

Strategies for M





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with Larry Maltin, MA

AS THE HOLIDAY SEASON APPROACHES, how can you prepare for family gatherings and visits with relatives? Getting along can be challenging, especially with ADHD in the mix. Ultimately, the goal is to improve family functioning so you can enjoy one another's company and the events. How can you support all members of your family so that everyone can be more comfortable?

TALKING POINTS FOR YOUR CHILD WITH ADHD

Prepare your child for holiday events. Give the child enough time to be ready to interact with relatives and friends. Talk about what to expect— who will be there and how to handle potential conflicts. Find appropriate times to talk with your child, not when you are in a hurry or when your child is flustered. Practice with your child by doing role plays. Brainstorm with your child to come up with a Plan B if needed.

Practice self-advocacy. Speaking up for yourself can be a real challenge, and is another skill that needs practice. Model good self-advocacy skills. Schedule practice sessions and play out scenarios. Make cheat sheets with phrases your child can memorize; for example, “Wait a second, can you repeat that?” or “I didn’t quite get what you just said,” or “Oops, you are right, I interrupted you. Thanks for reminding me. Sometimes I forget.” Notice when your child is advocating for him/herself.

Combat boredom. Recognize when your child becomes bored and help him or her become aware of it. Find appropriate ways to distract your child so he or she is not bored. Bring fidget toys or take your child outside for a break. And always have a Plan B you can use if things don’t go well.

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If you develop understanding among extended family members of how ADHD can affect behavior and use strategies to deal with those behaviors, you can significantly improve family functioning.

TALKING POINTS FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Prepare for family functions. Find allies in the family and prep them ahead of time. Advocate for your child, and don't assume that family members know about ADHD or your child. Come up with a Plan B you can use things get tough.

Address questions and concerns from family members. Try to hear their side of the story while staying calm and objective. Admittedly, that's hard to do when someone is being judgmental or punitive toward your child with ADHD. On one hand you want to validate your family member's experience, while on the other, you want to offer information about your child and about ADHD.

For example: "I hear you, Grandma. At your house you don't want bad manners at the dinner table, and Jimmy behaved rudely. On the other hand, Jimmy is only five years old, and he struggles with being impulsive. That's what it's like when someone has ADHD. Let's see how we can remind him next time."

Explore alternative strategies for the family event. Look for "stuck" patterns. For example, Grandma loves to tell long stories at the dinner table and doesn't recognize that your child gets fidgety and starts interrupting. Suggest alternative strategies, such as an after-dinner play break for your child, and designate that as the time when Grandma gets to tell her stories. Find a distraction, like a fidgety toy, or let your child take a time out; the child could step away and read a book for a while until he or she feels ready to come back to the table.

Suggest mindfulness and self-awareness exercises. Remind family members to stay objective and calm in stressful situations. Have conversations about their expectations

and your child's needs and abilities. Anticipate stressful moments and remind your family members that we all want the same thing—to have a successful family event. Find a way to collaborate to make that happen.

STRATEGIES DURING FAMILY EVENTS

Be mindful and self-aware. Practice being the observer, and seeing both sides. Be patient! Become the mediator, while advocating for your child and for yourself. But it's also important to listen to the other family comments. Validate both sides. It's not about being right or wrong, but rather about being able to arrive at an arrangement that everybody can live with.

Use humor. Don't take comments personally. Try to remember that every person has a right to their opinion, and theirs may differ from yours. Try to keep things in perspective, and see the lighter side of things.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE FAMILY FUNCTIONING

Remind yourself and your family members to stay focused and mindful. Find allies for support and coaching, such as a friend, teacher, or relative. Use good time-management skills. Practice being on time, expect punctuality, and allow enough time for finishing tasks. Be sensitive to timing—find the right time to bring up a point of discussion.

Use humor. Unless there is a serious concern or life-or-death matter, you might be better off looking for a positive approach. You could practice with questions such as, "Is this really a big deal?" "Do I really need to get upset right now?" "Do I have to take this seriously?"

Practice mindfulness and self-awareness.

Dealing with ADHD symptoms is a life-long experience, and the more we become aware of how we function and what is challenging, the better we can respond. That takes practice. For example, schedule practice sessions with your child at bedtime. Listen to soft music and focus on how you are feeling, and how you can calm yourself by taking a slow breath in and exhaling slowly. With practice, your child can learn to manage moments of anxiety or stress by himself or herself.

Find teachable moments. For example, you can comment on a situation that your child handled well, such as taking turns with the swings on the playground. Notice when your child is mindful. When he puts the cap back on the peanut butter jar, when she pets the puppy gently rather than too hard, when he remembers to brush his teeth, and so forth. Practice mindfulness yourself—it helps you to stay focused, and you model that for your child.

The extended family can be an important part of the social support system you build for your child, adolescent, or adult family member with ADHD, as well as for yourself. If you develop understanding among extended family members of how ADHD can affect behavior and use strategies to deal with those behaviors, you can significantly improve family functioning. Your efforts can lead to positive family experiences, not only during the holidays, but whenever you get together. With a positive attitude—and an investment in time and practice—you can make a real difference in your child's life as well as your own. 🗣️

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