

SELF-CARE SKILLS FOR PARENTING ATTENTION DIFFERENT CHILDREN

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Parenting a child with attention differences (Attention Deficit, Tourette Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive) can be an experience that either strengthens parents or stresses them to the point of burnout. I have noticed in my counseling practice that parents who are best at managing their spirited kids are also best at taking care of themselves. Those most effective share five basic characteristics.

1. They see parenting an Attention Different child as a challenge, not a curse. Hans Selye, the researcher who first identified the human stress response in the nineteen twenties said that accepting stressors as challenges is a marker of the healthiest people. He called this the "eustress" response and differentiated it from distress, a reaction style which can result in physical and psychological health problems.

Parents who have a eustress attitude do not try to avoid the reality that their child is different but seek to understand problems as they come up and try different things to deal with them until they find something that works. Their attitude is "This is not going to grind me down. I am strong enough and creative enough to deal with it, and I will prevail!"

2. They don't take it personally. Attention Different children have biochemically caused problems such as disinhibition and aggression that are not the parents' fault and that the child could not eliminate if he wanted with all his heart to do so. The best parents realize this. They don't put themselves down for not being able to change him. They stay firm, but not merciless, and they don't argue with the child. Guilt for something you can't control is a ticket to burnout.

3. They parent smart. Eustress oriented parents realize that they cannot let the experts run their lives and that they must themselves become authorities on what is happening psychologically and biochemically with their child. They keep up on their reading and become well versed in all aspects of their child's management, medication, diet and behavioral issues. They also actively participate in organizations that provide information and assistance (LDA, CH.A.D.D., Tourette Syndrome Association, OCD Association, etc.)

4. They become skillful in dealing with bureaucracies. Just as they do not let experts run their lives, they do not let professional managers in organizations mandated to help their children (schools, other service delivery agencies) tell them what to do. As parents of health impaired children they realize that the law is on their side but they may first have to let managers in charge of resource scarce programs know that they are not going to go away or accept a level of service that does not help their child. They become very assertive.

Hans Selye said that having a feeling of control over one's life is a central aspect of personal stress management. Parents may have to fight to keep their power with bureaucracies but it is worth the fight in terms of their child's well being and their own peace of mind.

5. They get support. Stress research on people who have survived horrendous experiences such as war or internment in concentration camps, has demonstrated that it is those who band together and take comfort from each other who survive. Parenting an Attention Different child can be initially isolating. Parents will experience severe disapproval from other adults who feel that the child needs more discipline or more love or more something else.

Parents who take best care of themselves actively seek out support from friends through deliberately educating them on their child's problem or they participate in organized support groups.

As a parent of a Tourette child, I have been amazed by how accepting people can be once they know that my son's behavior is only partially under his control. Getting the support of friends and neighbors is an ongoing process and the timing has to be right to talk about it. But once the subject is brought up and the questions explored, the stage is set for a new, stronger relationship based on acceptance and knowledge. Though parents must take some interpersonal risks initially, the end result of making their child's differences a spoken about part of their lives moves all toward a greater sense of community and makes the parenting challenge enormously easier.

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