

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #184: When The School Doesn't Recognize ADHD: How Parents Can Help

Katie: I think a lot of parents might start to question themselves. Could it just be like maybe my child isn't actually displaying any signs of ADHD at school? And obviously every situation is different, but almost certainly that's not the case. Almost certainly if your child has a diagnosis or needs a diagnosis of ADHD, they are going to be having issues at school. They just might not be immediately obvious to the people who are with them.

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.

Lori: Good morning, ladies. How are you all doing today?

Katie: Great. How are you guys doing?

Mallory: Doing good. I actually, I just got the cutest text message from my son's teacher. They had a like school wide assembly today and I guess each teacher got to choose one student to go up and dance and then the teacher had to copy the students dance and whoever did the best, you know, whoever did the best job won a yeti for their class. And so, she texts me to let me know she chose my son and that they won!

Lori: Oh my goodness, that's so exciting!

Katie: I love that.

Mallory: I'm so excited for him because it's his personality in a nutshell. Like my other kid would be like, do not put me in front of a crowd, ever. I will freeze. It will not be good. But this kid is like, put me in, coach, like, this is what I live for. I live to perform. So, so that was a nice little, little message to get that he's having a great day.

Katie: I love that for him. I can totally see it too. He's just the life of the party.

Lori: Yeah, that's so awesome. I think it's funny that your teacher texts you because I can't even fathom that.

Mallory: It is a little, a little perk. I'm lucky.

Lori: Yeah. My daughter's teacher is her, my youngest's teacher is amazing. Like she is so, so funny and every day hear these stories about like just funny things she does. But her nickname in school is Wild Child, which is funny because she calls her that because she's like so subdued in class. But she actually is like, like very wild. She's wild at home, but the teachers like never see it. Which is funny because we're going to be talking a lot about that today. Which is, you know, something I see in my psychology practice all the time. Parents have lots of concerns about their kids ADHD symptoms, right. They come in just with tons of concerns at home and then the issue is that teachers aren't really seeing the same things at school. So, I think this is such a common thing and some m parents a lot of times feel frustrated or feel like something's wrong. And I would say to you, like, that's very, very common that the teachers aren't gonna see as many issues at school as you do at home.

Mallory: Yeah. And we get a lot of messages from parents about this exact topic. Parents are really concerned because they have an upcoming evaluation for their child, or they have a school meeting the next day and they're wondering what is going to happen if the teacher isn't reporting any concerns. Like, I have all of these concerns, what if we get to this evaluation, what if we get to this meeting and the teacher just says, I don't see any of that, things are fine.

Katie: Yeah, it is really stressful. And as you guys know, you've been on this journey with me. I really get this on a personal level, too. I had one child who was really quickly picked up with a lot of challenges in school, and then one where I felt like I was constantly having to

advocate and say, hey, are you seeing what I'm seeing? And kind of bringing them along on the journey. And it can be a lot for parents.

Lori: Yeah. And the reason why we bring this up is because, you know, teacher ratings and information is really important when you're getting a diagnosis of ADHD. So, we get a lot of families who are like, I don't know, I don't know if I want to go through the process of getting an evaluation when the teacher isn't saying there's anything there. And so, part of that has to do with the diagnosis of ADHD. To make a diagnosis, you have to see multiple symptoms to a significant degree across multiple settings. It can't just be at home. It has to be that they're showing those symptoms in other settings. And school is kind of one of the main areas that we look at, right. So, those teacher ratings are really important, but again, ratings are subjective, right. So, it is a very subjective, personal kind of experience and we also see issues where, again, if kids are showing inattention in a classroom of 30 kids and five of those kids are maybe externalizing ADHDers who are out of their seat all the time and blurting out and whatever, the teacher is seeing those things, and they're not focused on the kid who's in the back of the classroom, right. They don't even notice that necessarily. So that's why it's important in an evaluation, and that's why it matters, and that's why we care about it, but it's not the only way that we can assess ADHD.

Mallory: And so, you know, the people who are showing up to your office, Lori, for this private evaluation, these parents are really worried if this is resonating with them. They're worried that they're going to spend this money and go through this whole process, put their child through the evaluation process, only for the teacher to say, well, I don't see these issues and have these rating skills come back as, you know, completely typical child. So, they're fearful about going through the whole process if nothing is going to come of it because the teacher doesn't see the issues.

Katie: Yeah, I hear that too and just the worry of, you know, is it even going to be accurate? Is it even worth my time? And then obviously on the other side, you can think, okay, is this evaluator just going to think that I am the anxious parent, like the overly concerned parent? I know, I feel like I've told this story on the podcast before, but my daughter, when she was 5, would turn the TV and the iPad up so loud to watch them. And we were just watching her, like she, you know, she hears well, I don't know, but she has them on full volume. And we would even point it out and be like, honey, that's so loud. And she's like, really? Like, I didn't

notice. So, I took her to get her hearing checked. And I, on the intake form, I think it said your occupation and I wrote speech language pathologist. And so, they come out, the lady was so nice, the audiologist, she takes her back. I kind of followed along and watched it. And of course, the whole time I'm like, okay, she's definitely going to need a hearing aid, you know, every time it would buzz and she wouldn't raise her hand or something, I'm like, she's failing. I'm texting my husband like, this is it, like, we're just gonna have to figure this out. And at the end, she started her feedback session with me. She's like, so I see that you're a speech therapist. So, speech therapists are often very concerned about hearing. And she basically tells me, like, my daughter is fine, there's zero concerns, you know, but essentially, like, it's okay like, don't feel bad. You know, I was so embarrassed. And I think there is that element when the teachers are saying, everything seems fine to me, that you're almost like, wait, is it me, then? Like, are they just having such a hard time at home because of something I'm doing or do they not believe me? In my case, is it because I'm a speech therapist, they think I'm just hyper focused on this issue. And it was, it did end up being more of a sensory thing for her, that she just likes things loud, she still likes things loud. But then I felt more comfortable to say, hey, we're turning it down because it's too loud for everyone else. We don't want that, that sensory input. So anyway, I think it's, it's stressful for parents, but honestly, I've been, like I said, in both situations, and I don't know what is more stressful when you're getting all the calls from the school or when you're begging someone to believe you. I don't know. I don't know which one's worse.

Mallory: Yeah, so both of these situations are really challenging, but when the teacher isn't acknowledging or understanding the issues that you're seeing, there's a few problems that can come from that. So, one of them is that your child isn't going to get the support that they really need. So, if the teacher isn't noticing or understanding how your child is struggling, they're not going to be able to support your child because they don't see something to support. Or another problem that can come from this is that if you're trying to get an evaluation if your child doesn't yet have a diagnosis of ADHD, or you're trying to get your child some kind of formal support at school, as Lori was explaining, we need that teacher data, we need those teachers observations of what goes on in the classroom to show that this child is showing signs of ADHD, not just at home, but also at school. So, when the teacher isn't noticing these things, there's lots of problems that can kind of come from that.

Lori: So today we're going to give you some suggestions for situations where your child's teacher maybe isn't seeing issues yet. But before we get into that, we want to ask a small favor. If you could, leave us an amazing review, we would so appreciate it if you are loving the podcast, those reviews really help us grow. It helps us to continue to provide weekly podcasts to you and it just helps us reach more families. So, if you are loving it, please head over there and just leave us a quick review. Okay, so back to our podcast for today, so what do you do when the school doesn't see issues? Let's talk about it.

Katie: Okay, so we're going to start with, why does this happen? And I think a lot of parents might start to question themselves, as I mentioned earlier, could it just be like, maybe my child isn't actually displaying any signs of ADHD at school? And obviously every situation is different, but almost certainly that's not the case. Almost certainly, if your child has a diagnosis or needs a diagnosis of ADHD, they are going to be having issues at school. They just might not be immediately obvious to the people who are with them and we're going to talk more about that. But we do have an episode that goes really in depth on this topic, and it is episode 137. And in that episode, we break down a letter that was written by the Office of Civil Rights all about kids with ADHD. And that letter clearly says that kids with ADHD likely are having issues at school, again, that are just not being recognized and that they have the right to get support in those areas even if their grades are okay. And again, we'll just, we'll talk a little deeper about that, but if you're questioning yourself and going, well, maybe they just don't have ADHD at school, that is very, very unlikely to be the case.

Mallory: Yeah. So, it's usually one of two issues. So, on one hand, the school may not notice the issues because as Katie is kind of alluding to, they're not just immediately obvious. So, you know the saying, the squeaky reel gets the grease. So those kids that are maybe shouting out before raising their hand, are hitting their peers, are struggling to stand in line, those kids are immediately picked out. They're very obvious that, oh, this child needs some extra support. But this often happens with kids who are the inattentive presentation of ADHD, they fly a little bit more under the radar because they're not as immediately visible in terms of need of extra support. They're not causing classroom problems, they're not being disruptive, they're not getting in trouble with their peers, so they're not as overtly a problem. And I put that in air quotes. So, they're kind of flying under the radar. They're daydreaming, maybe they're not listening to what the teacher says so they're peeking on their peers paper a little bit to figure out what am I supposed to be doing right now? All things that the teacher might not

notice the student is doing and struggling with because it's not a visible behavior problem. Yeah, so that's one possible situation. The other issue here is that the child is really struggling with particularly executive functioning tasks like staying organized, managing their time well, but that is not being attributed to signs of ADHD. It's being attributed to laziness, defiance, a lack of motivation if they just tried a little harder. So, you might be hearing things like, oh, yeah, their desk is a mess, but that's just because they're not using their time wisely when I give them time to clean their desk. Or, oh, yeah, they can never find their homework, but that's just because they're not, you know, keeping their backpack tidy. So, there's like a lot of excuses, so the teacher is noticing that the student is struggling, but they're attributing it to things like laziness or lack of motivation rather than like, oh, this child is struggling with these executive function skills that is all a part of ADHD. They're attributing it to something else.

Lori: Yeah, and I think a lot of parents sometimes go into an evaluation thinking, oh, the teacher has never brought anything up at a conference or whatever. And then we actually get to doing the evaluation, and they are actually reporting a lot of executive dysfunction and inattention challenges that maybe they, you know, didn't feel comfortable talking to the parents about or maybe it isn't a big deal, right. It's not disruptive to the classroom, so the teacher doesn't mention it, but they still are actually seeing the challenges with executive functioning. So, a lot of times you might think, oh, the teacher's not going to report anything. In many times they do. And they are actually when we kind of dive into specific questions around symptoms of ADHD, they are actually, in fact, seeing those things. Another situation I see a lot of times, are kids who are getting decent grades. So maybe the teachers are actually seeing some of those challenges in the classroom. I can think of a situation recently where, you know, the teachers were seeing symptoms of hyperactivity or difficulty initiating tasks or completing tasks in the classroom, but a really sweet kid, you know, the teachers just love them. At home, though, the parents are spending four to five hours on homework each night. And it looks like, tears, you know, the child saying horrible things about themselves, not having time to do any sports. They're not only having to do the homework for the night, but they're also then having to finish the work that they didn't complete in class that day. And they're also getting poor grades on tests and quizzes and bringing those home and having to redo those for a better grade. So, the parents are actually, like, way overcompensating for all of these challenges, because they're anxious, they don't want their kids to get poor grades. And by doing that, it's making them look like they're doing fine at school. Okay, so this is a

really common scenario and again, these kids are really struggling. They are extremely stressed out. School is very overwhelming for them, but it isn't showing up at school.

Katie: Yeah. They're internalizing a lot of that experience rather than the kids who are externalizing it. Absolutely.

Mallory: That's hard.

Katie: It is really hard. And I think as parents, it can be, you know, you don't, you're kind of frozen in that situation, like, well, what do I even do? I'm not there. How do I help?

Lori: Yeah. And, and a lot of times this is so hard for families, but we have a discussion about really backing off on that level of support. And I know that's so hard because you don't want to see your kids failing, but the schools then don't recognize that they need those accommodations, that they need that support. And then again, our kids aren't, it's at the expense of our kids getting the movement that they need to regulate their bodies when they're at school the next day, right. It's at the expense of them engaging in fun activities and playing with peers and all these things are so essential to their social and other development. We're focusing so much on academic, so many times we are having those conversations of we are backing off, we are putting a limit on how much homework is getting done at night, and that's it. Like, we're doing 30 minutes, that's what we're doing. Whatever doesn't get done, it doesn't get done, you just write a note to the teacher and we're done. Because these things aren't ever going to be addressed at school if we're just spending all this time overcompensating.

Katie: Yeah. And that's something, too, that you would want to talk about with your child's teacher. As we're going to talk in a minute here about getting a meeting with them, that's a really important thing. They need to understand that feedback, because if it looks really good, I think we had, someone on the podcast recently talking about a duck swimming in the water. And it looks really peaceful and calm, but then underneath, you know, the duck's feet are moving a million miles, you know, an hour. And so, it's really, that's what happens a lot of times for kids who are presenting this way and so yeah, that's a huge thing to communicate and let them know. So, Lori, just really quick to wrap this part up in terms of the evaluation, let's say a parent is like I don't know if the teacher is gonna report any kind of signs here or an example, I mean we've done evaluations together where all of a sudden the teacher rating

skills come back and it's just totally not what the parent is reporting. So, what do you tell parents in that situation? Like what do you do as a practitioner?

Lori: In some situations, I'm looking at what do I see during testing. The testing environment is another setting we can look at that's outside of school because again some kids love school. They love learning, it's their passion. They love getting good grades and so that's their hyper focus. So, they do really well or they do well in multiple classes but then some they're not focused in. So again, there's some nuance to how do we assess that. Even if your child's home educated, we don't have a teacher to look at. We're going to maybe ask coaches or therapists or we're going to look at how they do in other settings outside of school. So, we don't just have to look at school and I hope that makes sense.

Katie: Yeah I love that for parents to understand, like big deep breath because like you said, everyone's situation is unique. So now that we're clear that if your child has a diagnosis or needs a diagnosis of ADHD, it's very likely that they are having some school related issues and it's really important to start educating your child's teacher. So, the first thing we always recommend is to schedule a meeting with the teacher and we have an episode that goes much more in depth into this and things you can talk about and things like that. It's episode 141. If you want to check it out, we're going to link it in the show notes. But just a couple of things because I've been through these types of meetings and I just want to share what that might look like for you. So, you want to come prepared with specific questions and examples. And I'm always going to be the person, I don't know if it's my speech training or just my personality, but I'm going to start with the positive. Okay. So hey, here's some things that are going great. You know, my daughter really loves that you take them to the library once a week or I really love the way that you did a review session before that math test, because that was really helpful for her. You know, giving some positive things and helping set the tone just to think about what's your child doing well, what's the teacher doing well. We all love to hear that and it helps just open the door a little bit. And then what I've done is I've used much more of the 'I statements'. So, hey, you know, at home, I've noticed that we're struggling a lot with organizing our backpack. Or I've noticed that my child isn't bringing their planner home four out of five days a week. Are you seeing any challenges with that? Do you notice that? How's her locker looking? How's her desk? Is she able to bring all of her materials into the classroom? And another example, you know, that again, I talk a lot with parents about this too, is like, hey, sometimes my child doesn't really process what I'm saying to them the first

time. You know, if there's any distractions or if I'm just not being super, I don't have their full attention, I end up repeating myself three, four, or five times. You know, I noticed that my son will really look around and read the room to see what everyone else is doing because he didn't hear what I said. So, have you noticed that? Does he have any issues following directions the first time after you say them? And what you're doing here is you're breaking down, a lot of teachers have what they think in their head is ADHD, and a lot of times they're right about one presentation of ADHD but they may not be identifying these other signs. And so, what you're doing is you're literally just breaking down those aspects of ADHD that you see. Whether that's difficulty processing information, staying organized, getting started, timing themselves, you're helping them to reframe it as, oh, that could be part of ADHD, I just hadn't thought of it in that way.

Mallory: And I think it's really important to keep in mind that most teachers do not have training specific in ADHD. So, we, a year or so ago, we pulled our Instagram followers and we said, if you're a teacher, let us know did you have any kind of formal training in ADHD? And basically 99% said no, like, as part of their standard education, they didn't have any specific training in ADHD. Anyone that did have training in ADHD told us, you know, sent us a DM and said, I sought this out. Like I sought out the specific information because I felt like it was relevant to my students or relevant to my home life. So, most teachers are not getting training in school about ADHD. So, it makes sense that maybe they're not connecting the dots between your concern and then that being a sign of ADHD, especially if your kid is not fitting the typical profile of what a lot of people have historically thought ADHD should look like, right, the hyperactive, the impulsive little boy. So hopefully you're able to get on the same page as the teacher in terms of like, oh yeah, actually I am seeing that concern. Oh, I didn't know that could be related to ADHD. And at that point it's a really great idea to get on the same page in terms of how are you going to support your child. And it's important always to take a team approach. You know, you're a part of this team, you want to work together, you want to work with the teacher, you want to find solutions to specific challenges that the child may be having in the class or what you're noticing at home that then the teacher is realizing is also an issue at school. If you need some ideas about what could be done differently for your child at school, like what potential accommodations your child's teacher may be able to make in the classroom to support your ADHDer, we have a free ADHD accommodations guide that we will link in the show notes. That's a really great place to start and it's kind of broken down to into like if your child has, has a hard time, you know, staying

in their work area, here are some potential accommodation ideas. Or if your child has a hard time staying on task, here are some potential accommodation ideas. So definitely grab that if you don't already have that. And another thing that we always tell parents to do is if you're going to start working with the teacher and put into play some kind of plan, formal or not, it's a good idea to talk with the teacher about how do they prefer to communicate with you and what regularity do you want to communicate with each other. It's good to just get on the same page in terms of how often are you going to communicate and what is the best way to communicate with your child's teacher.

Lori: Yeah, and it's important, I think, to be respectful of that because they do have a lot of stuff going on. They have lots of responsibilities, they are teaching all day, so their ability to like do a daily check in might not be feasible. So doing, you know, again, being respectful of their time and ability to do that is really important. Let's say you have a meeting and you kind of even bring your evaluation, you have your ADHD diagnosis, you want to do a plan, and the team is kind of saying, yeah, we just we don't see these things. We always tell parents at that meeting, it doesn't have to be a contentious situation, but I think just saying, okay, well, these are the things that I'm seeing, these are the challenges, can we collect some data? Can we start looking at some of these things? Can we set a date for a month or two from now and collect some data and revisit this in a month or two and talk about, you know, some of these things? You know, put your concerns in writing. We always say that that's really important, just so that if you were ever to switch schools or whatever, these concerns are kind of in writing. It always helps me to, whenever parents come in for an evaluation, I want to see those emails that the teacher is sending. I want to see those concerns that you had back in second grade. It's really important to just document all the things that are going on.

Katie: Absolutely. And, you know, a lot of schools are doing more and more education and professional development for their teachers. And so, it can be helpful to, you know, offer that up and say, hey, maybe we could get a professional development on executive functioning or ADHD. This is a topic that I think a lot of kids would really benefit from within the school and those types of things and sharing those kind of resources. I know we've done professional development for a few schools here in Arizona, and teachers are always really excited because, again, it's just not an area they have a lot of training or a lot of practical tools that they can use, but even simple things where they can make adjustments to the whole classroom and the way that they run their classroom can be incredibly supportive for kids

with ADHD, and then they don't feel singled out. So that's another option is you could talk to your school about maybe bringing in some professional development or, you know, some books that everyone can read and those types of things.

Lori: Yeah, and many schools I know have professional development, like weekly or monthly built in, so that is something that is definitely available. But there are thinking about the laws with schools, there are lots of laws and things built into the school process that are there to really protect kids with ADHD and families of kids with ADHD. So, understanding your options for, you know, what is best for your child. You know, many kids with ADHD are best served with a 504 plan. They don't need a lot of interventions and goals. Some, you know, however, do. Some have academic challenges that they need support with, or their behavior and executive functioning skills really are so, you know, so challenging that they do need some interventions in that area that we do look at an IEP and if you're listening to this and you're like, I have no idea what you're talking about, what is the 504? What is an IEP? We have other podcasts where we review that and again, we have our online course, *Shining at School*, that we would highly recommend that any parent who is having kids at school with ADHD and is struggling like you go through that. It is really helpful to understand that process for you to be an amazing advocate for your child at school is just, it's a really helpful course.

Mallory: Yeah. And for those of you that are kind of very early in your ADHD journey, maybe your child doesn't have a formal diagnosis of ADHD, or they do have a formal diagnosis of ADHD, but they have no supports at school yet, we just want to remind you that you can request an evaluation at no cost to you to be done by the school. Generally, if the school approves this testing, it's very comprehensive. It'll include testing done generally by the school psychologist, a speech language pathologist might be involved, an occupational therapist, other professionals to kind of get this comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation to look at how is your child doing in all of these domains and does your child need extra support at school to be successful? Always request that psycho education evaluation in writing, kind of starts the clock, holds the school to certain timelines. And again, we go into more details about this in *Shining at School*, that online course that Lori was just telling you about. But if you're early in the process, you're feeling like you're not being heard, the teacher is not have seen the same things you're seeing, you might need to start that evaluation process which you can do through the school.

Katie: Yeah. And the last thing we just want to touch on here is that this is a whole process to helping our kids to advocate for themselves. And it's lifelong being able to identify our own needs and communicate them effectively. I know that's something that most of us are working on even as adults, but this is a great opportunity is to practice identifying, hey, what was hard about that? What was tricky about the spelling test? A really small example is when my daughter was in second grade, the teacher stopped saying the number of the words. So, at the beginning they say the spelling test number one, and then they say the word number two, and then they say the word. Well, that gave my daughter the opportunity to kind of tune into the number and be like, okay, I need to get number five next number six. Well, at one point they stopped saying the numbers and it was a disaster. We would have, you know, 4 out of 12 of the words written down. And she's a great speller, this is not the issue. So, a simple tweak like that, she talked to the teacher and said, hey, can you say the numbers again? And that's a really great way for us to help our kids get curious. Like, why was that so hard for you to write down all your spelling words? And then, how can we solve that problem? And helping your kids to role play, helping them to think about, okay, what could you say in that situation? And I'll be the teacher and you be the kid and then switch jobs. It's kind of fun. But it's especially for our kids that really get anxious or really a dysregulated emotional when they have to speak up for themselves, practicing with you as a safe person can be really helpful. So, thinking about ways that they can do that. You really want your child, especially as they get older, to be part of the process of choosing what will help them the most and that's really huge for helping them get buy in, too.

Mallory: Yeah. And when you notice that your child does self-advocate and has those small wins in that process, making sure that you're pointing that out, you're celebrating that, and you're telling them that you notice that they did that and how great that was.

Lori: Yep. So, our key takeaway today is that while it can be incredibly frustrating when the teacher maybe doesn't recognize that your child has ADHD or they're struggling, you are really an essential part of your child's educational team and we just really want to always emphasize that. And by educating and collaborating with your teacher, you can help your child get the right supports to help them shine at school.

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!