

Communicate with the ADHD Brain in Mind

“Why do I have to resort to screaming at you to get you to listen to me!” -Jennifer, exasperated parent of 13 year old Jackson

We've all been where Jennifer is. We just want our child to listen to us and to do what is expected of them when we ask. We want simple things like calling our child to the dinner table to be *easier*. Life does not necessarily run smoothly for any busy family, but when the ADHD Brain is involved, the challenge goes beyond typical childhood rebellion. Our daily challenge is to get our messages across to our child who is likely struggling to focus his attention on one thing. He may simply tune us out as he has trained his brain to do when trying hard to focus on the task at hand or our voice may simply be drowned out by all of the other things that have retained our child's attention. In some cases, he may have registered what we said and then his attention was quickly drawn away to something more stimulating. This is when we begin yelling. We are frustrated, we feel ignored and we quickly escalate to yelling out of desperation for something as simple as calling our child to the dinner table. In the end, our child does make it down to the dinner table, but when we look around the dinner table, it is not the picture perfect family meal we envisioned. Faces are scowling, arms are crossed and meals are being eaten at lightning speed just to get it over with--everyone is just plain mad. We are mad because we feel disrespected and our child is mad because he feels like he is always getting yelled at. The key to avoiding angry situations like this is to communicate with our Child's ADHD Brain in Mind. To put it simply, it means we have to understand that before we utter a word, we need to be sure our child's attention is focused on the words we are about to say. We also have to keep in mind, that we have to boost up his self esteem with each piece of communication we attempt. He has likely been redirected and or felt like he has made mistakes all day long at school. So when it comes to the simple task of coming downstairs for dinner, we don't want him to feel like he has messed up yet again. We want him to hear our message, follow through and have a pleasant dinner without yelling and heartache.

Here are some simple steps to boost self esteem and communicate with your child's ADHD Brain in Mind:

1. **When communicating be in close proximity.** It may be easier to simply yell down the hallway that dinner is ready, but in the long run you will find yourself repeating yourself over and over again until you begin to feel ignored. Walking down the hallway

and making eye contact to ensure that your message is received saves a lot of time and frustration.

2. **When giving a directive, do not make it a question.** You don't want to imply there is room for discussion when there isn't. This is a habit that many parents develop overtime as a way to ensure their child is paying attention, but what it actually does is open imply that there is room for discussion. "Come down for dinner, Okay?" A fairly predictable response from a child with ADHD would be "I'll come down as soon as I finish this level on my video game." As the parent walks out of the room, the child has already directed his attention back to video game, feeling that he has been given permission to keep playing. Meanwhile, the parent believes the level will be completed and in 2 minutes her child will come to the dinner table. When this doesn't happen, an argument begins with the child believing he was given the option to keep playing until the level was beat and the parent believing the child would soon be with the rest of the family at the table.

2. **Create Cue Words.** Assign one or two word phrases to cue important behaviors. For example, you can have a discussion with your child that when you say "Dinner time," it implies that your child will be seated at the table within 5 minutes. This is much more effective because if the directive begins as "Finish up that page of homework because dinner is in 5 minutes," some of that language gets lost. In fact your child may even just ingest the first part of the message, "finish up that page."

3. **Keep in mind the Power of Three** The first time you say something your child registers that someone is speaking, the second time your child understands you are talking to him and the third time your child hears the message you are trying to convey. This goal of this tip is to understand what is happening in your child's brain as you are communicating so that your own frustration level doesn't rise and you don't feel disrespected.

4. **Consider the Moment.** Gain control of your communication by understanding that your strategies may need to change, depending on the situation. Understand that your child may be feeling dejected after a long day at school where he struggled to stay in his seat and pay attention. He may have been redirected by his teacher 12 times and by the time he hears the frustration in your voice, he is ready to explode. On the flip side, you may be exhausted from a particularly stressful day so your patience is worn thin. Consider the moment and everyone's emotions as you are giving a directive to your child. If your child hears positivity and affection in your voice, he is likely to respond the

same way. If he hears frustration, he may perceive it to be extreme anger because he is compiling it with everyone else's frustration towards him throughout the day.

5. Put all these tips together for effective, self esteem boosting communication.

If you want the happy, pleasant family dinner that you envision, put all of these tips together. Walk down to where your child is, make eye contact, smile, and say "Dinner Time." Understand that this may be the piece of conversation that tips the scales from frustrated to pleasant. Once everyone is at the dinner table, listen. Really listen to what your child is saying. Listen to the challenges of his day and validate him. Show him that dinnertime is your favorite time of day because you get to sit down with him, hear about his day and see a smile on his face. Better yet, tell him that.