

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #170: Phones, Social Media, + ADHD with Dr. Tasha Brown

Dr. Tasha Brown: A lot of that misinformation that's out there, and helping them to be able to filter. We know children with attentional difficulties have a hard time with that filtering. Helping them to just filter information that is accurate versus information that is just being fed by someone out there who is speaking about their own experience or not speaking from an understanding of what exactly ADHD is and what it looks like.

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.

Katie: Today, Lori and I are so excited to be interviewing Doctor Tasha Brown, a licensed clinical child psychologist.

Lori: Dr. Brown is the director and founder of TMB Psychological Services, which offers a wide range of services across the United States, including therapy, parent coaching, school consultations, and workshops. So, thank you so much for being here with us, Dr. Brown.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Katie: Yes, we're so excited, and we are really looking forward to today because we want to have a conversation with you about social media and phone use. And as moms ourselves, Lori and I are already getting constant requests for phones from, we both have ten-year-olds.

Lori: Yes! Yeah, and it's really hard when so many kids these days are having access to phones and social media, and it can feel like a lot of pressure on us as parents to make these decisions and to hold boundaries that we want and feel comfortable with. So, we're really excited to dive into this topic with you. So, let's talk a little bit about some of the common challenges that kids with ADHD and teens with ADHD face when using smartphones and social media platforms.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, I love this conversation. I just want to start by saying this because in my clinical practice, this is literally something I talk about several times a week. The phone, the tablet, electronics, how to navigate that, and then on top of how to navigate that, how to navigate that when your child, has ADHD or struggling with attentional difficulties, impulsivity. And there's several things that I always, like to talk with parents about and it's starting with this question, like how, when we think about cell phone use, when we think about social media use for your child specifically with ADHD, what do we have to think about? Number one, we have to start thinking about just the attentional differences. And social media is this very fast paced, moving target. Like, you can be looking at one thing one moment and the next thing, something completely different is on. And for children who have attentional difficulties, we know that, staying and sustaining attention for long periods of time is something that very often parents and caregivers and teachers are working on outside of the home, at school. And so, when we give children prematurely, a phone and access to social media, we're now putting something in their reach that goes against a lot of what we're trying to teach in terms of staying focused, staying on target, focusing on one thing at a time, impulsivity. When we think about children making very quick decisions, not really thinking without going through the consequences, we know that our kids with ADHD struggle with that. And social media access to technology puts a lot, gives children a lot of situations where they have to make, very often, decisions that require critical thinking, requires them to think about, okay, if I post this or if I answer this, or if I engage in this conversation or on this thread, like, what will happen? What are the social consequences for this? And children who struggle with impulsivity, are very often getting themselves into difficult situations, not out of any ill intent, but because they're having a hard time, with that impulsivity.

Katie: I also think that, on that same note, they're not necessarily getting a good model of what they should be doing, because on social media right now, there is so much negativity, so much just almost, like, disdain for people that you disagree with. And this could be on all things right, not just politics. But even I got into a thread the other day about pasteurized milk and not pasteurized milk. It was an accidental rabbit hole guys. I don't know. I have no opinion. Please don't even ask me my opinion. But people were genuinely, like, hating each other in the comments about whether or not unpasteurized milk is safe to consume. I don't even know. I don't even know where this question came from. But I think that when kids see that, it makes it that much more challenging, because it's like, oh, this is normal, and it is so not normal. You would never, ever speak to someone like that in person. Well, hopefully not.

Dr. Tasha Brown: I was gonna say a lot of times parents, who I work with whose children have ADHD, one of the things we talk about is how you can be a model for your child with routines and thinking about how you get through your day and how you engage with your friends. Social media, you don't have the beautiful opportunity to be that model because your child is not saying, well, let me look at my mom's social media page and see how she's engaging, and then do that there. So, there's not that opportunity to be that model for how to engage online

Katie: Yeah, that's a great point.

Lori: And, yeah, I've seen situations, I think safety and we'll talk I know more about that, but situations where their stressors and their anxiety and things that they're feeling and somehow can go down a rabbit hole on TikTok of how to find drugs and just not, again, they're impulsive. They're not thinking through, like, the consequences of giving your address to a random stranger or the safety of those things. So, it is really concerning, you know, just with those like impulsive decision making online.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah. And one thing that I'm seeing a lot, especially with my, the teenagers that I work with is, there's a lot of content out there on like, what is ADHD? What are your ADHD symptoms? Like, how do you understand your ADHD? And so, these teens will come in and they'll start telling me things about their diagnosis, and I'm like, wait, what? Like, where are you getting all of this from?

Katie: Like, I unwrap every water bottle and that's why I know I have ADHD.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yes.

Katie: Um, that's not in the DSM. No.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Exactly. Exactly. And so, helping to protect your child also just against a lot of that misinformation that's out there, and helping them to be able to filter. We know children with attentional difficulties have a hard time with that filtering. Helping them to just filter information that is accurate versus information that is just being fed by someone out there who is speaking about their own experience or not speaking from an understanding of what exactly ADHD is and what it looks like.

Katie: I love that. So, on that same note, can you actually share with us a little bit on the research about how social media influences mental health, self-esteem, even social skills for kids with ADHD?

Dr. Tasha Brown: I, so a couple of months ago, the U.S. Surgeon General put out this huge report on social media use for teenagers and for children in general. And just generally speaking, we know that social media has a significant impact on the mental health of children just in general. So, we know that it contributes to higher rates of depression and anxiety. Specifically, when you look at teenage girls, we know there's a lot of bullying that occurs on social media. When we think about children who have ADHD, a lot of those things are we see, like, twofold. When we think about just comparing. So, there's a lot of conversation around what it means to be in a social space where you are exposed to so many people your age and what that comparison looks like and then what that does to your self-esteem. So, if teens and young, young adolescents are looking online and they're scrolling through social media, and they're seeing children and other people their age who do not have significant difficulties with attention and how they are engaging in their life and how they are able to navigate certain things. That comparison can increase anxiety, it can increase depression. And then also, when we think about, and you touched on this a little bit earlier, Lori, ways to medicate or ways to think about how to treat ADHD, we know that children who are on social media are exposed to those and don't always have the most healthy ways of coping with their ADHD. Especially because social media, and excessive screen use takes away the time, that very often goes into healthier coping strategies.

Lori: Yeah. And we know for, you know, when I used to work with teens who were experiencing depression, one of the first things we worked on were increasing two things in their life, and those were like, social experiences, positive social experiences and success activities. And again, it's not social in the sense of online, but social in person. Those social relationships are really and engaging in activities that they feel good about themselves are really buffers for that depression.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, definitely. We know that a lot of times when adolescents are depressed or dealing with ADHD, there's a lot of low self-esteem, especially as kids get a little bit older and they start to recognize and really have an understanding. Okay, what do my attentional difficulties mean for me at school? What do these mean for me socially? What does this mean for me on how I show up on my sports team? And very often that takes a wear and tear on their self-esteem.

Katie: That's so hard.

Dr. Tasha Brown: It's so difficult. And if they're spending so much time navigating social media and their electronics, it's harder to attend to the things and do the things that will help to boost their self-esteem in these other areas.

Katie: I love that. That's a great way to explain it. And I think it takes away some of the guilt that parents feel when they take away phones or are limiting it to think, like, what are we putting in place of it? And that's really, really exciting, actually. And I love that reframe.

Lori: Yep. So given some of the concerns that we talked about around the safety for ADHD kids, some of the mental health concerns, what do parents need to think about before they give their kids access to a phone or social media?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yes, a few things. Number one, I always tell parents just to think about their context. So, think about where you are, the other kids around your child do they have access to social media? Do they have phones? And this doesn't mean if everyone has a phone, like you're like, yes, you get a phone too, or you get access to social media too. But it just gives you an understanding on how you frame this to your child. If no one around your child has a phone or access to social media and your child asks for one, it's easier to navigate that conversation because you're not getting questions around, like, but so and so has one,

everyone has one. And so, thinking about what that context is. So, as you talk to your child about, why you're choosing to or not to give them a phone or access to screens, you can kind of think about your context and implement some of that conversation in there. You also want to think about your child's generally how they are managing their ADHD symptoms. So, when it comes to keeping up schedules, staying on track, being able to multitask, thinking about the areas that your child is really strong in and struggling in. Very often, kids who are still having difficulties with keeping track of items, who are having difficulty staying on track with their schedule, who are easily distracted by just going throughout their daily routine, very often those are strong indications they're not ready for a device. Also, thinking about what's happening in school, this is a conversation I have a lot, socially. So, if you have a child who is impulsive in the classroom, they're always calling out. You're getting a lot of phone calls home because they are, they're not defiant or they're not doing these things intentionally, but they're the kid who's like, running down the hallway, tapping everyone around. Those are signs that socially your child's attentional difficulties are getting in the way of them making decisions that will help them to be fruitful in the school space. And so very often that transfers over into an online, online setting. And then we also know that sometimes children who have ADHD can become very fixated on items and social media and games, especially like some of these, like Minecraft and other things that kids are playing.

Katie: The games, yes.

Dr. Tasha Brown: The kids that I see who struggle with attentional difficulties, it is very hard for us to find a balance between how they can navigate that, in a way that is, number one, easy for parents to get them off of that, and also for parents who choose to give their children screens and choose to help their children engage in these things is, can my child start to make their own boundaries and then monitor those things. So if I say, you can have 30 minutes on your screen today, can my child then monitor those 30 minutes? What does their time accountability look like? Are they able to do that in other spaces? If your child isn't able to, like, time block or think about time or follow, or look at their timer and follow that, that might not, that also may be a sign that they're not ready for, for a screen.

Lori: Yep.

Katie: This is all just amazing. And I totally agree with everything you're saying. So, I'm thinking about applying this in my own life, right. And I, like I mentioned, we at both Lori

and I have ten-year-olds, and so she's my oldest. This is a tough thing to navigate because some of her friends do have phones. I would say less than half of her friends have phones, probably a handful. But, you know, this is a constant conversation. And it probably started about a year ago where she's like, oh, mom, I need a phone. And then it kind of switched for a little bit to an Apple Watch. Can I just get an Apple Watch? And I'm thinking, like, if you can't bring your, your water bottle home, I don't think that you need a \$600 Apple Watch. But okay, I digress. So, but thinking about parents, and I'm sure there are some that are listening who've decided or they've kind of know their true north tells them we're not really ready for a phone. So, do you have recommendations for me, specifically, and any of us who are trying to really communicate that to our kids in a loving way, but also to hold that boundary, it is exhausting to have the same conversation over and over.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah. One, if you know, and not all parents have an exact time when you're going to give a phone or a device. Some parents, like when you get to 8th grade or 7th grade or when you get to high school, if you have a day or a time period where you know, okay, this is going to be the time where I'm going to be more open to the conversation. Just being clear with your child. Right now, you can't have a phone. However, when you get to 9th grade and you're in high school and, and you may want to put another some other things in there, like you're responsible and I'm seeing these very concrete things, then you can discuss the phone. I'm being very clear if there's a time around it. And so, every single time your child comes to you and asks about it, you can always point back to the time. Also, kids understand that their home has certain values and things that are important. And just like parents communicate things that are important around how you eat, how you socialize with family members, what you believe in, you can teach your child your values around the phone use or having a screen. So, right now, I don't want you to have a screen because there's so many beautiful things that you can be engaged in. I want you to have fun with your friends. I want you to play your sports. I want you to read. Like, really point to your value system and use that in your conversation with your child around why you're not choosing for them to have a device at this time. And then also being very clear and concrete around, when the time comes, because this is always, always attention area, is if the time comes like that, the parents said, and then they're like, hmm don't think you're ready. Being very clear and concrete about what you're looking for. So, I need you to be responsible, for a child, especially a child who has attentional difficulties, being responsible can mean so many different things. Being responsible means, I wake up on time two days out of the week, I do my chores once. You

want to be very concrete. I need to see that you are able to follow your schedule. I need to see that you have kept track of all of your items for the first half of the school year. Just being very concrete about what it is that you need to see before you say that you can have that device.

Lori: Yeah. That you're completing your homework each night and that homework is getting turned in, or, yes, those basic hygiene, basic responsibilities at home. Because I see, again, we see so many teens that are not doing any of those things right, but have access to a phone, which is just distracting them even more from all of the things that they need to be doing, which is. So, I like that, that it's important to have. Okay, we're not even going to talk about it until this age, but even at this age, these are the expectations we have that need to be in place.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, I love that. And I think children, especially as they get into adolescent years, they understand for the most part, their attentional difficulties. And so, you can even bring that into the conversation. And this is a great way to start to provide children with education around what do my attentional difficulties mean and what do I need to navigate them? So, sharing with your child, one of the hallmark things about ADHD is difficulties with, like, shifting attention. There can be a lot of things going on, and you're having a hard time attending to all those things at once. If we introduce this phone, this is another thing that you have to pay attention to, and it's going to be hard for you to shift your attention to your chores or to engage in family or to do your homework. And, to help you or to help you start thinking about ways that you can get engaged fully in the other areas, we're just not introducing the phone right now. So, you can introduce it in that way or have the conversation in that way also.

Katie: Yeah, I kind of think about it, like, driving. Like, my kids aren't that close to that yet, right. But in Arizona, you can get your learner's permit, I think, at like, 15 and a half, and then you are eligible to have a driver's license at 16. But I've always told my kids, because of course they asked me, like, when can I drive? And we've always said, I don't really know, like, the earliest time would be 16. But that being said, I know I wasn't ready to drive at 16. I personally was, like, terrified and told my parents, like, I don't want a driver's license yet. And it was actually the opposite. They had to, like, talk me into it at 17. They're like, you need to drive yourself to school. But I think that it is less about your age, right. And especially with kids with ADHD, we know that they aren't developing at the same rate as

their peers in some areas. And so, setting that stage, or setting, we call it, like, setting the table to know that it's not an automatic. And that is, I love the way you explain that with the phones, too. I honestly hadn't really connected that in my mind because we've always kind of said, like, 8th grade ish will look into the phone thing. But that it is more about, like, these specific skills or the specific, like, habits and routines. And I love that. So, on the same note, then I'm thinking of families who maybe have gotten their kid a phone and maybe they regret that, or they're like, it's out of control. Maybe we want to take it away, or maybe we just need to limit it again or regain some sort of boundaries. What advice do you have for those types of families that are in that situation?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah. Number one, it's okay to backtrack and take away a device.

Katie: That is hard.

Lori: I would even say to an app. Like, I was talking to family where they decided to do Snapchat. And Snapchat really is designed to have kids on there as long as possible. It's very reinforcing. You know deciding do we get rid of a phone? Do we get rid of a specific app or a specific game?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yes. Yes, it is okay to say, you know what, that just wasn't the greatest decision. And I say that because I have to spend a lot of time with parents, like, talking this through. Like, it's okay, you can say something and approve something and then realize, like, that's not the, this wasn't the greatest decision. And that's beautiful modeling for children, in general, and beautiful modeling for children with ADHD is that sometimes we make decisions for ourselves about things that we think may work and then notice that they're not, and we have to make a decision to just not engage in those things. Maybe not permanently, maybe just for a while.

Katie: Right.

Dr. Tasha Brown: So I, for a couple of things. So, number one, I like to do a gradual removal for some kids where behavioral problems can become a concern. So thinking through, okay, maybe you had access to your screen for 5 hours a day, but, you know, moving forward, you're having, for the next week, we're going to do 3 hours so you can get used to it. Then we're going to do an hour, and then we're going to take it away. For behavior, for if you think

your child's behavior is just gonna spike and it's gonna cause other issues in the home or just through your routine. Being very clear and concrete with your child that it's gonna be taken away, and having a conversation about it, and ideally not taking it away in the height of conflict around the device. And so not like, oh, my gosh, I'm so tired of this device.

Katie: I'm throwing it in the sink!

Lori: Where it's modeling almost an impulsive decision too, around it, right?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, exactly. So it's, it's thought out. You know what, where I'm noticing this is not working. So, on Monday morning, I'm gonna have a conversation on the way to after school practice. You know, I've been noticing that the screens have been getting in the way of a lot, so we're gonna take it away on this. At this time you won't. And being very clear if there's no chance that the child is getting it back or there's no wiggle room around it, being very clear from the onset of, like, what the rules and guidelines around this removal is going to be. Because most of the time your child is going to come back and say, well, can I use it now? It's the weekend or it's school, break or it's camp. These are all the things I hear. Can I use my phone now? Or can I put my game back on? Just being very clear around what it's going to be. So that communication around what it is and then back to this idea of explaining to your child why. Why it is this is happening. I always love these moments, especially as, as we get into that pre-adolescent, adolescent range. You want to be teaching your child how to manage their attentional difficulties for a lifetime.

Katie: Yes.

Dr. Tasha Brown: And so, when you make decisions because you recognize that their ADHD is interfering with something, you want to be really clear about why you're. why you're doing that so your child can put it together. So, we're taking this away right now because we're noticing that you're not able to complete your homework, or we notice that you have been in your room for a really long time and your chores aren't getting done, or you're just not spending enough time with us, or you're having a hard time falling asleep. Like, whatever the reasoning is, getting in there and highlighting that for your child, so that there can be a little bit more accepting because they know what's occurring. And so, you putting that reasoning to it can be really helpful. And then staying consistent. As much as they cry, as much as it becomes a conversation, that consistency is key. So, if you're deciding that it's gone and that's

your decision, it's gone. And being aware of, like, other things that you may need to do to fill in the time that your child was spending on their device.

Lori: Yeah.

Katie: It's hard. Being consistent is really tricky. I also, on that same note, something that I've done in my own family around, maybe my kids don't have phones, but like an iPad or something. And I will say, I'll model it for myself. Like, I'll say, I really need to turn my phone off right now because I really need to get started on this other thing, I'm just avoiding it. You know, and I'll kind of speak that out loud. Or I need to turn the phone off because I don't want, like you said, to be awake, you know, late at night because I was on my screens too late. So, trying to model that too. If, for parents who are thinking like, oh, my kid, isn't that receptive to me saying, like, these are all the things that it's affecting you. You can also point out, your own, how you're using those strategies, too, along with your child. And I think that can be helpful because they can see, like, again, this is something adults do. This is something we all do throughout the day, not just, it's not just me and my brain that needs the special, you know, special strategies kind of thing.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah.

Lori: So, in thinking about our teens that maybe do have access to a phone, maybe they have access to social media, what would you tell parents to do about fostering open communication around online safety? Like, what do those conversations look like for teens?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, this is such an important one. I think having open communication, and different families have very different, like, values and guidelines around this. So, I have some parents who are like, I'm gonna check and look and look to see who you're following, or check your messages, like, once in a while to see what's going on. And then some parents who are like, no, that's like, an invasion of their privacy. I want to foster that autonomy. Wherever you fall on the spectrum, it's I think it's okay. It's having that clear communication from the onset and then setting up with your child, like, what the guidelines around their social media use is. So, setting those expectations so you're not sharing your personal information. I don't want you meeting up with people. If there's bullying or something that's occurring, make sure you come to me, like, keeping that conversation open. And then asking general questions, like, who are you following these days? Like, what are you looking it on

your phone? Can I see? Maybe sitting next to your child and, like, watching them scroll through, while they're going through it, just so social media never becomes, like, this secretive type of thing. If you're noticing your child having, like, their social media becoming, like, this very secretive, like, you can't look over my shoulder, or I'm not engaging with it around you, or you're noticing behavioral changes, like, because of how they're engaging in their social media, talking to your child around setting the boundaries on pulling back, like, if needed. And one of the I think the luxuries of when we were growing up is that a lot of the things that happened at school, like, if it happened at school, like, it just stayed at school. It simmered down overnight, and then, like, came back to school the next day to, like, deal with it. But now kids don't have that luxury. They, something happens at school, it festers all through school. Everyone's typing and then you get home and then things are blowing up because everyone's engaging on social media. Watching out and just talking to your child about how to navigate conflict with their friends is a really important piece of this social media monitoring and talking specifically around, okay, if you are having a conflict with your friend, is it better to hash it out under in your DM's or do you wait for school the next day or do you pick up your phone or do you text? Like, what's a better way to manage this as part of the conversation around, like, safety around phones.

Lori: I love that.

Katie: This is also helpful. So, is there anything else that you really want ADHD parents to know as they're making these decisions around phones and social media?

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, so just last week I had, I worked with this college student. I've been working with her for years. She has ADHD. She came on the session and she said something so insightful. I think I'm gonna remember this like, forever. She was like, I really feel like my frontal cortex is really just starting to develop. Like, I'm starting to feel it. And I was like, okay, that's so insightful. And I think it's this, there is something different about an ADHD brain and there's something different about like an adolescent and pre-adolescent brain. It's still developing. And when we introduce a lot of different things and we just use substances, when we introduce social media, when we introduce excessive screen time, it causes changes in the wiring of your brain. Your child's brain is already trying to make all these connections, to follow routines, to engage socially in appropriate ways, to think about staying organized, to manage the ever piling demands of school. We don't want to add something else to that

when critical things are happening, in your child's like, brain development. And one of the things that I always do with children and adolescents that I work with who have ADHD is like, pull out a structure of the brain and let's talk about what is happening here, so that we understand it's not just a behavior, ADHD is not just this behavioral thing that's occurring. There are chemical things that are happening. And I think it's important for parents to remember that as they're thinking about how they make decisions for their children about anything, especially when we talk about social media use.

Lori: Yeah, absolutely. And also encouraging parents that if you feel like your child is not there and not ready that, that's okay. Even if everyone else and their friend group is, they're gonna be okay. And you know, what is healthy for their brain, and you have to make those unique decisions based on your child's brain and how they're gonna be successful in life.

Dr. Tasha Brown: Yeah, absolutely.

Katie: This has been amazing. I love this conversation. I think there's gonna be a lot of parents that want to stay in touch with you and continue to learn from you. So, what would be the best way for them to reach you?

Dr. Tasha Brown: So, I do have a podcast. It's called Notes from a Child Psychologist. So, if you are interested, and I do have a couple episodes about ADHD. So that's a great way to stay in contact and engage with conversation like this one even more.

Katie: I love that. And we'll link that as well as your practice and other things in the show notes, in case anyone wants to find that. But thank you again for your time and your expertise. This has been incredibly helpful.

Dr. Tasha Brown: No problem. Thanks for having me.

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!