

## **Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective**

### **Episode #163: Is It ADHD, Anxiety, or Both?**

Mallory: The way that then we would provide support to these kids looks different. And that's why it's important for us to look kind of beyond the surface, dig a little bit deeper to figure out where is the struggle and how can we help you complete this work.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: When a parent comes to you, Lori, for an evaluation and they share that their child is, you know, struggling to focus, having a hard time remembering things, maybe their child feels, seems restless, maybe they're irritable, they're having sleep struggles. Where does your mind go? Are you thinking ADHD? Are you thinking anxiety?

Lori: A lot of times I'm thinking both and that can be a real challenge, and that's my job. A stereotypical child with ADHD versus the stereotypical child with anxiety seem very different, but these two diagnoses can actually share a lot of the same surface level behaviors and challenges and we have to kind of get to the root of it.

Katie: Definitely. And just thinking about the numbers here, so we know that about one in nine kids have a diagnosis of ADHD in the United States, and similarly, about one in ten kids

have an anxiety diagnosis. And then it's estimated that about four in ten kids with ADHD also have an anxiety disorder. So, I mean, that just means that there's a lot of kids that are managing both ADHD and anxiety.

Lori: Yeah. So the question is not just is it ADHD or is it anxiety? because for a lot of kids, the answer is it's both, they have both going on. And it's even more complicated relationship because anxiety can then make the ADHD struggles worse. While ADHD can also make the anxiety worse.

Mallory: Yes, exactly. And there's a lot of kids that start to experience anxiety about their ADHD specific struggles. So they, like, they have anxiety about the ADHD challenges. So, like, let me just give an example as a grown up, let's say you like, you walk into work, you have really good intentions for the day. You're like, today, I'm going to be a great employee. I'm going to be super productive. I'm going to have great relationships with my coworkers. But the second you get to work, you start getting negative feedback on how you're doing. You forgot to hit submit on that report yesterday because you got caught up in a conversation with a coworker. A coworker complained to your boss that you didn't pull your weight in that recent group project. And despite your best efforts, you've forgotten a recent meeting or two because you keep forgetting to put them on your calendar, so.

Katie: Not me. I don't know what you're talking about!

Mallory: So, what's the result of all of that going to be? You're going to start feeling stressed, anxious. You're going to maybe even dread the thought of going to work. So, like, your anxiety is growing because of your ADHD specific struggles.

Katie: Absolutely. I mean, we see this a lot for kids at school when they have ADHD and they start to feel really anxious. And so today, our goal is to really dive into a few of the ways that ADHD and anxiety can look the same on the surface. But how can we start to really tease these two things apart? Because depending on what's going on, that's going to change the way that we support them.

Lori: Yeah. And it's not really so easy for kids to differentiate those things because our kids at a young age can't really articulate their worries well. And sometimes they're not saying, oh, mom, I'm worried about x, y or z, but a lot of times we see it in their behaviors. So, let's talk a

little bit about difficulty focusing. So, let's bring up some examples to help you kind of look at how these things might look a little bit different. So, of course, regulating attention is a core challenge for kids with ADHD. So, let's think about taking a math test at school. So, you might see behaviorally on the surface a child taking a math test, and maybe they're getting up out of their seat. Maybe they're sharpening a pencil. Maybe they're asking to use the restroom. Maybe they're sitting there kind of frozen and not doing anything. And so a child with ADHD, it could be that they're just, they're having a hard time regulating their attention to that test. It could be that they hear all the things going on right outside the window that's right next to them, and they see the lawnmower going and they're getting distracted. It could be that they just can't sit still for that long, and so they need that movement and they're getting up to kind of avoid that non preferred task. So they're sharpening a pencil or going to the bathroom. Whereas a child with anxiety might be sitting there kind of paralyzed, frozen with fear of I'm going to fail. Like, I don't know how to do this. I can't, you know, what if I get it wrong? What if I get a bad grade and then I fail out of school and then my parents are going to be mad at me and my teacher's not going to like me and the other kids are going to notice and they kind of spiral, right. What we know about anxiety is we go into fight or flight or freeze, right? So that can look really similar to a kid with ADHD where they could be freezing up, where they're just sitting there and looking distracted and not completing it, but they could also be fleeing the situation where they're getting up and asking to go to the bathroom. We see that so much in kids with anxiety where they're asking to go to the nurse or asking to go to the bathroom all the time to avoid those anxious thoughts and those anxious feelings. So again, part of the reason why we wanna look at this is because treatment for these two different things might be really different. So for a kid with ADHD, a lot of times we're looking at how do we accommodate that, right? Like, we're gonna maybe move that child's seat to an area where they're not getting distracted and they're not near a window or a distracting student. We might be having that student work one-on-one with the teacher so that they're able refocus them more. We might have the teacher come over and check in with them every five to ten minutes to make sure they're on task and to help them kind of initiate. The opposite is a lot of times true for the anxiety. We don't want to accommodate it. Accommodating it can actually make it worse. So we're going to actually focus more on doing therapy for that child to help them with developing some coping thoughts around, you know, they're automatically thinking that they're going to fail and all these things are going to happen, and developing coping thoughts. You know, maybe they're constantly erasing everything they do because they're second guessing. So we might actually be like, you know

what, we're going to use a pen for this test instead of a pencil so you can't erase. And you just go with your first, your first instinct on that.

Katie: Oh my gosh. But that actually makes me feel anxious when you say that. I'm like, is it an erasable pen? Or like, what are we talking about here?

Lori: Yeah. And it's, you know, again, a lot of kids think, oh, I need, you know, I need to be able to do that, right? But we're kind of saying, no, actually, you probably don't. You probably knew it the first time. And that's the difference between, like, the ADHD versus anxiety. So those are kind of a couple of different examples, but you can kind of see the way we might address those is going to be different based on kind of the root of the struggle.

Katie: And I think it's so important, too like you said at the beginning, like a child who's getting up and down out of their seat or sitting there frozen isn't necessarily going to articulate, you know, I'm just really having trouble with my cognitive flexibility, or I'm having these thoughts, and now I'm spiraling. Like, they don't have the language necessarily, or even the insight to know or explain what's going on. And so it's so important for us as parents and working with our teachers, too, in this math test example, to really get curious and figure out, okay, what is going on, because like you said, that's going to change the way that we treat it. And that's so important.

Mallory: Yeah, it's not always super clear, which is why teasing out ADHD and anxiety can be so challenging and kind of along those same lines of your example, Lori, with we see both kids with ADHD and both kids with anxiety struggling with focus. Another kind of surface level struggle where there's something a lot different going on underneath the surface is kids working slowly or having a lot of incomplete work. So we see this in kids with ADHD, and we also see this in kids with anxiety, but again, like, the core of what's going on beneath the surface is a lot different. So maybe your child with anxiety is struggling with perfectionism. You kind of alluded to this with the math test, wanting to get it right, but with perfectionism, they're paralyzed. They don't want to get started because they want it to be perfect, or they're working very slowly because they want it to be just right, and that's resulting in a lot of incomplete work. They might be asking for a lot of clarification on directions, because again, they want to get it just right. There's the anxiety about messing up, getting something wrong. So, they're working really slowly versus a child with ADHD that has a lot of incomplete work, again, is it coming back to being distracted? Is that child with ADHD having a hard

time getting started because the task feels overwhelming? Again, that's kind of bringing it back to some of those executive functioning struggles. So on the surface, we're seeing similar things, but the root of it is different. So, like, let's take an example of art class. Most kids love art. Let's say you're working on an art project, but the child is having struggle getting through, you know, getting through the art project. They're not finishing it while the rest of the class is finished. Is it because, you know, the child with anxiety wants it to be just right, wants it to be perfect, so they're working slowly. They constantly, like you said, Lori, are erasing and redoing it. Or is it the child with ADHD that is just not interested in this? Maybe this isn't something that they care about that much. Are they getting distracted? Are they chatting with their table mates? So again, the way that then we would provide support to these kids looks different. And that's why it's important for us to look kind of beyond the surface, dig a little bit deeper to figure out where is the struggle and how can we help you complete this work?

Lori: Yeah, I remember when my daughter was in first grade, her teacher was like, she's not getting work finished. And I remember asking, like, is it because she's distracted? Because we saw a lot of distraction at home, and she's like, no, she's super focused and participating all the time. But when she does written work, she's just not getting stuff done because she's erasing and erasing, and she's such a perfectionist. And years later, you know, we find out she has OCD, and we find out that she has this whole method of when this letter is written wrong, I have to write it this way. And so it was, like, almost paralyzing the amount of effort she was having to put into making sure she had all these rules about, this has to be written. If I make this mistake, I have to do this thing that none of us had any idea what's going on.

Katie: Yeah. But just to get on a little soapbox for a second, I feel like in both of those situations that you guys just described, a lot of times the school staff might be like, oh, they're just really not they're not participating, they're being defiant, they're so resistant. And again, like, the school staff has a lot going on. I'm not criticizing school staff, but it is like, on the surface, it does look like, why is this child putting their head down? Why is this child taking so much longer than everyone else? And now I have 20 kids that are done with their art project or done with their writing assignment. And so there can be just kind of logistical stress for the teacher and also maybe frustration. And so, again, that's a little soapbox, but it is so important to reframe this, because in all of those situations, no one's being defiant. They're actually all having their own very specific struggles. And I mean, even the OCD piece, like,

we didn't even talk about that. But yes, there's so many different explanations for what's going on, and that's really important.

Lori: Yeah. And it's like I said, with anxiety, and we talk about this all the time, it's fight or flight, right. And fight is sometimes anger, defiance. It's fighting, you know, and that doesn't, that's not what we often think about. When we think about anxiety, we think of, like, the timid, shy kid that's shaking in a corner. And it's not always, not always that.

Katie: Especially with boys, you're going to see more of that.

Lori: Exactly.

Katie: Frustration. I learned from you guys, we call that externalizing. So you're going to see externalizing behaviors. So another area, the third area where there can be some overlap and similarity between ADHD and anxiety is when it comes to social interactions and having friends, so, and keeping friends. So kids with ADHD and anxiety can both struggle with this, but the reason is going to be really different. So thinking about a kid that's anxious and kind of going back to that more classic anxiety where they might be shy or they might want to sit by themselves and just observe and see what's going on, that is going to potentially make it hard for them to make friends and make it really intimidating. Like going into a birthday party or another social situation that might be really overwhelming for a child with anxiety. And then for kids with ADHD, they can also struggle socially. And we talk about this quite a bit, but one of the areas that can be really hard is peer interactions, because you have to sit and really attend to what someone is saying. It's really hard when you have ADHD to not interrupt, to not shift gears, to not run around. Even if you're more on the inattentive side, there's a lot going on inside of your mind, right. And so it can be really difficult to take perspective and be flexible and all these different types of things. And so if we think about you know, for example, at a birthday party, these kids are going to look different from one another, but you might have this common theme of, oh man, it is challenging for them to make friends. And again, this is a great example of where we really would want to figure out what is going on at the core so that we can make sure to support appropriately. So a lot of times, you know, looking at prepping our kids before we go into a situation, talking through, okay, what's it gonna look like? And helping them rehearse, that's really especially important for kids with ADHD. And then, I don't know on the anxiety side, what would you guys say

for a child who's anxious going into a birthday party? What would be your strategy that you might share with parents?

Mallory: So in that case, you're prepping as well. And if your child, if your child is anxious about social situations, maybe they have social anxiety, then you're kind of reviewing the tools that you've given them already. If you haven't already had this conversation with your child, you're going to be fighting an uphill battle with that prep and then having them have a successful birthday party experience. But really, this is why it's important to get to the core of it, too, is like, you've already talked with your child about this, then you understand what kind of situations make them anxious, and they have tools to kind of manage those tricky situations. So you are doing prep, but it's based on a lot of prep that you've already done leading up to that as well. So, you know, parents might be coming to you, Lori, and saying, my child is struggling with their friends, or maybe parents, the teacher is telling you that your child is struggling with peers. And again, that's when we need, okay, tell me more about that. How are they struggling with peers? Because while kids with ADHD and anxiety might both struggle with peers, but there's different reason and there's a different way that we're going to support our child.

Katie: Exactly.

Lori: So another kind of situation that we might see coming up is kids with ADHD and anxiety both showing excessive movement. So, I touched on this a little bit, but kids with ADHD, you might see lots of fidgeting, lots of moving around, getting out of their seat, jumping, crashing into things. But many people don't really think of kind of fidgeting or body movements with anxiety. But I definitely see kids in my office when I'm doing testing, and they're anxious about the testing where they're constantly fidgeting with things on the desk. They might be shaking their leg constantly, that's like a really common one. So again, we might look at a fidget toy for a child with ADHD can help them kind of self-regulate sometimes. Sometimes it can be distracting.

Mallory: Finding the right fidget.

Lori: Yeah. it is, definitely, and I can tell you from personal experience using them during testing, some it's distracting, some it can help. Or using a fidget toy for kids with anxiety can be kind of a self-soothing type of thing for them where they're kind of getting, you know, we

think of like stress balls and things like that that help them kind of relieves some of that, those anxious, that anxious energy that builds up when they're in that kind of fight or flight stage. So again, excess movement, not something we really think about with anxiety, but we can definitely see it. Or kids getting up out of their seat a lot at school, where they might be trying to avoid something. So it looks like excessive movement.

Mallory: Absolutely. Another area that we see a lot of times, with kids with anxiety, but we can also see it in kids with ADHD, is school avoidance. Kids not wanting to go to school. Kids actively avoiding going to school, refusing to get out of the car, or they do get out of the car and there's a big meltdown. And this is something we definitely have to get really curious about. And for most cases of school avoidance, these kids are experiencing some level of anxiety. And it's kind of those kids, it can be those kids with ADHD that I kind of talked about in the beginning where the child has ADHD, but then they start to develop anxiety about their ADHD related struggles. So they've learned that school is really hard for them because of their executive function struggles. They have a hard time paying attention, they have a hard time getting work done, they have a hard time kind of inhibiting impulsive things on the playground. So they're really struggling at school, they're getting a lot of negative feedback, and now they have anxiety about going to school because of those struggles, so now they're avoiding school. And there's a lot of reasons an anxious child might avoid school. If they're struggling with social interactions, if they're struggling with those feelings of perfectionism, if they're struggling with separation anxiety, not wanting to be away from their parent because they're worried about their parents well-being. So again, we could fall into a situation where we see kids with ADHD and kids with anxiety avoiding school. And this is a really challenging one. And if you're a parent who has a child who has school avoidance, you know how challenging this is.

Lori: So challenging.

Mallory: And it really does require a lot of extra support for these kids. And oftentimes someone at the school, we need someone at the school involved, the school psychologist, the school counselor, and a lot of times it also requires a professional outside of school. Especially if the child is experiencing anxiety, to kind of overcome the school avoidance, because, as Lori kind of already alluded to, the more when you have anxiety, the more you avoid and get out of the feared situation, the bigger the anxiety grows. And as a parent, when



your child is avoiding school, your first instinct might be, yeah, okay, just take a day off. Just chill. It's gonna be okay. You know, you might be tapped out. You can't handle another morning meltdown. But the more your child is avoiding school, the stronger the anxiety is growing and it's so challenging. So it's a situation where we really need to pull professionals in, and everyone needs to be on the same team, whether at the core, we're talking about ADHD or anxiety. We all need to be on the same page to really help these kids to school and have a successful school day.

Katie: And I think something else that should be evaluated in that situation is what's going on with that child's learning? And as you mentioned, you know, getting the professionals involved, absolutely. And most likely, there's a need for an evaluation to figure it out, because Lori has told stories before of, like, a kid that will go in and literally destroy the front office of the school. But really, at the heart of it, I think it's that was just creating so much anxiety for this child because they had a math disorder that was unidentified, and they were just terrified at this point to go into the classroom. And so you see this otherwise pretty peaceful child, and you're like, this is not who you are. This is just so far beyond what we know about you. And so, again, I feel like we just keep saying the same thing because it's super important. But getting curious to see, okay, what is going on? Is there a learning challenge? Maybe multiple subjects are really challenging for this child, and we know that there's a high overlap between ADHD and learning disorders. And so if you're seeing that level of school refusal, looking at the anxiety and the social emotional piece, and then also looking at the child's learning profile and what's going on there.

Lori: Yeah.

Mallory: So important.

Lori: I would say in almost every situation of school avoidance I've had, every child has had significant separation anxiety with a parent. But then there's also other things going on contributing to that, whether it's social anxiety with other kids at school, bullying, learning disorders that have not been identified and they're not receiving accommodations, same with ADHD. And ADHD complicates this, because when you're anxious you have these emotions and an ADHD kid is just their emotion regulation it's a just really hard for them. So you're going to see really big emotions. You're going to see them become highly impulsive where they might just run away when they have those feelings of anxiety. It's hard for them to go

through the process of sitting with that anxiety, which is so important in treatment, sitting with it and realizing, okay, I can cope with it, I'm going to be okay, it's not going to hurt me, it's not going to kill me. And there is a part of treatment where you have to kind of sit with those uncomfortable feelings of anxiety. And that's hard for a kid with ADHD that's impulsive, that wants to kind of immediately escape and flee from that situation, so it can definitely complicate it. The last area we want to talk about is that can be difficult for kids with ADHD and kids with anxiety is sleep. So for kids with ADHD, oftentimes falling asleep is really hard for them. They have very busy bodies and calming their bodies and calming their minds at night is hard. So you might see kids just getting kind of wound up and running around at night. They can't stay in their bed. They might have just racing thoughts. So, you know, you might see just like, you know, talking about a million different topics and things like that. Whereas a child with anxiety, it's sometimes a little bit more clear at night, you're going to start to see worries. And they might not say, I'm worried, mom, but you might see questions about the next day. So it's a lot of times questioning of what do you think's going to happen tomorrow? Are we going to do this? Are we going to do that? What is the plan for tomorrow? What's going to happen at recess? and maybe assumptions about something bad happening is another thing that we see with anxiety, where there's assuming I know that my friend's going to be mean to me tomorrow and maybe I should just not talk to them. Or all of that assuming that something bad is going to happen, is another kind of sign of that anxiety at night. So you might see a lot of still getting up out of bed, coming to check on you. It might be anxiety about mom's going to leave or mom's not safe or somebody's going to break into the house. So you might see your child not wanting to leave your side, wanting you to lay down with them, coming into your bed at night because they're afraid in the middle of the night. So those are all kind of signs that it's more anxiety as opposed to just the ADHD.

Katie: It's so hard. Those nighttime worries are really tough. And of course, we all want to reassure our kids and be like, no, no, we're safe, everything's fine, but it is so easy to get stuck in a cycle of having to consistently have those same conversations. So, okay, we've kind of gone over a bunch of different ways that ADHD and anxiety can look similar on the surface, and they're not really the same at the heart of it, but they might look the same and they might be easily confused. So when we're thinking about a diagnostic evaluation, what would you ladies say are some of the main kind of features, or what are the characteristics you're looking for to start to parse this out? If it's just ADHD, just anxiety, or both?

Mallory: Yeah. So obviously, in the psychologist's shoes and the diagnostician's shoes, we're interviewing parents, we're trying to get information about all of these things as much as possible, as much as they understand kind of what's going on beneath the surface. But I think another big piece that we haven't necessarily touched on is we really need to talk to the kids about it. And as Lori mentioned earlier, like a lot of times kids are going to struggle, especially younger kids, to actually put words to this and really understand it, but we have to talk about it and we have to start getting some information from them. And so some things that we can kind of tune into that might help us differentiate ADHD versus anxiety is when is this happening? When are you seeing this behavior? Is it isolated to specific tasks or specific places? Is it just at birthday parties? Is it just during math class? So start paying attention to when are these things happening, that can give us a lot of information. Talking with kids and starting to give them some language around emotion so that they can start to verbalize that better, Especially if you're trying to parse out ADHD versus anxiety, talking with kids about if they're experiencing any of those kind of physiological symptoms that are part of kind of that fight, flight, or freeze. So are they getting butterflies in their stomach? Are they constantly complaining about stomach aches? Are they getting headaches a lot? Are they able to tell you that, like, their hands get really sweaty right before a test? So talking to the kids about it, and it really does require a lot of adult guidance because kids are going to struggle, especially at the younger age being able to put words to some of this. But there are questions we can ask to kind of help them, help us start to tease out what are we looking at here?

Lori: So it can be really helpful to get a thorough evaluation from a trained professional, like a psychologist, a neuropsychologist, a developmental pediatrician, to really get kind of an accurate picture of your child's skills and then help you have a better idea of the best type of treatment. Or, you know, again, even figuring out what treatment do we do first? If we can't do all things all at once, what is the most predominant issue? If your child has both ADHD anxiety, how to which one do we kind of address first? What's impacting your family the most right now?

Mallory: Mmhmm. I'm just thinking about how many listeners, especially moms, that we have listening to this episode right now that are like, I was diagnosed with anxiety as a kid, but now I've figured out that really it was ADHD inattentive type for most of them, but now I have anxiety too, because that went untreated for so long. I'm just.. it's so.. it's so tricky. And

I think that's probably a situation that a lot of our listeners are in as they grew up thinking they had anxiety.

Lori: Yeah. And I think that's so true. We talked about this on our episode with Doctor Hinshaw about girls and women with ADHD, for many years, and even still now, we're kind of just diagnosing the anxiety when some of that anxiety that they're having really is at the core challenges with regulating attention, regulating their bodies, all of that.

Mallory: Yeah. And hopefully this episode has kind of highlighted for you why it really is important to get an accurate diagnosis, because the way that we then support our child can look really different. And if you're listening to this episode and you're feeling pretty confident that your child is struggling with anxiety, should check out our episode 132. We give you some concrete strategies to help your child if they are struggling with anxiety. We'll link that for you in the show notes. And then today's key takeaway. As always, as you navigate through ADHD and anxiety, keep in mind that we are here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!