

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #174: Building Emotional Regulation for ADHD Kids with Siggie Cohen

Dr. Siggie: Yes, I am triggered. Of course, I feel the same emotions and, or, the emotions that I'm supposed to feel; helpless, angry, frustrated. What do I do with my emotions now? It's really more about the management of the emotions, not the avoidance of these emotions.

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: Today, Lori and I are so excited to be interviewing the Dr. Siggie Cohen. With over one and a half million followers on Instagram, you might be familiar with her name.

Lori: Dr. Siggie is a child development specialist who's been working with families of all kinds for almost four decades.

Mallory: Her EBP method, which stands for Emotional Behavioral Proficiency method, provides parents and caregivers with practical tools to feel more empowered, better understand both their child's behaviors and emotions, and feel less guilty, which is so important.

Lori: Yes. She is also a mother of three and runs a private practice in California. Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Siggie.

Dr. Siggie: Thank you so much for having me. Thank you for the introduction.

Mallory: Oh, of course. This is like a dream of ours to have you on the podcast. We're big fans of yours. We love, we've been following you for a long time. and we're just really excited to have you share your knowledge and decades of experience with our listeners, who are mostly ADHD parents. And we really love your balanced, your judgment free approach to parenting. And something that all parents have to learn to navigate is their child's emotions, right. It doesn't matter if your child is two, doesn't matter if your child is 18, even probably when your kids are adults. We know that you, as parents, are navigating a lot of big feelings with your kids.

Lori: Yeah. And we find that this is so true for parents raising kids with ADHD when they have those big emotions that are often even more intense and more frequent than neurotypical kids. So, this is one of the biggest challenges we hear from parents in our community.

Dr. Siggie: Yes, absolutely and I so agree. And it is already to parent, and it's already to deal with these, the big emotions, the emotions that stand in the way of functions, right. Then we throw in another challenge, an additional one, and it's very difficult. I totally understand. And I know these parents are trying so hard and navigating so many aspects of the ADHD, not just giving in, not just giving up, looking for what's the best way. And I so appreciate that we're here talking about it. So, I'll say basically that, that we attend to the big emotions because they do stand in the way of functions. And that's our biggest issue today because we come mostly from the idea of do as I say, right. The doing and parents, I'm not saying they disregarded emotions, but emotions were not so regarded. That is a true statement, right. It's like, do as I say, do as you're supposed to. The doing stands in the forefront of all life, right. We can't just do as we feel. We have to do as what the doing requires, the tasks and so on. What we see today is due to the fact that we recognize the emotions we tend to go overboard in giving them center stage.

Lori: Yes.

Mallory: Yes. It's a balance. And this leads me into one of my questions for you, because a message that a lot of parents are receiving on social media and, from us included, is different from how a lot of us were parented and that's that all feelings are allowed. All of your feelings, you're allowed to feel all the feelings. You can feel angry, you can feel sad, even

when as parents sometimes we feel like it's out of proportion or it doesn't quite make sense. We're parenting in a way where we want to let our kids know that all of these feelings are allowed. But even with that, the caveat here is that not all behaviors are allowed, however, and this is tricky for parents, right. This is like a tricky line. Where do we draw this line between acceptable emotional expression and then at what point as parents do we have to set limits? So that's kind of my question for you, is, like, where do we draw the line with this, knowing that we're parenting in a way where we want our kids to know that these feelings are allowed, but not all behaviors are?

Dr. Siggie: Right. Absolutely, because we can divide it to prosocial and antisocial behaviors. So, all emotions are appropriate, allowed, relevant, and then not all behaviors, meaning that what is also the child trying to get from the parent? Pro social, meaning I need you on my side, or antisocial, which is really what happens a lot of times when we have big emotions. They're so big that there's no room for anyone else and that's what the mistake, or the big mistake. Tell me how you feel, what's the matter? Why are you feeling this way? And then we say this, but you can do this, but you can do that. And what I say is when. When. Kind of like when you are angry, you can be angry. Absolutely, even at me, but whoa not this way. Not this way. And the idea at the end of the day is this, that when we are having big emotions, we do need somebody. We do need people. We need the person to be there for us, even if we don't know it, right. We tend to, I hate you, go away. And all that antisocial while we're actually the most needy. So, think of the difference like that. If I storm out of the room and stomping and then slamming a door, notice how my action represents my emotion, 100%. Nobody can be mistaken that I am very angry. And then I'm left with, you know, whoever I did that to is left with the storming out, the slammed door in their face and so on and so forth, which only resonates anger. So now we have one angry and then another angry, and anger meets anger, and I don't, you know, it's only chaos, right. As opposed to, I'm standing right there and I look at you and I know it sounds okay kids cannot do it. Yes, they can, because I say, I want to help them say this 'Mom, I am so angry right now. I want to storm out and I want to slam a door. I'm not going to do it.' And notice what happens instantly, the parent, the person that is, you know, this is shared with, is drawn in and immediately you get support and say, I so know what you feel. Yeah, I so get what you're saying. I know that feeling. I've been there before. Now we have two people, a parent and a child, or anyone communicating truly there for each other.

Mallory: Yeah. So, they're working collaboratively rather than against each other. And I know that a lot of our ADHD families do find themselves in that situation where they're working against each other, like you said, like, one person's anger becomes the other person's anger, too. And now everyone's escalated, and that's really, really challenging.

Lori: And so many of the families that in our community, the parents also have ADHD, and so they're like, they would say, yeah, I get really dysregulated, too, in those times. So not only is my child dysregulated, but now I'm supposed to help them and I can't even help myself, right.

Dr. Siggie: Yes, very true. And it's very difficult. And so, they also react impulsively and they're very triggered. It's true. Now, I think all of us are triggered. It's a normal thing to be triggered. And what we're talking about most of all is not to avoid being triggered, meaning I don't feel, nothing is going to get to me. That's not normal. That's not even okay. That's not the goal. I'm just happy, I'm fine, you can feel whatever. No, it's more like, yes, I am triggered. Of course, I feel the same emotions or the emotions that I'm supposed to feel; helpless, angry, frustrated. What do I do with my emotions now? It's really more about the management of the emotions, not the avoidance of these emotions. So a lot of times when we talk about staying calm is not, I'm calm because nothing gets to me. No.

Mallory: Right. And I think that's an important message for parents to hear, is that we still want parents to feel emotions and we want them to have healthy expression of those emotions. Because if kids are left to feel like, my parents are calm 100% of the time, nothing makes them angry. And there's not all parents are in this boat. But for parents who are able to make it seem like they're always calm, we're missing a real good opportunity to model healthy emotion regulation for our kids. So, it's okay to let your kid know you're feeling frustrated or you're feeling mad and then kind of talking through how you're going to manage that in a pro social way, right?

Dr. Siggie: Yes. And the difference, and the subtle difference is when a parent feels that and they can't say, whoa, I'm getting very angry right now. So immediately there is, so you need to manage yourself so I don't get angry. The modeling here is, oh, wow, I am getting so angry. This is more like a self-reflection, even though I'm speaking, you know, I'm saying it out loud, and then I say, but this is me. This is me. I got this. I put sort of like a separateness, a buffer between me and me managing myself, as opposed to projecting and spilling it over to

the child, which creates this sort of like collaborative chaos. We don't want that. We want to step away from the chaos, so we are more in charge and a little bit of a distance from it. So, it's sometimes, even with that little subtle saying, I, wow. Oops, sorry. This is so hard for me. Ooh, I'm having a very hard time. But that's okay. That's okay. That's me. I'm gonna manage myself. I got this. I got this. It's not up to you. And now I switch back to the parental role. But listen, this way I can see you very angry. I know your frustrated. And the kid is like, yeah, I get it. Go ahead, tell me, tell me. Use your words. You are ... ah ah not like that. Do you see the emotional behavioral? I'm attending to the emotions, I'm actually promoting the expression the outlet. But I'm also setting the boundaries to the expression of the emotions. Just because I feel this way doesn't mean I can say whatever I want or act however I want. No, I can share it. And even then, there's a way of sharing, which is why I help I tell parents a lot of times, tell them to use metaphors, use numbers, use any kind of gestures, create sort of like a platform for the emotion to exist. But on its own stage, rather than sort of like dumped on you and now you have to either be offensive or defensive with your child.

Lori: Yeah. One struggle we hear from ADHD families is that they've equipped their child with tools, like, for these moments, right. So, I've taught them how to use deep breaths or muscle relaxation, but they're just unable to use those in the moment that they go from zero to 100 immediately. So, what advice would you give parents who are saying that, that we've worked on these skills, but they're not able to access them?

Dr. Siggie: Yeah, because we're missing something here. You see, the child, the emotion is here and now we tell them, you must be here to calm yourself down. And actually, that's not real and that's not really the work. The child needs to be here before they can get to the, okay, let me count down, or let me find ten red things and so that's already the end result. But the emotion is still causing havoc inside me and I actually need to express it. And so, I think that what happens with all these tools, they come too soon. They're not actually allowing the expression of the emotions in the appropriate way, but the emotions still need to be expressed. They can't be oppressed. They can't be dismissed. Here is what we actually are doing when we tell them yes, I see you're very angry. Okay, calm down, take a deep breath. Come to ten. Do this. We are actually oppressing, dismissing, which is why they can't do it. The emotion is huge. It's big. It needs an outlet. It needs an arena. It does. Just cannot overpower everyone else. It cannot be disruptive, destroying, aggressive. No, but it can be expressed. So, when I say use metaphors, I'm not telling them to calm themselves down. Tell

me, actually, I'm promoting. Tell me, tell me, what does it feel like? Is it a roaring lion? Are, you a dragon right now? Is there fire? What's going on inside you? Tell me. I want to hear it. See, the active listening is tell me what's going on with you before I tell you to relax, everything's okay.

Mallory: Got it. So, part of the problem here is that parents are trying to kind of intervene and prompt the use of these tools when their child is already at, kind of the peak of emotion dysregulation. It sounds like what you're saying is we need to allow for prosocial emotional expression. And then it's when they're coming down that we can kind of, once that emotion has been released, that's when we can maybe prompt the use and see effectiveness of relaxation tools. Like you said, find ten red things or take those belly breaths.

Dr. Siggie: Right. And I would add, that after you've done this, even those tools with your children, they already know it. Remember, your kids are smart and intelligent. Even if their brain is ADHD, they still remember these things. So don't be dismissive by having always to okay, so now, like, you can ask your child now, what tool would you like to use for the last few minutes of this? Kind of like, it's like, would you like to, you know, are you ready to now maybe do this or do that and so on and so forth. So allow the toolbox to be there, but for them to also be more proactive in choosing and making these decisions for themselves, because they can, they're smart. And when you are part of the solution, not just a problem, you're so much better equipped to actually feel, helpful, not helpless.

Mallory: Yeah, I love that. I think that's so important. And I think that is a common thread parenting kids with ADHD is parents are kind of exasperated at times where they're like, I know my kid knows how to do this. I know my kid has that skill. Why aren't they using it? And that's what it comes down to a lot of times with ADHD is it's not a lot of times that my kid doesn't have the skill how to take belly breaths, it's the skill of being able to access it in the moment. And maybe, maybe we're trying to make them use it in the wrong moment. But I also love your approach of giving them some agency over choosing what strategy they're going to use, you know, presuming competence with our kids and letting them have some say in what they think is going to help them calm down, kind of once they're past the peak of that emotion dysregulation, and we're kind of talking about what happens after that peak. But something that we hear from ADHD parents a lot as well is that we talk a lot about preventing these challenges, right. That's a great parenting tool is figure out ways to prevent.

But with these big emotions with ADHD, parents are constantly telling us, like, I'm trying to catch the frustration early, I'm trying to intervene early, but my kid goes zero to 100 and I literally can't intervene before that peak. Like, it's just, it goes too quick. What advice would you have for parents who are experiencing that with their kids? Like, how would you suggest they support their child?

Dr. Siggie: Let's almost reframe this. The zero to 60 is necessary because if we are, if they are going zero to 60 and now we are with them at 60 and wanting to take them back to zero too quickly, we actually haven't practiced any of the tools that they truly do need. So I'm saying it's almost like, I want to say parents actually welcome. Don't try to micromanage the moment before. If you can, absolutely. But we also, I think, need to learn how to do that well, it's not like telling your child, hey, notice, be calm, you know, like be careful, like all these things actually make it worse sometimes. So that's a whole other aspect or another tool that parents need to learn. But I almost want to say parents, think about it like that. Your child needs to practice self-regulation. Practice is like actually being out there, moving your muscles, whatever those muscles are, even if it's the mental muscle. So don't fear that zero to 60. I'm just saying let's learn that between the zero and the 60, there is a whole bunch of steps we can't just skip. They are skipping because they're extreme, it's true. And also, I think that so much of it, and that just goes back to giving them the agency, giving them the trust that they can figure things out. Remember that ADHD children already feel talked down to so much of the time. They already feel put on the spot. They already feel stupid or wrong. Why? What's wrong with me? Their self-esteem and self-reliance is already a little lower. So we are constantly telling them what to do, how to do it, as if they forget and they can't actually use their own intelligence. So, I think that going back to remember they do need to practice that and allow them ask them, what do you think can help? First, I want to hear all these emotions. No, I'm not going to let you throw or hit or break something. No, but right here, right now, tell me. I want to hear. And here's another thing that happens when we have to use language, a lot of language, to actually explain how we feel that, by itself, naturally comes our emotions. Because what happens is cognitive kicks in cognition, which, forces our brain to think. Language is difficult. So if I have to actually think of how to explain something already I'm using a whole different part of my brain, and now the emotions subside all by itself without me actually having to tell it to. So, tell me. Tell me how you feel. Tell me what it feels like. Go ahead. I want to hear. I'm right here. No, no, not this way. But see, that's the practice. That's what we want.

Lori: Yeah. And I feel like I interview so many kids, and so often something that they will say is, I just don't feel understood. And I think what you're saying is it gives them that opportunity to explain and let other people know and understand their feelings. And this is important in like, any relationship. I even think with my husband, it's so important. Like, he wants to feel understood more than anything. And I think, yeah, that is so powerful. And even with anxiety treatment, I think about one of the main issues is avoidance when we feel anxious. And it is embracing, part of the process is really embracing and just allowing yourself to feel that emotion and realize I can cope with that. It's not modifying it or changing it or trying to push it away. It's just feeling that emotion and sitting with it.

Dr. Siggie: Yes, exactly. Not running away from it, not fearing it, and not trying to even fix it. That's another thing that the child goes zero to 60, and immediately we're, like, trying to investigate, but why? But what's the matter? But here. We run to solutions. Meanwhile, we're running away from just being here. This is the only place we actually need to be. Again, I'm not saying anything goes, but still, we need to be here.

Lori: Yep. I love that. And one of the tricky things parents often ask us questions about is how to handle big emotions that come up in public. So, we had a DM recently from a mom who was like, I'm experiencing this at soccer. My child misses a goal in front of everyone and obviously, that shame kicks in and they kind of become overwhelmed. And you're seeing these big emotions, behaviors coming out. Like, what would you tell a parent that's dealing with that in a public scenario or public situation?

Dr. Siggie: Yeah. So, so difficult. I so understand, and I want to say to parents, first of all, anything and everything you're feeling is completely validated and relevant. Any of us would feel that, right? All eyes are on us and the shame and the guilt and the embarrassment, and that's what the child is feeling as well. So we can actually connect to them right then and there. It's like, yes. I can tell now. They're like, I know, I know. This was... Ah. This is tough. Actually, once again, we truly just want to sit right there and not rush to say immediately, but you can't do this and everybody's looking. Don't add. We already know this is what's happening. And once again, don't try too quickly to get away from the emotion, like, to fix it. Okay. Calm yourself down. You can't do this. This is not okay. I know you're nervous. I know you feel all eyes are on you. It's one of those things we have to work with when we do struggle with something like that and any type of inability or disability that is on

public display, for sure. But we don't want to just walk around or walk away with the shame and the embarrassment and try to sort of, like, smooth that out. We want to be able to feel that, recognize. Yeah, some moments get away from us. I know. All right, let's see. Instead of once again. Okay, count to ten. Do this, do that. Stay with, it's okay to feel that. It's okay. I know. The feeling is not gonna last forever. Yeah, it will. This I know. No, no, no. It's not going to. It's not going to. I know. It's kind of hard. Yes. Feels like everybody's looking. Here's another thing we can do while we're maybe walking away from the field is breaking it down. Is everybody looking? Everybody. Is everyone? Are there some people that are looking because they care? Right. We immediately feel put on the spot in such a targeting kind of way, but that's not also true. Yes. Everybody, they hate. I don't know, some people, because I know your coach cares, or grandma is right there and she loves you, or your best friend, I think, is, like, kind of worried. So breaking it down from the mass, the whole of it, to more bite sized pieces, that can be manageable.

Lori: My daughter was in an ice skating performance last weekend, and she forgot where she was going, and all of a sudden just broke down into tears. She went over to her coach, and they actually were, the judges were really nice and let her start over, and she pushed through it and finished her routine and did very well, actually. But she came off just sobbing and I mean, one of her greatest fears is like embarrassing herself in front of people and her coach was kind of like, no tears, you're an athlete. I think that can be hard too, like with coaches that maybe communicate. So I think, what would you say in those situations if you feel like, hey, a coach is communicating one thing, but maybe you communicate something else in private with your child, like, how do you address that?

Dr. Siggie: Right. You actually allow your child to recognize the diversity of people and that does include approaches because you don't want them thinking that everyone is always going to react exactly the same. Actually they're practicing and I would say let the coach. Obviously, if the coach is a good coach and a good person and is not, you know, dismissing or patronizing a child, but they have their own way. We can appreciate and respect their position because that position is also important for our child to recognize. There's all these different parts of whatever is happening is not, it's not all made of one thing, you know, it's always going to work just the way I'm used to. So they're being exposed to that, promote it, advocate for it. Maybe they can even say, I hate the coach, he's doing this, he's mean. You know, sweetie, I get that you didn't like what the coach said. I get it. Wasn't that the coach

was mean. No, he wasn't mean. Or that, he doesn't care. Just as a different way. Think how you explain diversity and right then and there, it's not gender, it's not race, it's not culture, religion, it's none of that. It's just personality. Even that is approach or a position or a role. Just because I don't like it, doesn't mean it's wrong.

Lori: Yeah, and I totally agree with you and I wouldn't even have said anything to her. Her coach is amazing. And I think it's true that our kids are going to have different adults in their lives, whether it be teachers, coaches that are going to communicate things differently and they have to learn to understand that.

Mallory: Absolutely. So I'm wondering, how just broadly speaking, because this could probably go really deep, but broadly speaking, your approach to kind of helping our kids with emotions, how would you say it changes as our kids get older?

Dr. Siggie: I think that, what we want is to establish a good balance and a good platform for us to be able to communicate to them and them communicate to us. We want to pay attention to their self-esteem. And so, how we can make sure that in spite of the ADHD, they're not being defined by it, right. Which as they get older, becomes more and more a very important factor of them and their life. It's not all going to be what my mommy says, what my daddy thinks of me. It's going to be so much my peers, obviously, all these other experiences that they're exposed to, teachers that are very different and so on and so forth. So that identity, I think, is something that we want to make sure that is strong enough. Yes, you have ADHD sometimes makes it difficult in these cases. First of all, everybody's got challenges and difficulties no matter what. And it doesn't define them all the time. It defines parts of them. What else defines you? So I think as they get older, there may be identities, they have more than one, is what you want to work on. Because you want to remember that they're going out there into the world, not with you, all the time, and they have to present themselves, and however they present themselves becomes so much more of their experience.

Mallory: So really empowering them and kind of giving them ownership over this, it sounds like. What's the most important message that you would want parents to hear when they're raising kids with ADHD and they're working through these big emotions?

Dr. Siggie: Definitely work on everything we talked about, but also notice the other kids. You have to remember the siblings of a child with ADHD, if they are not, identified as such, and

how they are learning from this experience, what they're learning, what is their takeaway from everything that's happening? Because the sibling relations is so important almost sometimes as the parental relations. Think about that, how you're open with your other kids about it because they can why is he like that? And I hate it. And they feel embarrassed sometimes and it affects them and they hide. So it becomes part of their identity as well. And it's, you know, almost like, damaging to them. So open it up as a family, be supportive of one another regardless of that. And I think that definitely helps the child with the ADHD. So notice that and, you know, friends and how you can be transparent about it and with their friends, with parents rather than trying to, you know, the old excuse in the world. Oh, he's tired. Oh, yeah, he didn't eat today. Like, we always try to kind of like, you know, iron the wrinkles. But actually, yeah, he's still struggling, still working on it. We have, you know, we see steps forward. Sometimes we go around in circles. Don't carry that as a shame for anyone.

Lori: Yeah, I love that. Well, thank you so much. This is extremely helpful information. I know people are going to walk away with some strategies to try with their kids. where can people find you and what resources do you have for them?

Dr. Siggie: So obviously, social media. So Instagram is our biggest platform, but they can find us on the other ones, Facebook, TikTok and so on. The website drsiggie.com has lots of free resources that they can download, they can tap into. Yes, there are certain courses that they can also purchase. They can sign up for a newsletter that comes out. And again, gives a lot of, like, more pieces of information, more tips, more just conversations that are out there, and we sort of, like, digest it for everyone and, give some support this way. So, I think I'm there.

Mallory: Excellent. Well, we'll be sure to link those things for our listeners in today's show notes. And just thank you so much, Dr. Siggie. It was a joy to have you on the podcast today.

Dr. Siggie: Thank you so much for both of you. I appreciate it.

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!