

One or More Houses, No Executive Functions

ADHD and the Modern Family

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So, you have cleaned up the mess made by everyone getting ready for school and work, when you get a call from the school. Your son forgot his lunch/homework/trumpet and wonders if you could bring it to him. You grab it and go, then return, only to get a call from your husband. He is wondering if you can check to see if he left his reading glasses/cell phone/iPad at home and could you look for it to make sure it is safely at home and not lost between home and work. You go look, find the lost object, reassure your husband and get yourself ready for your day. You go to work, come home, and find clothes/backpacks/instruments in a pile by the front door. You can tell where your son has been by the trail he left behind. You locate him playing video games and ask him if he has done his homework. He replies, "I don't have any." You remind him of the long-term project that is due in two weeks. He has not even thought about it yet.

SOUND FAMILIAR? This is the ADHD family at work. ADHD runs in families. Often a parent only receives the diagnosis after a child is diagnosed. The mom frequently serves as the frontal lobe for the entire family, doing all the

planning, social programming and problem solving for everyone. What if Mom has ADHD, too? Who does the planning then? This is when getting help from people like professional organizers and coaches can be critical to help set up calendars and plans to assist with managing the family so things don't get too chaotic.

Life with ADHD creates stress, whether in yourself, your spouse, your child or all the above. Stress is harmful for personal health and for marriages. Couples who have a child with ADHD have been found to have a higher rate of divorce than couples without such a problem. What is a family to do?

First of all, remember that the married couple is the anchor of the family. You must take care of yourself and your marriage. In the hurried society in which we live, we tend to devote ourselves to our children. However, like on an airplane, we must remember to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first so that we can be around to put it on our children. In the rush to get the lunch/homework/trumpet to the school and to locate the forgotten glasses/cell phone/iPad we may neglect to eat breakfast or to get some needed exercise.

It is also really important to have couple time. Having a date once a week can be very beneficial, even preserving a marriage. Continue to do things you enjoyed doing together before you had children, if at all possible. Don't be afraid to seek marriage counseling if you need to.

There are also some things you can do to help improve the family's functioning. Here are some specific suggestions:

➤ **Once a week, have a family meeting.** Make it fun. Serve popcorn or some other kind of treat that is fun for your family. Then have everyone take a turn and set a timer. Everyone gets five or ten minutes each to talk about anything they want to talk about, things that they feel good about or things they are upset about. The rule is that everyone else has to listen respectfully without interrupting. At the end of the first go-around, everyone can take a second turn if you want to. At the very end, everyone can talk about the coming week and what they have on their calendars.

➤ **Family meetings can also be used to improve communication and to resolve conflicts.** These are very important skills for everyone to learn. Children can be taught the importance of assertiveness versus aggressiveness and the need for using “I” statements at a young age. Remember that children learn by what they see modeled by their parents and what they are rewarded for, so learn and use these techniques as well.

➤ **Encourage perspective-taking in all family members.** This is a very important skill for all people to learn and use. Take the same situation and have everyone tell about what they thought and felt in that situation to see how different people react. Michelle Garcia Winner, SLC-CCC, has done some terrific thinking about teaching perspective taking to kids; for more information see her book *Thinking About You Thinking About Me* (Think Social Publishing, 2007).

➤ **Design places in your home where family members can go to cool off when they get upset.** This is not a punishment, and is not time out. This is a place that is pleasant that each person can design to be the way he or she wants it to be. In the cooling-off place should be things that will help you to cool down when you get upset; paper and crayons for drawing, a journal and pen to write with, music to listen to, magazines to read (or rip up).

➤ **Putting some kind of organizational system in place is a good idea.** Every family member should have a launch pad, a place to put their belongings that they will need to grab and go in the morning.

➤ **Keep a family calendar with important dates on it for everyone in a place that works for you.** Some families keep a big calendar in the kitchen and each family member uses different color ink for their activities. That way everyone knows what the other people in the family are doing. Some families prefer using an online calendar like Google Calendar. This can be helpful because you can arrange to receive email reminders about upcoming events on your calendar.

Divorce and multiple households

What if you have tried to do all of this, but the marriage is in trouble? Counseling has not helped and there is constant fighting between you and your spouse. Stress can lead to parental conflict. People who are under significant stress can become irritable. Parents can start fighting over things like whether or not the child should take medication, which parent will help with homework and chores.

Parental unhappiness can lead to parental conflict. And parental conflict is harmful for children. Parents will sometimes ask me if it is wise to stay together for the sake of the children. My answer is that what is best is whatever will reduce the amount of conflict to which the children are exposed.

If a couple decides to divorce, how they go about divorcing will set the stage for how much conflict follows the divorce. There is some good research that reveals that by having a traditional divorce with opposing attorneys you may increase the level of conflict between you. However, you can choose to reduce the level of conflict by using divorce mediation instead. In mediation, you both sit down together with a mediator to decide about parenting plans, financial settlements, and division of your property. The idea is that the two of you know what is best for you and for your children and can intelligently make decisions on your own without court involvement. You can learn more about this option and locate a mediator in your area at mediate.com.

It is also wise to learn as much as you can about the effects of divorce on children. A good way to do this is to read *The Truth About Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive*, by Robert Emery, PhD (Viking, 2004). Emery has reviewed all the research on this topic and makes concrete suggestions for parenting plans based on the age of the children and the type of divorce you are going through. He also has a very informative website, emeryondivorce.com. Another excellent book on this topic is *Putting Children First: Proven Parenting Strategies for Helping Children Thrive Through Divorce* by Joanne Pedro-Carroll (Avery, 2010).

Having ADHD in the family does add some complications for divorcing families. It was hard enough keeping track of everything while you were all in one house—and now there are two houses. People with

ADHD have difficulty with executive functions, which include stopping and switching activities. This difficulty can become a real problem for children with ADHD who have to switch houses. I know one teenager who spent two hours every Sunday evening, packing up her belongings to change houses, much to the chagrin of her waiting parents. Children with ADHD also often have difficulty with losing things and forgetting things, so they may often have the experience of not remembering in which house they left their homework (or soccer gear or trumpet).

Then, as if things weren't complicated enough, what happens if one or both parents remarry? Information collected by the Census Bureau tells us that seventy-five percent of people who get a divorce end up re-marrying. The number of people in a child's family can increase dramatically when both parents remarry and there are more grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins by marriage.

The more things change the more they need to remain the same. It is ideal when there are problems with executive functions for two houses to have similar rules at least as much as is possible. Many blended families have learned that it is a good idea to use a computer-based calendar such as Google Calendar for the family so that both parents can add important items to the calendar that affect everyone, like school concerts and sports events.

Other suggestions for managing the functioning of multiple households when there are children with ADHD include:

➤ **Transitions are difficult enough, so minimize the impact by having things be the same between homes as much as is possible.** This may mean meeting with your former spouse regularly to decide on these important co-parenting issues.

➤ **This need for similarity includes bedtimes, diet, screen time and basic behavior management.** The fewer changes the better for children with ADHD.

➤ **Keep enough clothes and personal items in each house to minimize the amount of packing that has to be done.**

➤ **Have a second set of schoolbooks for each house to avoid forgotten items.**

➤ **Have a launch pad in the same place in each house (such as by a front door).**

➤ **If there are disagreements between spouses, have a professional to work with on a regular basis to help you to resolve these conflicts.**

Divorce is certainly stressful for everyone in the family. It is also painful. Certain behavioral changes can be anticipated in children following the separation and divorce of their parents. For example, it is not unusual for children's grades in school to drop in the year following their parents' divorce. It is also not unusual to see an increase in some aggressive behaviors in this first year as well. Children of divorce with ADHD are at risk for the development of emotional problems later in life. However, children tend to be quite resilient and most of them fare quite well. It makes sense for parents to do everything they can to minimize the chances that their children will suffer from their divorce, including working together after the divorce to co-parent their children for life.