

How Having ADHD Made Me a Better Advocate for My Daughters

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If you looked back at my report cards in elementary school, every single one would say that. Even after recognizing that I struggled to pay attention, my family assured me that I didn't have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) because I was able to watch television for long periods of time.

My experience isn't as unique as I would hope. In fact, according to The State of Learning Disabilities report from the National Center for Learning Disabilities, 78% of parents believe that any child can do well in school if he or she just tries hard enough. And 33% of educators believe that sometimes what people call a learning or attention issue is really just laziness.

For me—and probably for many kids struggling in school—that wasn't the case. I was applying myself and doing the best I could, but I wasn't able to focus or pay attention. My teachers were frustrated that I would score in the 90th percentile on standardized tests but fail to turn in spelling tests and math worksheets. Through trial and error, I found strategies to keep myself organized in school. But by the time I went to college, I sought an evaluation and was told that I do, in fact, have ADHD.

Thanks to advances in research and more experts exploring these issues, our understanding of ADHD has grown tremendously over the past few decades. According to Understood.org, girls are not identified with ADHD as often as boys, and they are often identified much later. The signs can

look significantly different in girls and boys. For example, girls may not display the behavior challenges that boys do and might, instead, be chatty, disorganized, or emotional. And, much like me, because girls work hard to compensate for their challenges, it can often be overlooked.

Now, as a mother of three girls, nothing is more important to me than knowing my children's strengths and challenges and advocating for what they need. When my oldest daughter was in second grade, she began to exhibit the same signs I did at that age. Recognizing those familiar signs, I knew I had to take action. I wanted her to have the same understanding of herself it took me decades to develop.

We went through with an evaluation, and my oldest daughter was diagnosed with ADHD—just like me, but much sooner. My middle daughter was also diagnosed when she reached second grade. And my youngest, who struggles with reading and writing as well as attention, is in the process of being evaluated right now.

When I was younger, I became an advocate for myself only after the system failed to recognize my struggles. But I don't want that to happen to my children. Instead of making assumptions about what their future might look like with learning and attention issues, I make a point to consider their strengths, their interests, and their ideas about themselves. I want to ensure that my children—and all children—are on a path to understanding themselves and harnessing their strengths and talents.

Having ADHD myself and raising three children with ADHD is a unique challenge, and one I think many parents can relate to when learning and attention issues run in the family. But it is true that parents are their child's best advocate. When your instincts tell you that something is going on under the surface, it's important to trust that. It's critical to seek out professionals who will listen and help you support your child in the way you know you need to.

I often wonder how different my life would have been if my parents and teachers had recognized my ADHD earlier and provided the accommodation and supports I needed all those years ago. Fortunately, my children won't have to wonder about that. And I hope other parents trust their instincts, listen to their children, and follow a path that gets them and their child the supports they need.

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