

When you suspect that your gifted child has ADHD

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Questions to ask yourself:

1- Do others in the family show signs of ADD (ADHD)?

- Do any siblings show more obvious signs of ADD (ADHD)?
- Do either of the parents show signs of ADD (ADHD) - albeit undiagnosed – for example, problems with organization, planning, time management, forgetfulness, and difficulty with paperwork?
- Is either parent very bright, but didn't go as far in school as would be expected?
- What about grandparents?
- Aunts and uncles?

ADD (ADHD) rarely exists in a vacuum. It's a family affair (as is giftedness).

2- Then consider the following questions about your gifted child:

1. Does your child have a poor sense of time?
2. Does your child struggle with procrastination, typically beginning homework when it's nearly time for bed?
3. Is your child a night owl who seems to get a "second wind" later in the evening?
4. Is your child an "absent-minded professor"?
5. Does your child hyper-focus to the extent that he or she doesn't hear you when you call?
6. Is your child a dawdler who has great difficulty getting up on time in the morning, and getting ready for school once he or she is out of bed?
7. Is he or she very likely to misplace personal items – jackets, keys, wallets, etc.?
8. Do you find that you need to repeat multi-step directions because your child hasn't registered all of the steps?
9. Do you send your child upstairs for something only to find that they have completely forgotten their mission and are sidetracked by something else?

The child described above presents a very different picture from the stereotyped child with ADD (ADHD) who is impulsive, over-active, with a short attention span and little inclination to follow the rules.

What happens when inattentive type ADD (ADHD) is combined with giftedness?

Sometimes, ADD (ADHD)-like traits are intensified! For example, read Web's (1993) description of gifted children. According to Bell:

- gifted children often daydream and pay little attention with not interested (ditto for ADD (ADHD)!);
- they have low tolerance for tasks that seem irrelevant (ditto for ADD (ADHD)!);
- they may have a high activity level with little need for sleep (ditto for ADD (ADHD)!);
- they may be emotionally intense and engage in power struggles (ditto for ADD (ADHD)!);
- and they may often question rules and traditions (ditto for ADD (ADHD)!).

What are the risks when ADD (ADHD) is overlooked in gifted children?

Sadly, sometimes “giftedness” and “ADD (ADHD)” seem to cancel each other out – in the eyes of the school and in the eyes of the student him or herself. For example, a college freshman was referred to me by her very concerned mother, when “Rose” found herself feeling overwhelmed by the demands of managing her life as a college student away from home for the first time. Rose’s mother believed, accurately, that Rose was a gifted student with ADD (ADHD).

Rose believed that she was neither gifted nor ADD (ADHD). As Rose put it, “I know what gifted is. Lots of my friends in high school were gifted. They didn’t need to study nearly as long as I did. They made better grades, and they got higher scores on their SATs. If I were gifted, I wouldn’t be having the problems I’m having now!” Rose denied her ADD (ADHD) as well. “I don’t know why my mother thinks I have ADD (ADHD). I’m not at all like the kids I knew in school with ADD (ADHD) – the ones who took Ritalin. They never read or studied. They were hyper and hated school. I’m not like that. I read all the time and I’m certainly not hyper!”

For Rose, and for many gifted students like her, her giftedness was masked by untreated ADD (ADHD), and her ADD (ADHD) went unrecognized because Rose didn’t fit the ADD (ADHD) stereotype. The hidden cost – demoralization and chronic under-functioning.

What should a parent do if they suspect their gifted child has ADD (ADHD)?

First, they should seek an evaluation by the best-qualified professional that they can find. Parents should make sure that the professional they select has experience evaluating gifted students with ADD (ADHD).

Parents need to learn more about what ADD (ADHD) looks like in bright, inattentive ADD (ADHD) students. And help their son or daughter to learn about this too. Parents who suspect that they too have ADHD should talk openly to their son or daughter about their own struggles.

They should also help their gifted son or daughter understand that struggles with postponed assignments, sleep difficulties, incomplete homework, careless errors on tests, and unpredictable memory lapses may all be part of a very treatable condition.

It's important that parents also teach their gifted son or daughter about the very positive traits often shared by gifted individuals with ADD (ADHD):

- patterns of “divergent” thinking that can lead to rare insight,
- a wealth of creative ideas,
- an ability to hyper-focus,
- and tremendous drive and energy that can be brought to bear on an activity when a gifted person with ADD (ADHD) directs his attention toward activities that are in his areas of strength and interest.

Parents should seek comprehensive treatment. Studies suggest that the most effective treatment for ADD (ADHD) combines stimulant medication with solution-focused, cognitive/behavioral counseling.

Parents shouldn't delay if they suspect ADD (ADHD) in their gifted child. Even if their child is doing well in school, the cost of doing well only increases as demands and expectations increase. But more importantly, ADD (ADHD) is a quality-of-life disorder that can affect all aspects of life. Untreated ADD (ADHD) can have a negative impact on self-esteem, on peer relations, and can lead to chronic sleep difficulties, and to chronic stress that may develop into anxiety and/or depression as life becomes increasingly challenging.

The great advantage of an early diagnosis is that a gifted child will have a better opportunity to make critical life decisions that are more ADD (ADHD)-friendly, and will have a greater chance of reaching his or her true potential.