neurogenetic disorder of the brain's executive (self-regulatory) explains why those with ADHD are not always able to act as others act, and it provides us with a basis for respecting them and deepening our understanding of how ADHD can impair a child's daily life.

The self-regulatory functions of the brain are known as our "executive functions". While there are many different permutations of exactly what these executive functions comprise, the following list is a helpful way of understanding the skills our children find so challenging.



The 7 Executive Functions



- **Inhibition or self-restraint**
- **Self-directed attention to achieve self-awareness**
 - These are the mind's mirror (self-awareness) and the mind's brakes (inhibition)
- **Self-directed access to visual and auditory memory to achieve hindsight and foresight (an awareness of ourselves across time)**
 - A sense of who we are and what we have done across time, our personal history and sense of self. This awareness is held in mind and used to guide us in understanding and responding to events.
- **Self-directed speech to control ourselves through self-talk (our internal dialogue)**
 - The ability to inhibit behaviour, show self-awareness and have a sense of our past and future through the ability to talk to ourselves often in our mind or even out loud when others are not present, to help guide our own behaviour.
- **The ability to manage our emotions**
 - The ability to inhibit our urge to respond based on emotion and to wait instead to give our brain time to split incoming information into two parts: the content and our reaction to it. This gives us the capacity to deal more rationally, less emotionally and thus more effectively with a situation.
- **Self-motivation to support and sustain goal-directed actions**
 - The ability to create our internal motivation without the external rewards and payoffs often needed when we are younger. The internalised emotions (e.g. pride, determination) drive our behaviour towards the goal.
- **Self-directed play/activity to solve problems and invent solutions**
 - The ability to analyse things into parts and dimensions to problem solve and engage in goal-directed innovation.

How then do we as adults assist our children in developing these executive functions?



The 12 principles of Executive Parenting.

1. Use the keys to success

Use the resources available to you beginning with a professional evaluation, diagnosis and scientifically validated treatments right for your particular child. Identify and promote your child's strengths and talents and find and cultivate community resources.

2. Remember that it is a disorder

Your child is not failing to meet expectations for his age on purpose. ADHD is a neurobiological disorder. Acceptance, forgiveness and patience go a long way to help you keep going.

3. Be a shepherd, not an engineer

Your child needs a supportive, kind shepherd, not an engineer trying to build a better offspring. Be kind to your child as well as yourself.

4. Get your priorities straight

The disorganisation, poor time management and lack of impulse control that are the hallmarks of ADHD can make daily routines very tough. Step back, review your priorities and pick your battles.

5. Be there and be aware

Children with ADHD need a lot of reminders and a lot of practice learning to plan, problem-solve and manage schedules. Commit yourself to paying attention to what your child is doing so you can be an effective shepherd.

6. Promote your child's self-awareness and accountability

Your goal is to help your child to grow up and learn to take care of him or herself. Help your child understand the consequences of his or her actions and start to hold them accountable so that they can learn to be accountable as adults.

7. Touch more, reward and talk less

Parents of children with ADHD tend to talk constantly to their children issuing commands and reminders, correcting, redirecting and reprimanding. Over time this is a recipe for conflict and often a disintegrating parent-child relationship. Getting your child's attention with a simple, gentle hand on the shoulder or an encouraging pat can be a lot more powerful than words – and so can rewards.

