A Damnable Gift

by Tim Pitts

SCHOOL IN THE 1950S AND 60S was challenging for those of us with ADHD. Instead of harnessing the creative attributes of ADHD by teaching students how to stay on task, teachers and administrators frequently labeled us as lazy, slow, or stupid. It wasn't entirely their fault; teachers had no idea what ADHD was, much less how to teach students to benefit from the gift they possessed.

Those of us with ADHD groped our way through life's proverbial minefields. I was forty-five when I learned I had ADHD; the revelation raised interesting, personal questions. While I don't look back in bitterness or regret, I do wonder what my life might have been, had I been diagnosed and treated as a child. I know that I was given a gift, but not recognizing it for what it was, made it a damnable gift.

After I graduated from Baltimore Friends School, the headmaster wrote my father that life for me would be difficult. His note was not particularly encouraging but neither had I given him reason to expect much more. My education, which began at Calvert, an elementary school for which I could not have been less suited, was a disaster. Calvert, a socially correct elementary school, was supposed to be the launching pad to Gilman School and ultimately the Ivy League.

As part of a fundraising effort for Save the Children, Tim Pitts climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in the early 2000s.

Calvert made no attempt to make school fun. Learning was rote, in classrooms ordered with Prussian precision. I was taught, not by men, but former Marines who just a few years earlier had fought in far away places like Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal. Although the teachers had names, we called them Sir. If we earned demerits we were assigned a poem, which we were required to memorize and recite in class—cruel punishment for someone with ADHD.

I left Calvert for Friends after the fifth grade, when my parents were advised that I was not Calvert material. The move created a better environment, if limited results. No Prussian military formations in a Quaker school, teachers had names, and rote memorization was replaced by workbooks and project-based learning. Despite the change of venue, my grades were only marginally better. I got through the sixth grade, repeated the seventh, and by the time I reached eighth grade, was labeled as an underachiever. It wasn't until my sophomore year that a remarkable teacher taught me a life lesson that opened my door to opportunity and success.

"Mr. Nick"

Robert Nicolls, revered by generations of students, taught history and was was the boy's varsity lacrosse coach. "Mr. Nick" had the remarkable ability to control a class, simply by loving what he did. He was a keen observer of the human spirit, able to find the key to unlock talent in even the most recalcitrant student.

True to form, I was a "D" student in Mr. Nick's American History class; by my sopho-

Tim Pitts *teaches history and leadership at The Hun School of Princeton in Princeton, New Jersey. He coached varsity lacrosse for several years and currently advises the student photography club. He is helping to create an international studies program as well as a continuing education program for parents, alumni, and friends of the school.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIM PITTS

I arranged for the two of them to meet before I left town. I thought if they met in advance, the housesitter would not be taken aback by Sarah's in-your-face attitude. Well, knowing it and living it are two different things and the housesitter walked off the job two days before I returned home. She sent an apologetic email. I sympathized with her and we parted on good terms.

Overall, this plan provided peace of mind and prevented my children from some of the pitfalls of too much freedom when they weren't ready. I want to point out that my children really disliked this arrangement. I had to set some ground rules for them in advance. I told them I didn't want any of their friends to spend the night, as our housesitter would not know who was on the "approved" list. My son's attitude was, "Fine, I just won't stay here while you are away." I was onboard with this. Even though he could still get into trouble, the reason wouldn't be lack of supervision.

If you decide to try this, you should think through some details in advance. Is your housesitter's significant other or best friend allowed to stay at your house also? Is the housesitter allowed to drink alcohol in your home? What action should the housesitter take if your children break the rules or get into other trouble? Should you be notified immediately, or after you return? Do you have a friend or relative who can act as an additional resource?

We used housesitters until my youngest child was twenty-four. Even when my kids weren't living at home, I didn't want them to have access to my empty house. As they matured, they learned to recognize and avoid risky situations. So I no longer worry about their safety when I travel. And I've even come home to a clean kitchen once or twice. Ⓐ

old getting thrown out of grammar school.

Things were rough, but luckily I found help. CHADD helped me understand what my son was going through and how to handle him. I found the support I needed from all the other parents that were going through what I was going through. Most importantly, I learned to advocate for my son and to ensure he received the education he deserved.

Nowadays, Richard calls me after a full day at work and sounds happy. I had an entire life's adventure between his fifth and twentieth birthdays, but we can now talk and look back and giggle about some of the things that went on. I remember speaking to parents after Richard had gone too far with his smart comments or after one of his many court dates. They would always say, "Hang in there, it gets better." To me, it was ages before the constant voice in my head would stop worrying or wondering what impulsive thing he was getting himself into next. But finally, the little voice now says, "He did it…he is a successful college student with a full-time job." No more worries, no more sleepless nights. It really does get better.

When my husband and I traveled together, we hired a housesitter.... Overall, this plan provided peace of mind and prevented my young adults from some of the pitfalls of too much freedom when they weren't ready.

The housesitter stategy

Name withheld at the request of her children

My decision to arrange for adult supervision while my husband and I traveled was based on several factors. Some experts feel that people with ADHD have a thirty percent gap between their actual age and their emotional age. So my young adults really functioned at a teenage level. Also, my son had had a few scrapes with the law. If no further misbehavior occurred, they could be considered "youthful indiscretions;" if new problems occurred, I was afraid his past errors would be considered an "escalating pattern." And the clincher for me was a local tragedy concerning a young man who was home while his parents were at the beach. His one moment of poor decision-making caused a fatality that ruined several lives.

So when my husband and I traveled together, we hired a "housesitter." The primary duties were to make sure that my young adult children did not consume alcohol or host parties in our home. Handling the mail and watering the plants were secondary to me.

I was able to find housesitters to match this job description several ways. Often we used my children's former babysitter. She was now about twenty-six years old and living at home to save money for a house. So she was grateful for this opportunity and she was familiar with my children. Another time, one of our employees filled the role. He had a five-year-old son and they considered it a new adventure. We are also live in a university town.

Our most recent housesitter did not work out very well, but I have to take partial responsibility for that. My daughter was going through a particularly disagreeable phase, so

help me care for Richard so I could keep attending college part-time. I had a wonderful full-time management position, so in my mind expenses were covered and my son and I would have a wonderful life together.

Then, ADHD surfaced and my life was turned upside down. My sweet baby boy was now a tornado and my elderly mother just couldn't handle him. I remember one day coming home and my mother was on the couch with her hands buried in her hair. She looked exhausted. She looked at me and with tears in her eyes asked me to look into daycare for Richard so she could keep her sanity. Not only was Richard hyperactive, but he was getting into things that could potentially hurt him. My mother just wasn't prepared to take responsibility for him.

Oddly enough, it turned out the daycare wasn't much better. If anything life got even more hectic. Constant calls about Richard pushing, shoving or biting other kids. One day I remember being halfway to a conference (which was three hours from home) and literally having to turn around because the school director wanted Richard to go home for the day and I had no one to turn to to help. Grammar school wasn't any better; he got expelled from Catholic school in kindergarten. It seems insane now that I look back and think of a five-year-

For example, creating a designated area in the classroom for quiet and relaxation where a child's preferred comfort items, such as a favorite stuffed animal, book, or family photograph, are available for self-soothing, can significantly reduce his or her stress level. In conjunction with discussing ways we can support a child's behavior with his or her family, we typically create a behavior management plan that outlines the agreed-upon techniques that will be used.

We are able to safely meet the needs of most children through classroom modification and specialized teaching techniques. At times, when a child's behavior continues to put his or her own safety or the safety of others at risk despite our adherence to a behavior management plan, we partner with the family and outside organizations to bring in a one-to-one personal care assistant who can provide the extra level of attention he or she needs to participate safely while still benefiting from the rich social experience and developmental curriculum. In these situations, our hope is that this one-to-one, intensive guidance is a temporary solution that will help the child make progress up to the point he or she is ready to manage the behavior independently.

Communication between home and school is really key to a positive and successful experience for the child, says King. Sometimes parents don't let the teachers know about services their child is receiving or how problem behaviors are managed at home. The school would like to duplicate what is working in the home and discontinue strategies that the parents have already ruled out. When parents find a technique that makes a real difference for their child, they might think that the behavior becomes a non-issue. But if the school doesn't have this information, the child continues with the behavior at school. If you know it—share it, King emphasizes. Your child will have a much better experience.

Driving by

Author's name withheld

Driving by Richard's old preschool, it seems like just yesterday I was driving like a madwoman to this exact location to scold and threaten my teeny four-year-old baby boy. Times were rough back then—I was a single mom with a full-time job. I had always thought the idea of being a young mom was so attractive. I also assumed my mom would

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Looking to parents as partners

by Anna McMonigal, Disability Services Coordinator, KinderCare Learning Centers

Our inclusive environment is an important part of who we are. To give children the support they need to reach their full potential, we consider the individual needs of each child on a case-by-case basis.

A key piece of what children are learning in their early years is how to interact with others and which behaviors are appropriate in which situations. To facilitate children's social-emotional development, our teachers take a proactive and preventative approach to guidance focused on reinforcing appropriate behaviors. Our teachers are trained in using a variety of positive guidance techniques including environmental planning, positive reinforcement for positive behavior, and teaching conflict resolution skills.

We also collaborate with parents to foster the growth of their children while in our care. We believe parents know their child better than anyone, and we depend on their partnership to ensure that we fully understand the needs of their child and set him or her up for success from the start. With parental consent, we also commonly work with support specialists who are part of a child's life, such as a child's doctor, physical therapist, or public school teacher, to gain a deeper understanding of how we can best meet his or her needs in our program. In addition, the KinderCare Disability Services Team coaches teachers on applying educational recommendation s for specific children in our group care setting to foster their learning and development. In a positive guidance atmosphere like that at our centers, most inappropriate behaviors are avoided or resolved. In those instances when positive guidance is insufficient and a child's behavior repeatedly puts his or her own safety or the safety of others at risk, we notify his or her parents and involve them as resources and partners in problem-solving. During this process, our focus is not on a child's diagnosis, but rather on how we can meet his or her needs regardless of a diagnosis.

Insight from a child's parents, as well as care providers from other settings, is extremely beneficial to establishing a plan for addressing behavioral concerns. This type of advice helps us understand if there are techniques working for a child at home or in other environments that we can utilize. When a child has an established care plan that his or her parents choose to share (such as an IFSP or an IEP), the KinderCare Disability Services Team supports teachers in implementing that plan to the greatest extent possible in our group care setting.

KinderCare Disability Services also provides support by recommending specialized teaching techniques and instructional tools that may benefit a particular child. Some examples of behavior support strategies used in our classrooms include:

- breaking multiple-step activities down into individual steps that are easier to follow and which give children a sense of accomplishment every step of the way
- incorporating motor breaks into structured activities, such as adding a dance activity to Group Time rather than expecting children to remain seated for an extended period of time
- using visual aids, such as picture schedules that help children through transitions and diagrams of safe ways children can calm themselves when working through difficult emotions.

Sometimes, strategies that may seem simple make a huge difference.

Day care and children with ADHD

Aja King, West Chester Area Day Care Center teacher, interviewed by Marie Paxson, immediate past president of CHADD

Aja King has been teaching very young children at a community daycare for over seven years. She has cared for a number of students with ADHD and is very familiar with the symptoms and challenges. I sat down with her to discuss concerns and solutions for families and childcare providers when ADHD is in the picture.

While some children arrive with the diagnosis of ADHD, she says, sometimes staff members see traits of ADHD that are preventing a child from learning necessary skills or having a positive experience. When this occurs, they refer the parents to the regional educational agency (often called an Intermediate Unit or SELPA) for an assessment. This assessment drives the services the child receives and teachers follow the recommendations to help the child.

In seven years, King has not had to personally tell a family that their child had to leave the daycare due to the child's symptoms. She feels that referring children for assessment of ADHD or other disabilities and following the recommendations within the assessment have been very important.

When asked about managing the child's ADHD symptoms during the day, King says she feels it is important to adjust the lesson plan to meet the needs of the child. Another key ingredient is receiving suggestions from parents on what is helpful at home. Often it is the little things that make a difference, like giving a child a Koosh ball to play with during circle time to help him or her focus.

It can be a real challenge for children with ADHD to focus during quieter activities like art and story time. The child could miss learning important skills or the chance to enjoy the activity. King finds that working with the child one on one, instead of within a noisy or active group, can be helpful in these instances.

Choosing "the best"

Anonymous submission

When my son was little, I had to work full-time to support a spouse in graduate school. Initially, we only needed the help of babysitters to cover the few hours every week that both of us were out of the house. But when my son was two-and-a-half years old, we felt that he needed to socialize more with other children his own age and to have more educational exposure than he was receiving at home.

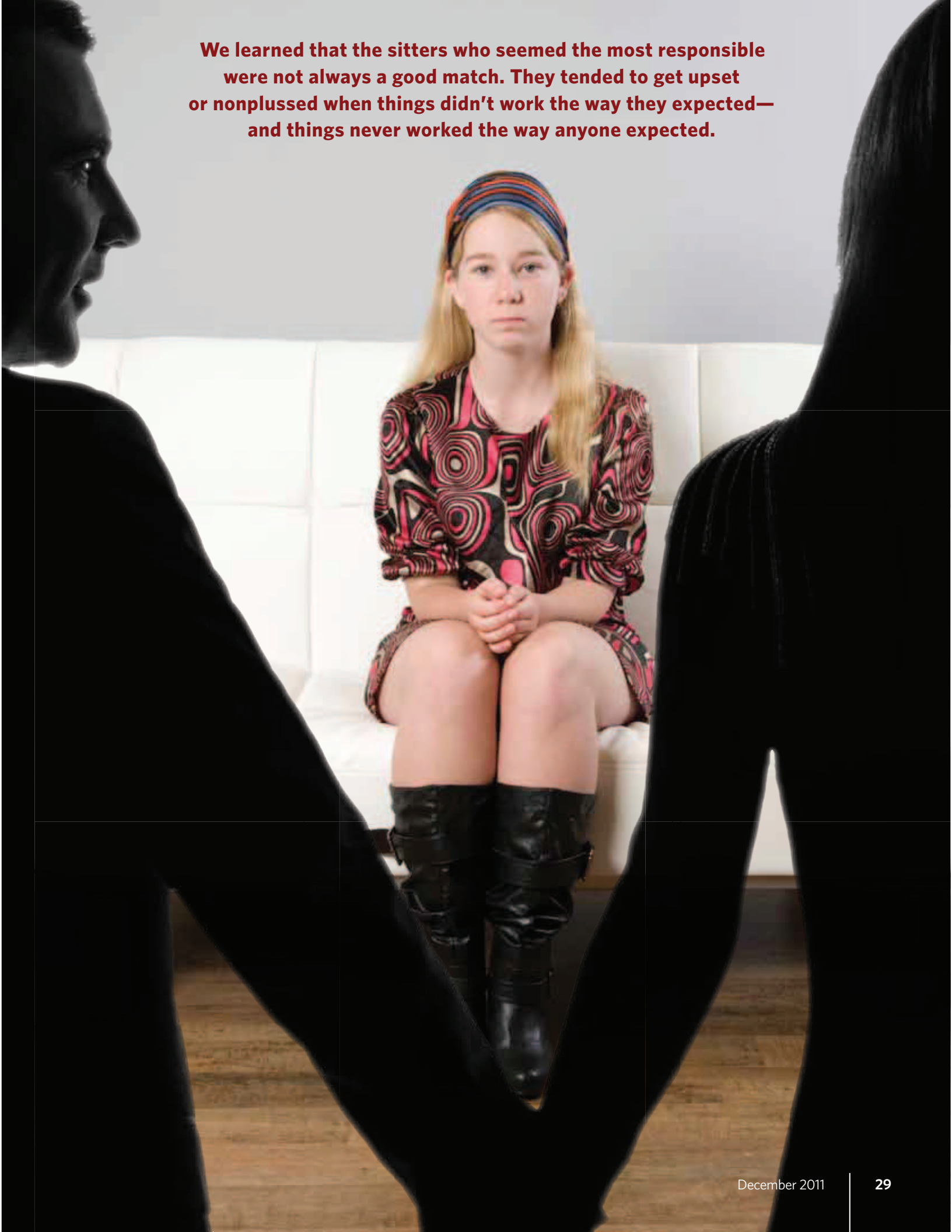
Day care brought new challenges. The daily reports, with feedback on how his day went, started out with one or two frowning faces every week. He did not like to sit still at circle time. Instead of participating in the group activity, he could often be found in the library corner alone. After a few months, there was often more than one frown every day. Getting to daycare after the long work day to be met by the lead teacher wanting to talk about the biggest issue of each day became a regular occurrence, and I dreaded that time of the day. But I never thought that I would soon be looking for a new daycare center. After all, I was paying for someone to watch and care for my child while I had to work; I didn't realize that they could label him a "bad kid" and kick him out. How embarrassing when searching for child care to have to tell them that your child was asked not to return to the last school he had attended (at age three!).

I made it my mission to find him the best possible new school. I carefully interviewed every available place in the area. I wanted "the best," but did not realize that might not necessarily be the one that was best for my son.

At the time I was angry at the school, frustrated with the limited options and the high cost, and unaware that my son would eventually be diagnosed with ADHD. I made it my mission to find him the best possible new school. I carefully interviewed every available place in the area. I wanted "the best," but did not realize that might not necessarily be the one that was best for my son. It finally came down to two choices. One center had a kind and warm director and a young, energetic staff, but it seemed downtrodden and cash-poor, and I was not impressed. I made the mistake of selecting the glitzy and glamorous fancy daycare chain with the gorgeous campus, teachers with impressive resumes, glossy picture ads, and the most amazing schedule of events, field trips, and activities. So what to do when he was asked to leave there too? It didn't take long. He was only there a few months. They just could not deal with his "differences." Thankfully, the center I had rejected after my previous careful search allowed him to transfer to their care. And that warm director? She was the one that started us on the road to getting a diagnosis and services for my child. She was the first educator who "got" him.

Had I known what ADHD was and what my son needed, I hope I would have made a better choice the first time. Twenty or so years ago, no one was diagnosing children as young as three with ADHD. But now the resources available are much richer, and no child should have to be kicked out of daycare. I would have gotten more information and learned what my son needed before the first transfer.

We learned that the sitters who seemed the most responsible were not always a good match. They tended to get upset or nonplussed when things didn't work the way they expected—and things never worked the way anyone expected.



compiled by Marie S. Paxson

Childcare CHALLENGES

Is finding childcare one of your biggest challenges in parenting a child (or children) affected by ADHD?

AS WITH SO MANY PARENTING CHALLENGES, those who have been "in the trenches" are often the source of the greatest support, and their experiences often contain the best suggestions and strategies. So *Attention* invited CHADD parents to share their stories of finding babysitters, daycare, and "supervision" for older children with ADHD.

Finding babysitters was a nightmare

Submitted by Jean from Delaware

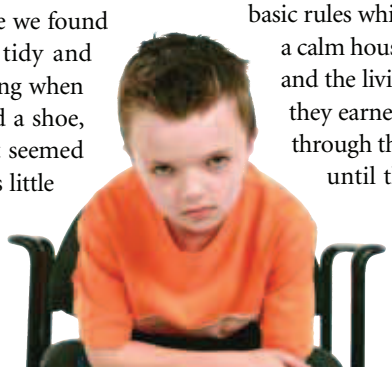
Looking back, now that my son is nineteen, it's almost comical to think that a little person could rule a household. But let me tell you, when that little person has ADHD, ruling is just the tip of the iceberg.

When he was an infant, finding a sitter wasn't too bad—unless I was the only one leaving the house. Thinking of dad as a sitter is ridiculous, but when a mom needs to go out, dad needs to stay in and take care of junior. A screaming, crying little person can put any sane person over the edge. The only way my darling hubby could calm baby boy down was to put him on his chest. I often came home to the two of them, sound asleep, baby on top!

Family wasn't an option. They were an hour away. Plus, as my son got older and entered the preschool ages, he was very hyperactive—too much for my elderly parents to handle. My brothers and sisters were a godsend, taking him for the weekend when we needed to get away. Sunday afternoon always had a bittersweet ending; we came home to a frantic sister and a brother-in-law who had the car packed and running in the driveway. I've got to hand it to them, though; they did watch him more than once!

As my son grew, and we (mom and dad) would go out for dinner, we would need to hire a sitter. It seemed we couldn't keep the same sitter for very long. One poor little girl found herself locked in the garage until she could cajole our son into letting her back into the house. Never saw her again! Then there was the time we found his room spotless. Everything eerily tidy and put away. That is until the next morning when I went into his sock drawer and found a shoe, and a belt in his underwear drawer. It seemed he had watched a show with the sitter's little brother where they threw everything into the air from their drawers, saying WHEEEE! The babysitter had the two of them put everything away. She wasn't seen again. There was a string of one-timers.

Then we realized that these babysitters were too young—and girls. A friend of mine suggested her son. It was magic. My son loved having a "guy" to come and "hang out" with him while we when out. No more nonsense, no more messes. We actually had two difference male sitters, children of friends of mine. It made all the difference. My son didn't like the fact that girls were coming over to "watch" him. When we told him the guys were coming over to hang out with him, he was okay with that.



Finding appropriate childcare

Submitted by Sharon from Tennessee

It was always a challenge to find childcare so that we could go out for an evening or weekend activity. Our kids were high-spirited and unpredictable, and not all of the sitters we tried were willing to come back. We learned that the sitters who seemed the most responsible were not always a good match. They tended to get upset or nonplussed when things didn't work the way they expected—and things never worked the way anyone expected. The ones who worked out the best were flexible, confident, and usually playful.

To keep the sitters who worked out well, we paid generously. We left favorite snacks and had the sitter arrive at supper time so that there was some transition time before we left. We also gave the kids incentives to follow some basic rules while we were gone. If we came home to a calm house, the children were in bed and quiet, and the living room was not a complete disaster, they earned a reward. As long as we could walk through the living room, we could leave the rest until the next day, and the children could help then with cleaning up.

respondents offered an especially valuable perspective when he noted that "they are doing the best they can with everything they have to deal with." Given how annoying and/or disruptive ADHD behaviors can be, it can be quite challenging to maintain such a perspective, but there is much truth in it. When speaking to various CHADD chapters, I often express a desire to have all members tattooed on the wrist with the reminder, "I don't have to respond to that, I can let it go." So ask yourself, is it my problem, the other person's problem, or some very real combination? We cannot skip this step—indeed, many classroom teachers have later thanked me for asking it, noting that in some cases the question has helped them to determine that in fact some particular behaviors did not require intervention.

If your answer—at least for now—is that the behaviors you find offensive are truly more your problem than someone else's, then you are in a remarkably powerful position. What I mean is that we can always examine and adjust our own attitudes. But as countless individuals in relationships with someone with ADHD have learned, just try and do that to or for another person! (see "I've Been Trying To Get Across To Him That…" on Karustis.com). In sum, for your own emotional well-being, it will very often be advisable to not respond, to work on letting go.

A few common scenarios

The person in the cubicle next to yours rattles the wall, hums to himself. He never seems to shut up, and does not appear to realize that you are there to work, not just to plan lunches. If he does not get fired soon, then we can probably conclude that he has made the situation problematic for both of you, and you need to say something.

A vendor comes into your office once a week. She takes up over an hour on each occasion. For the life of you, you cannot remember the topics of conversation, because she jumps topics around so much and seems so uninterested in what you have to say. This time affects your work production and causes you fairly significant anger.

Your neighbor can be a lot of fun. He is often hilarious with his tales of risk-taking and misfortune, and often lights up a room with his presence. On the other hand, more often than not he seems to not know when to stop. He can get out of hand in his intensity, and once even broke the leg on your coffee table while regaling your dinner party. Equal parts entertainment and agitation.

It is not your place, of course, to give a diagnosis, but remember that *functional impairment* is a crucial marker for ADHD. In this case *something* is impairing adequate functioning, for both your associate and you. As Dr. Spock famously advised, *Trust yourself*, you know more than you think you do. If this person is regularly causing significant problems for you, there is a good chance that she is doing so with many others. Remember, you tried to let go and not respond.

Look at yourself, part two

Know thyself, buddy! So you have decided that you should probably say something, but you are not at all sure how to approach the matter. Take another look in the mirror and consider your own behavioral patterns. Do you tend to be direct? Or are you generally more comfortable hinting at potentially sore subjects? It is acknowledged that such a dichotomy is an oversimplification. Many people who pride themselves on directness would be shocked to discover how often they are both indirect and passive in their actions. Conversely, more self-consciously indirect folk are frequently direct in their communications with selected individuals.

You will also want to be careful about inadvertently coming to diagnostic conclusions. This is easier said than accomplished, particularly for the truly informed person. Sometimes it may just seem *obvious* to you that another person has ADHD. Although not as common a phenomenon as many people assume, one should pay attention to the possibility of having "ADHD on the brain" and seeing it in people for whom such a label may simply not be appropriate.

Consider the relationship

Each relationship is its own culture, so to speak. In some work settings, for example, you may find it much easier to bring up the subject of possible ADHD three months after you have moved to a cubicle on another floor. But in other situations a workstation relocation may not be a realistic option. Those reading this article are likely to be individuals who already know someone with ADHD. Because we all have limited reserves of emotional energy, prioritization is in order. Do you really have the wherewithal and the desire to broach the subject with the person in your orbit who may have ADHD?

Let's say your answer to the above question is "yes." At the very least you feel you must do or say something, for your own reasons. One thing is fairly certain—namely, that the other person will not benefit by you being drained of your well-being. So if you must detach and have less contact with the person, then do so. And try to keep guilt at bay. Trying to maintain a relationship with an adult with ADHD can feel similar to when your car is stuck in the mud and you keep hitting the gas pedal. There is an illusion of doing something, and yet the muck just keeps getting deeper. Since it is possible, even likely, that this person has been (unknowingly) coping with ADHD for many years, you can be relatively sure that he has developed some sort of coping mechanisms. Repeated negative feedback from others, and in all likelihood fairly consistent failures, have probably resulted in a pattern of denial, projection onto others, and more. So try not to take it personally if your efforts to raise the ADHD topic do not appear to be welcome.

And yet, and yet—you are an informed and experienced person. You have valuable insights to offer. Don't slink away in discouragement. As with parenting, one can never be sure when a seed has been planted. "Ever wonder if you might have ADHD?" Heck, if you can bring yourself to relate your own experiences, you may not even have to ask the question. Simply conveying your own, or someone else's struggles, may get the message across. Since your purpose is not to attack this individual, there is no need to soft-pedal if the response is "Why? Do you think I might have ADHD?"

Given that adults with ADHD have almost certainly received more negative feedback in their lives than those without the syndrome, do not be surprised if your queries are taken as personal attacks. Of course, this is a risk adults run in any relationship, the decision-tree marker being, "Is it worth taking this risk?" Since life offers no guarantees, we cannot know the answer for sure in advance. Do not, however, let the possible negative risk in and of itself make you silent. Your honesty will never be something for which you need to feel guilt.

Do not be overly surprised if your feedback is actually welcomed, even if the immediate response is not so warm. You are not shooting darts in the dark, after all—you know a bit about ADHD. Indeed, since you are likely to be speaking from experience, try to honor the resonance of truth that you bring to this relationship. And so, arm yourself with a few resources, whether they are support/educational organizations such as CHADD, perhaps a good clinician who can perform a full assessment, a knowledgeable physician, and others. Just as you have probably educated yourself, save your associate some additional pain and be ready with whatever resources you are able to offer, should these be welcomed.

*Available on ATTENTION 2.0 at chadd.org