



THE CENTER
FOR FAMILY
BUILDING

Dr. Hallowell
LIVE A BETTER LIFE



ADHD and Adoption

BY EDWARD (NED) HALLOWELL, MD
AND LISA SCHUMAN, LCSW



ADHD AND ADOPTION

All children want to feel capable, successful and glad to be who they are, and their parents want to do all they can to help them toward those goals. Yet for children who joined their families through adoption and have ADHD, reaching those goals can be a challenge.

For parents, this is a poignant and critical issue, demanding a plan to make the very best of the situation. A child who feels great about who she is and about life will fare much better in life than a child who does not.

You have probably wondered who your child will grow up to be, how your child will feel about being adopted, what surprises might lurk in their genetics, and whether your child will search for their birthparents or genetically related siblings. You may also ask yourself how open you will be with your child's teachers, friends and neighbors about your child's background and birth family. It is likely you've fielded many awkward if not downright inappropriate questions and felt worried about how your child would manage similar experiences.

Although you will spend many of your days busy doing what parents do driving your child to soccer practice, packing lunches, going to teacher conferences and doctor appointments- the concerns you carry as a parent of an adopted child may swirl around in your head in the night in a way they do not for other parents. They are unique and beg to be addressed with knowledge and wisdom, rather than the ignorance and fear that so often surrounds them.

When your adopted child is diagnosed with ADHD it can feel like a double whammy. While many adopted children have ADHD, that does not mean you made a mistake by adopting your child or that you caused the ADHD. And even if his genetics did contribute to his ADHD, we are here to tell you, as world experts, that if you manage ADHD correctly it can become a major asset in your child's life. For example, did you know that most successful entrepreneurs have ADHD? What you need to help your child is knowledge.

Like adoption, ADHD is emerging from the shadows of ignorance into the light of knowledge and truth. This is great news, because ADHD comes with many talents and strengths. That does not mean your child will never feel different; it's likely that at some point she will. But the sooner you accept and understand the diagnosis and put plans in place for your child and for your family, the more likely you will be able to manage your child's challenges as well as develop her manifold strengths and talents-and help your child develop a robust and sustaining sense of self-esteem.



In this ebook we outline 5 basic concepts to help you better understand and work with your child's ADHD and adoption issues. For more information please contact us at drhallowell@gmail.com or lisa@familybuilding.net. We have personally experienced many of the difficulties you face and have helped hundreds of families have an improved understanding of and experience with their adopted child with ADHD.

1. UNDERSTAND WHAT ADHD AND ADOPTION ISSUES ARE AND ARE NOT

ADHD is not a deficit disorder. The term completely ignores the many positive traits so often associated with ADHD. In ADHD there is not a deficit of attention at all. Indeed, there is an abundance! It's just that the mind wanders, like a toddler on a picnic, with no regard for danger or authority. The mind does not go empty, as it would with a deficit, it goes elsewhere! It is always looking for something interesting, novel, shiny, and engaging. And ADHD is not a disorder, but rather a trait. If you don't manage it properly it can become a disorder for sure, but if you do manage it properly, it can become a tremendous asset! That's your goal, as a parent, to turn your child's ADHD into a precious asset, as it is for the many hugely successful adults who have it, like David Neeleman, who founded JetBlue airlines, or Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic.

ADHD can indeed present problematic symptoms including, impulsivity, hyperactivity, distractibility and disorganization. These symptoms can cause problems at home and in the classroom. To the uninformed, these symptoms will be regarded as signs of disability, weakness, and deficiency. As a result, the child may be looked upon as an incapable or "difficult" child. Antiquated methods of managing the child with ADHD will include "dumbing down" the curriculum and giving the child consequences for "acting up" or not "paying attention". The inspired and seasoned teacher will look for ways to assist and remediate. The right type of learning environment will aim to meet the child where he is, and build from there rather than trying to force the child to complete work that he cannot manage. The helpful classroom is a classroom that finds ways to help your child succeed. While consequences for negative behavior are appropriate, it is the moments that are positively reinforced that will be most valuable to your child's success.

Research has shown time and again that even subtle experiences of positive reinforcement can help a child feel good about themselves, and when they feel good about themselves they are more likely to try harder. In one case with which we are familiar, twin girls, with very similar capabilities had very different experiences in kindergarten. One had a positive experience with her teacher and thrived. The other felt criticized and diminished. The girl who felt diminished did not read fluently in first grade. She was labeled as the "twin with difficulties" and continued to believe that label. The girls were on different educational tracks, which would have widened, if the parents did not intervene. The twin who was lagging behind had already begun to feel badly about herself and might have developed a phenomenon called learned helplessness.



Learned helplessness occurs when a child has seen himself fail over and over again. This child is at risk of eventually feeling like a failure. In that state, it is difficult for the child to motivate himself to persevere because he feels “there is no use”. Although this downward spiral can occur, taking positive measures to help your child feel seen and capable can also snowball. Fortunately this girl was given the right supports and caught up to her sister. The right intervention helped to stop the negative cycle.

Think of treating ADHD not as treating a disability but as unwrapping a gift. These children may pose problems, but they also come with talents and skills -gifts- just waiting to be unwrapped. They are usually creative, original, intuitive, energetic, persistent, imaginative- all qualities that can't be bought or taught. They also typically have a wonderful sparkle about them that can light up the world, as long as it is not extinguished.

It is important to advocate for your child and to arrange to have a team to assist your child. A therapist and psychiatrist will help guide you, and help you advocate for your child. Often this is necessary in order to get your child the support he needs to help him be successful. Even when it does not seem necessary, it can be enormously beneficial to get the right help and not waste time and energy with unproven or less than beneficial supports.



Every adopted child, to a greater or lesser degree, can feel “different” and many will experience feelings of abandonment and grief. These feelings will vary depending on the child's temperamental style, the circumstances of the adoption and the degree of acceptance she feels in her environment. Like adults, your child may be introverted or extroverted, outgoing or private. These traits can give you clues to understand how your child will manage her adoption information in the outside world. Be sensitive to your child's personal style. It may be different than yours and her unique experience needs to be respected. These issues do not need to be a problem, but they do need to be examined and recognized so your child will feel accepted fully for who she is.

Learning about adoption and accepting that your child has a unique history, different from yours, will not make him any the less your child. If you have suffered with infertility, or difficulties in bringing a child into your home, the discussion of adoption and your child's birthparents may trigger sadness and pain and reawaken feelings of your own loss or hurt. But keep in mind, these are your issues; you do not need to make them become your child's burden as well.

It is important to remember, that before you had children, you may have suffered from two sources of pain. Infertility and childlessness. Now you have a child so you are no longer childless and that pain is gone. Yet the pain of the infertility may still be there. It is important to remember that this pain only belongs to you. It is not related to the desire for parenthood. It only concerns a personal hurt, and that hurt is something you need to grieve and come to terms with on your own.

2. THE BEST INTERVENTION IS EARLY INTERVENTION.

The earlier your child is treated with remediation, and medication if needed, the better. The intellectual information and emotional understandings your child will absorb will be part of his permanent experience of the world. That means that even if you experiment with ADHD medication or introduce remediation early and decide to withdraw it later, whatever your child has gained during that time is now part of him.

Parents often say, “if I take him off the medication, he will lose everything he has learned”, or, “he has to learn to be independent at some point, so giving him help at school is just a crutch”. Nothing is further from the truth. It is more like teaching your child to walk. You do not push your child to walk before he can crawl. If you do, you are likely to delay his ability to walk. To discuss how and when medication can be beneficial, contact, drhallowell@gmail.com





Explain ADHD to your child using a strength-based model. Tell her, “You are lucky. You were born with a very powerful brain. You have a race car for a brain, like a Ferrari engine, but you have bicycle brakes. We just need to strengthen those brakes. And when you strengthen your brakes, you will win races and become a champion.” This is a very accurate model of ADHD and helpful because it takes the shame out of the intervention. Telling your child, “Your brakes failed you,” is not shaming. “We gotta work on those brakes,” is a lot better than, “You’re a bad girl!” You still intervene—you have to—but you do it without shame, which is very important in maintaining self-esteem.

Helping your child understand where he comes from at an early age is helpful as well. There are two ways early adoption education can be helpful. After decades of research on adopted children we understand that children receive their birth story information more positively when the parents are comfortable relaying the information. Feeling comfortable with your child’s birth story, however, is typically not easy. People often have emotional reactions to talking to their child about their story.

You may be thinking about your fertility journey, about your child’s self-esteem, if you are “doing it right”, etc.. This is natural and understandable. If you trip over your words or seem anxious when you talk to your child about his narrative, your child may feel there is something wrong with his story, with his birthparents or with him. To avoid this potential difficulty, talking to your child before he can understand the words gives you an opportunity to rehearse your narrative over and over and change and modify your story until it feels comfortable and rolls off your tongue.



An added benefit to this approach is that if you speak to your child about her beginnings often, its likely she will not remember the day when she did not know her birth story. It will just be a natural part of your story together. Further, by disclosing to your child early, you will become her ally in her self-exploration. If you have not yet developed a narrative for your child, do not despair. It is never too late. No matter how close you are to your child, your child will know that some part of her comes from other people and you want her to feel good about that part of herself as well.

Speaking to your child openly about his beginnings and speaking well of the birthparents will communicate the message that he can always come to you to talk about his adoption questions and that there is no part of him that you do not love. Beginning a life book can also be helpful. It is like a pre-baby book which chronicles how your child came to your home. You can complete your Lifebook any time and you can even do it with you child. For more information on Lifebooks, go to www.familybuilding.net.

3. LOOK FOR THE SILVER LINING AND MANAGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS.

Although, it is important to acknowledge and address your child's difficulties and struggles, it is also important to focus on the positive. Every child has gifts. A child who has ADHD may have difficulty in math but may be very focused when she is drawing. Expose your child to as many different activities as you can. Once you find one or two that click, stick with it for a while. Even the most pleasurable activities can involve aspects that are boring or frustrating. Your child may protest more than her peers and may genuinely feel stressed about continuing with that art class or drum lesson. However, if she is engaging in something she is good at, and the activity is tolerable, continuing that hobby would be helpful in teaching her to tolerate frustration in a manageable way and hopefully begin to build those muscles that are so necessary in life.

For most parents, finding the balance between encouraging a child to persist and letting go is challenging. ADHD presents a wide spectrum of symptoms so there is no specific rule of thumb. The goal is to not "sweat the small stuff". It may be difficult to do when you see other parents whose biggest problem is that their child received an A- on their math exam and would be horrified to see the state of your child's bedroom. Children with ADHD are typically emotionally much younger than their chronological age. If you can remember that when your child loses her jacket for the third time this winter, it may help you feel calmer and help you manage your expectations.

As you search for your child's gifts, focus on them and mention them to your child. He may be good at thinking "outside the box", he may have a great sense of humor (the author of Captain Underpants has ADHD), he may be great at magic tricks or hypnotizing a lobster, he may be intuitive, persistent, and creative. Your child may have a huge heart and insist on marching to the beat of his own drum. All these positives are what make people with ADHD so interesting and potentially successful.



People with ADHD can contribute, and have contributed, to the world like gangbusters. They're the kind of people who colonized this country and continued to fill us in waves of immigration. We're a nation of immigrant entrepreneurs, i.e., people who have ADHD!

In adoption, every party loses something but every party also gains something. The positives in adoption need to be celebrated. Arguably, the two most important issues to look at positively are the placement of your child and the permanence she has in your home.

Many adoptive parents take this for granted, but your child will likely think about the circumstances that surround his placement often. Typically, children think about this issue many times during their childhood and wonder if they were discarded like the trash or abandoned because they were, or are, unlovable. To combat this concern, parents need to deliberately communicate to their child that his birthparent(s) "placed" him in a place where they knew he would be found. Or "placed" him with a family who they knew would take care of him. International adoptions can be difficult because there may be very little information on the birthparents. Yet it is important, even if you have not met the birthparents, to let your child know that you are confident that his birthparent's intentions and actions were good and gave him the opportunity to live with you. It is extremely important for your child to feel good about his beginnings.

It is not uncommon for adopted children to experience concern or fear that they could be sent to live with still another family. Therefore, your child needs to hear, over and over, that she is permanently your child. Yours forever. You can't say it often enough. It is also important to remember that your child "was" adopted, not "is" adopted. Words are important and convey meaning. The adoption was an event and now your child belongs to your family.



You can enforce these ideas through books and stories but also in conversations in the car or on a walk. Many adoptive families like to describe themselves as Forever Families. Fortunately, there are decades of research on adoption and many books available for children with a lot of options for talking to your child about permanence. Whatever language you use, the message that needs to be conveyed is that your child is lovable and yours permanently. This basic premise will not be easily assumed by your child.

Creating family traditions and rituals can also help your child feel a sense of permanence. Whether it is a Sunday night dinner at grandma's house, weekly movie nights or a traditional holiday vacation, traditions can help cement the family. Many families also enjoy emphasizing shared hobbies or traits and will proudly say, "our family loves to go bike riding", or "everyone in the Smith's house likes to give big hugs".

4. CELEBRATE DIFFERENCE BUT MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD FEELS PART OF THE MAINSTREAM OF LIFE.

This is a delicate balance, but important to keep in mind. If your child attends special education classes or has behaviors that set her apart from other children, your child may feel sad. Children don't like to stand out as different. Even the child with the beautiful red hair does not want to hear about it all of the time.

Helping your child develop a healthy understanding of different learning and behavioral styles can be helpful. If your child has friends who also have ADHD or other struggles, your child will know she is not alone. It is also important for your child to engage in activities, to the extent she is able, with mainstream children as well. Perhaps your child is not athletic but can draw just as well as other children in the class. A play date with one of those children at a pottery painting facility may give your child a positive experience with a more mainstream world and improve her confidence.

People who have ADHD and dyslexia (as does one of the authors of this ebook, Ned Hallowell) should acknowledge that we are not normal, if you define normal as being like the majority of people. I tell myself and my patients that we have the chance to be super normal, even better than normal, if we take care of ourselves properly, if we strengthen our race car brakes, if we train our brains the way we should when we are growing up. Then we can become one of the many millions of people who have this kind of brain who can achieve great success and happiness.



When you begin reading adoption books to your child and talking to him about his beginnings, it is likely you will also be sharing information about the many types of ways a family is made. Many of these books help children be self-accepting and provide “diversity training”. These messages are wonderful for a child who was adopted and may feel different than his friends. He also needs to know he was born the same way every child was born. You can explain these details in a story format which chronicles the birthmother’s pregnancy and birth, or in a biological style which explains the three components (an egg, a sperm and a uterus) that are needed to create all children. There is often a lot of emphasis put on the birthmother. Your child needs to know there was a birthfather too. Your child needs to understand that he was born exactly the same way as everyone else he knows.

5. REMEMBER: YOU ARE A FAMILY.

The adopted child should not be singled out as the adopted child, even if you have children in your home who are genetically connected to you or your partner. You adopted your child, and now you are a family built by adoption. If your son was adopted in Korea, you are a Korean-American family. Purchase Korean artifacts and put them around your house, not just in your child’s room. Root for the baseball team from the town where your child was born. Celebrate holidays from all of your backgrounds.

Although ADHD often runs in families, children with the ADHD diagnosis may feel “less than” the other children in the household. Conversely, if the child with ADHD is given more energy, attention and perhaps private schools, the “average child” may find ways to be different to gain the same attention. It is not possible, or reasonable to treat all of your children the same. If one child has crooked teeth, you would not give braces to all of the children. Yet you can help the children all feel special in their very unique ways.

Supporting your family members to be who they truly are not only helps each individual grow and feel loved but demonstrates your appreciation, and love of all people, the diverse collection we call humanity.

Helping your children grow up to be the best people they can be, can be the most challenging work a parent can do. Like most challenges, the struggles posed by adoption and ADHD can be turned into lifelong assets and advantages if managed deftly with knowledge, creativity, patience, humor, and a willingness to ask for help. As one of our teachers used to say, “Never worry alone.”

We are both here to worry with you and help you through your struggles.

For more information and support feel free to reach out to us any time at drhallowell@gmail.com or lisa@familybuilding.net

