

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #191: Marriage and ADHD Parenting: How to Stay on the Same Team

Lisa: Because if we don't come up with a plan, an agreement on how are we going to discipline, the kids will know and they're going to come in and split the two of you. And now you're going to be fighting about the child and not really the issue, is that we don't have an understanding on how we're going to handle situations.

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.

Lori: Today, Katie and I are excited to be chatting with Lisa Rabinowitz, a couple's therapists with over 30 years of experience working with ADHD in relationships. I think this is probably in the top five, if not top three topics that our audience has requested.

Katie: Yes. Lisa, it is so wonderful to talk with you today. We're really looking forward to learning about how parenting ADHD affects couples across the world and hearing some of your strategies to help. So welcome to the podcast!

Lisa: Thanks, Lori and Katie. I really appreciate you having me here today.

Katie: Yes.

Lori: We're so excited. This is such an important topic and you know, Katie and I have talked about marriage therapy in the past and how much has helped our families. So, it's just, I know all the information you have to share is really valuable to our listeners.

Katie: Yep. So, before we dive into relationships and ADHD, will you just tell our listeners a little bit about how you became interested in helping couples who have ADHD themselves and/or are raising kids with ADHD?

Lisa: Sure. So, I became interested when I knew that there was something going on in my office, but even though I had extensive training, I knew I was missing something. And I happened to go continue to try to find some other training and went to a training, it's called PACT, which is Psychobiological Approach to Couples Therapy, which is the one that actually talked about the brain. And so often we forget that there's a brain component. And so, when I started listening, I thought, oh, now I understand what I'm missing in my office. And I literally remember coming home probably about 4 or 5 in the morning from the conference, first client at 9am and I said, guys, I have something new to share with you and they're like, sure, share whatever you want to share. So, I said, let's try this thing and in one hour I was convinced I had found the right approach to help ADHD couples. And it was a game changer for me because when you don't understand that there's an issue in the office and you just treat the ADHD, whether it's one partner, both partners, the same as just a regular couple, you're missing something. And there's an elephant in the room that's not going to be addressed and then we're gonna not be able to really help this couple in the best way. And so that's how I found out.

Lori: In that training, did they talk specifically about ADHD or was it like how did that kind of present in the conference, I guess?

Lisa: Right. So, it wasn't specifically about ADHD. When they focused on the brain, I realized, oh, this is really what's showing up in my office. That there's, when you're dealing with a couple with ADHD, their brains are just firing differently. And if you treat them like a neurotypical couple, you're going to think the following: What's wrong with you, partner A? Let's just say partner A is the one with the ADHD. You're forgetting things, you're having communication challenges, you're disorganized, you like fill in the blanks. They're always going to look like the bad one, the one with the issue. And then the focus is going to be something's wrong with you and that's going to be terrible for couple's therapy. We cannot

work as a couple blaming one person for all the problems. Now does that person sometimes need to get support or coaching or something else? They might, but this is a couple's issue because there's two people in this relationship. So, we've got to figure out how are we going to help them deal with this issue.

Lori: Got it. That's so fascinating. Let's talk a little bit about what are some of the most common challenges that couples seem to face when they're raising a child with ADHD. So how can those ADHD related stressors impact a couple's relationship over time?

Lisa: So, there's a lot of things, but I would say a big piece is communication. So, if the parents are having difficulty communicating about a topic the way, whether it's communicating about a topic, communicating with each other around a topic, oversharing, not sharing enough, interrupting each other, all these different things. If we're going to have a problem as the couple now when we're dealing with the kids and dealing whatever issue that we're trying to tackle around the kids, we lose sight of the challenge because now we're just fighting or we're not talking because we can't figure out what to do and we don't know how to handle the situation with the kids. So, we want to figure out how do we work on their communication, so then we can then handle and help the kids. Because if we can't have a conversation, then how do we work with, you know, the different challenges that the kids are going to come in with that usually one, if not both, parents are also struggling with.

Katie: Yeah, that's such an interesting statistic, right. So, we know that oftentimes the kids are getting a diagnosis first. And as the parents go through this process, we hear constantly from parents, I myself have gone through this where I'm like, oh, wait, I'm checking all these boxes and going like, wait a second, and that resonates. But that's such an interesting process that families have to go through then, because exactly what you said at the beginning, it's not like, oh, this one person is the quote, unquote problem, right. It's recognizing, like, we all have different things that we're working on. And I think that's a huge piece of the puzzle when you're dealing with parents of kids with ADHD that, as you said, it's very likely that one or both partners, they themselves have ADHD or struggle with executive functioning and these kinds of things. And a big part of that is emotional control and being able to regulate emotions and these are all things that are just going to play such a big role in relationships.

Lisa: Right, right. And the kids are watching you, the parent who might also be struggling with emotional regulation. And so here we are being the role model or trying to be the role

model. So that emotional regulation piece is something I talk literally every day with couples about because they need to learn how to do it themselves so they can also help their kids do it. Otherwise, everybody's dysregulated.

Katie: Yeah.

Lisa: And we have a big problem.

Katie: And we do get that question a lot from parents that are, you know, we share different strategies and different tools, and we always tell families, like, hey, this is just one tool in the toolbox. But inevitably, when we talk about emotions, we get someone who says, well, wait a minute, I can't do it. I have ADHD. You know, and so just a word of encouragement to those who might feel that way or feel really defeated as a parent, like, no, you can help yourself, too, and learn these skills, especially if they weren't modeled to you as a child. You know, the generations go way back, right?

Lisa: Yes. Probably weren't.

Katie: Many parents struggle with being on the same page with our partner when it comes to things like discipline. What advice would you share with families who are struggling with that?

Lisa: So, I discuss agreements a lot, and this is something that couples want to have an agreement around. So, without the children anywhere in earshot, we're going to have a conversation. What do you feel like your, what's your ideas on discipline? Right. And they should be changing and changing as the child, right, goes from 3 years old to 5 years old to 15 years old. So, there's going to need to be that shift and we have to be starting with a conversation. So, what are your ideas and thoughts on discipline? What are your ideas and thoughts on discipline? And now we have to come up with what are we going to do? It's not going to be probably your way and it might not be your way, but can we come up with something that's going to work for both of us? Because if we don't come up with a plan, an agreement on how are we going to discipline, the kids will know and they're going to come in and split the two of you and now you're going to be fighting about the child and not really the issue is that we don't have an understanding on how we're going to handle situations or again around discipline. And so, there's so many things that can happen, but let's make the best plan

that we can have. And I always tell people, if you're not sure, say, you know, mommy and daddy are gonna talk about this and we'll get back to you. I'd rather you take that time, figure it out and then you come back together to tell the child that this will be whatever, you know, if there's a consequence or whatever the case might be.

Lori: I feel like our, the issue I see so many parents having is like the kids really pick up on, you know, one parent says no and then they go to the other one or they'll try and you know, get their way. My kids do it all the time and they, and a lot of times I'm distracted in the middle of something and then my husband's like, they already asked me that, I already answered it. But then I didn't know, you know, or vice versa, the same situation would happen. So yeah, our kids can very much will work around those situations to try and get their way.

Lisa: Lori, you know what we used to say is what did mommy say? What did daddy say? So that was my first question. My kid would come over, can I da da da or what? What did daddy say?

Lori: Yeah. I love that. And that's a good, yeah, that's a good thing to kind of ask all the time is like, did you already ask your dad? What did your dad say?

Katie: Yeah, I was curious when thinking about that conversation. So, thinking of maybe parents who are raising an eight-year-old, right. And so they're coming to the table, as you said, to kind of get on the same page and have an agreement about discipline. So what is that? What would that actually look like? Like, would you suggest specific questions that they would answer? I know when my husband and I went to marriage therapy, we talked a lot about our family of origin, right. So it would be like, well, how did Katie, how did your family deal with this situation? And Todd, what was your experience? And then we would both kind of share what we did and didn't like. But that's a pretty in-depth conversation. I think if you said to me, like, what do you think about discipline? Even as a professional who works in the field, I might struggle. So how do you suggest parents, you know, start and kind of continue that conversation?

Lisa: Right, right. So, I love your idea. Let's start with your family of origin because that's what's familiar, right. Like what happened in my house is probably, unless I did a lot of work to do things to change, it should be different, right. If it needs to be different, then I probably

did some work on that. So first let's find out what did they do? Right. Did you think that anything should be different? and if so, then what? What did my partner, what did he see growing up? Did he think that there needed to be anything different? And then I usually try to take, you know, what's the most common situations that happen? Oh, you know, at bedtime or, going to a friend or, you know, food. So, what are the top three things that you usually are going to, you know, have discipline issues around? And then we take each one and I know this takes time, but it's less time than fighting for the next ten years about it.

Katie: That is such a good way to put it.

Lori: We talk about that all the time. Like if you don't have a plan in place, it's, it does take time up front, but you're gonna eliminate a lot of battles and heartache.

Lisa: And resentment and kids, you know, when the kids feel like they get to, you know, really push apart the parents and get them fighting, then it creates instability in the marriage and it creates instability in the family system. So, I really want them to know that we've discussed this and if we haven't discussed it, then we might again say like, we'll let you know on the next day or two.

Katie: Yeah, I do say that to my kids sometimes, like, I'll say, okay, well this is a new situation that we haven't actually faced, so I need to talk to dad about it, you know, and that, that's a tricky thing sometimes for them to accept. But I do think over time they get more used to that response.

Lori: Yeah. And I know and yeah, in our experience, if I kind of make those decisions without involving, you know, my husband, like, he has this feeling of like I wasn't a part of, like a part of that. And I feel like something that was really important for us was feeling like we're a team in how we approach so many things. Like we are a team and a team comes together and is, they have to be united. And if you try and do everything on your own again, if you're playing soccer and you try and take everything on on your own, you're not going to be as effective as if you make passes and you help each other out, you know? So, I think it is really important to kind of think of it in terms of like, we're a team kind of uniting together.

Lisa: Oh yes, yes. And when you're a team also, you, you carry each other. It's not all on you and it's not all on you. Now sometimes, you know, I had somebody earlier today, you know,

and it happens other times that one person's out of the home and one parent is out of the home a lot more. And so, you know, what did we come up with again? We had a conversation around this, that since you're home more 8, 12 or more hours a day with the kids, then you're going to make the decisions. And then when you get home tonight, you're going to find out, we're going to share these. This is what I had to, you know, I had to make the decisions. If that's the case, these are the decisions. You're going to be backing me, right. The other partner is going to back me on it, but if there's anything that we differ on, then let's talk about it sometime soon. So it will happen again, we'll have another thing that comes up, whether it's around, you know, whatever it might be around discipline. And then I'll know that okay, well, my husband really wanted me to do this and not that and we talked about it and we agreed on whatever it is. So when it happens again, this is what we're gonna do instead.

Katie: I love that you mentioned that. That's been a huge change in my family. So prior to about two years ago, my husband and I both worked full time outside of the home. And so we were really together a lot during the times that we did parent. Like we would both get home and we would, one person would make dinner, one person would be running baths and it was just sort of this team effort. And then a couple of years ago I went more full time with The Childhood Collective, which I love and it's amazing, but I also am home and I have tons of flexibility. So part of my job is now that we used to have, you know, childcare and now I pick up the kids every day. And as you mentioned as kind of the quote unquote default parent, I make a lot of decisions throughout the day, little micro decisions and sometimes I don't even think of it as a big deal. Other ones I know I'm like, oh yeah, we're gonna need to touch base on this. But it's funny because I feel like it's, it kind of works for my personality because I'm like an over communicator. Lori can say the same. I like to like make sure you know what I meant and like that we're on the same page. So, but I will tell my husband like every little detail of the day. And it's funny because I think there's probably times when we're both tired and we don't really want to do that. But it's helpful because ultimately, he then feels like he knows and on a Saturday he's back with the kids and he's much more able to step into that where, you know, again, previously he was, you know, traveling and different things and it was so much harder for him to transition back in because he feels like a lot has changed in just a short amount of time. And that's such a tricky thing when you have elementary age kids. But I don't know if there's someone out there that's like, I don't really have time to communicate all of that. You know, just trying to hit the big items can be really helpful. And

I think that's very true for so many people, especially moms. But not always moms, you know, they're with their kids on their own and that's something that's can be really tricky.

Lisa: But you know what, I'm going to piggyback off of that because what we can do is if that's the situation, right, like we just don't have any time and like when are we going to talk about this? It's you know, 11:00 at night, we're exhausted. I have no energy left to have that conversation. So, what some couples will do is again, having a conversation, making an agreement, making a plan. So, is it leaving you a voice note? right. I'm gonna leave you, it could be 10 voice notes today and you don't even have to listen, right. You can listen to them on your drive home, you can listen to them on the weekend, but they're there, right. Some people have a book and they'll write it all in the book and eventually we'll talk about it. Others, I know this sounds really crazy, but they have a Google Doc and on Google Doc they write in like, you know, I said that the kids could go, you know, to the birthday party this weekend. And, and I think we do the best we can.

Katie: Those are great suggestions. And I, it's funny because again, I'm like, well, I don't really run out of energy, so that's not an issue for me. But I'm married to someone who absolutely hits that wall and is like, no, we cannot talk about this after like 9:30.

Lori: And I, I wholeheartedly relate to that where I'm at the end of my work day and put the kids to bed and I have zero left to communicate or give for the day. So I can, I can very much understand that.

But just practically speaking, to go back to your kind of having an agreement on discipline, do you actually have couples kind of write that down and like sign off on it as if it was like a formal agreement or is it more just like we kind of decide on these things?

Lisa: Yeah. So some couples want to write it down and they want to sign off on it and others just feel like they have a little bit of a different relationship. I don't judge anybody if it works with we just have this verbal agreement, that's great. Now the thing we're going to check though, in a month or two, I thought we said this. Oh, I thought we said that. Then we might have another conversation. The verbal was great because some people are great auditory processors, but not every person whether you're ADHD or not, is a great auditory processor. And verbally saying that I might be like, I don't remember. Did we have that conversation? I don't know.

Katie: I was thinking of the memory piece too, especially for ADHD brains, because there are so many times where my husband and I will walk away from a conversation and I think we both have very good intentions. But it's like, wait, I thought you said this. Wait, I thought we said that. And we're just not on the same page. I'm like, wait, we just talked about this. So for us, a lot of stuff goes back to the calendar. We put things in the calendar, even things that aren't necessarily like calendar worthy, but you know, a trip to the grocery store and I'll run our list through that calendar so that it's, I know exactly what we need. And I don't know, but I, we have to write things down. And there's been a lot of times where we walk away and we're like, we're definitely on the same page. And then come to find out we were so not on the same page. So, I don't know. But that's, I love that, that, you know, every couple is unique and if it doesn't work, you can revise it. It's not, you don't have to set it in stone forever.

Lori: So, another question for you. How can couples navigate situations where one parent is kind of more understanding of their child's ADHD while the other kind of sees their child is just having bad behavior? And I think it's interesting because I think that concept that you were talking about earlier within the couple's relationship is very much similar to like a parenting relationship with a child. Like, it is very transformative when you stop seeing either your partner or your child is this is just a problem versus this is how their brain is and we're gonna kind of work together as a family unit on this.

Lisa: Right, right. And it ties in also back to the family, right. I would probably get curious. The one that thinks it's just bad behavior, which I hear, I hear it. I would be curious, is that what he or she heard growing up as a child? Right. Oh, you know, Bob, he just always misbehaves. Right. He's the one that's always in trouble. Right. So, was the messaging that it was just bad behavior? Right. And if you just tried harder. Right. And unfortunately, all of that could possibly be playing into right now. So I really try to explore it. I try to, you'll always hear me talk about curiosity, compassion. To me, that's one of the biggest keys. So I want some more information. I want to find out, is there some backstory here?

Katie: Yeah.

Lisa: Because again, if I say to that person, you're wrong, it's not bad behavior, it's ADHD, you know, and basically, what's your problem that you can't get this, which sometimes people feel like, like, you know, they're the bad ones. Right. It's just like bad just keeps going around. And it's sometimes very hard to be patient because I definitely have some feelings

about that because I also heard that in my lifetime. And so I try, you know, to bring compassion to somewhere along the line they probably heard something along like that about ADHD or could be other things like mental illness, disabilities.

Lori: Yeah. I feel like that point of getting curious or curiosity is so helpful when you're like talking about those things because not, it's not from a judgmental place. And it is very easy when you've maybe spent a long time as one parent, like reading books and listening to podcasts and you might see your partner that's like treating your child differently and it like hurts your heart, you know, and it can really bring up a lot of emotions. But I do think coming at it with, with a point of curiosity of like, let's think about this, like, let's talk about like what is it that's going on that makes you, you know, see it as bad behavior? What, like where does that come from is helpful in approaching it. So it's not as judgmental but, but I understand for families it is really hard.

Katie: Yeah. And I'm thinking to of families where their child is maybe the doctor has recommended medication and we get a lot of messages from parents that are like, I really want to try meds, I'm working with the school, we're really struggling. But the other parent is opposed to that and it's creating a lot of tension, right. Because again, you have this one parent that's feeling like this could be a good solution, let's at least try it. And there's probably some beliefs or some preconceived notions on the other side, some fear that saying no, no, no, let's, let's hold on, that we're not going to do that. So, in that case, would you, if I'm thinking of a person that's listening who maybe has tried to educate their partner, has tried to share maybe some funny memes or break the ice in those different ways. I mean, I don't know, I feel like there's a lot of good ADHD humor out there in my family, humor is always the go to. So, I don't know. Please don't if that's not your style, that's totally okay. That's just something that I have used. But you know, would you recommend then that they try to get into some kind of therapy or support if that's causing, you know, constant friction, like what type of treatment is most appropriate and those types of questions.

Lisa: Yes. So there's a couple of different options. And I do want to comment on I think the memes and Instagram have opened up the world to people that it's it doesn't have to be like, something's wrong with me. And you know, you see, there's so many different kinds of people that there's probably somebody that you can relate to and somebody your partner might be able to relate to and be like, wow, that actually happens in somebody else's home

too. I wonder, you know, what they do and how they... I think there's so much we can learn there. So regarding, you know, if we're really struggling, I think you're asking, like, should they possibly go in and get some couples counseling to sort this out?

Lori: Like, what would be some things for parents to kind of leave and say, do I need this? Like, are we at the point of doing this? I know when we were going in, it's not like we have any big issues, you know, so it's like, should we go in? Like, is it enough that it's just we, we need help with how we communicate things. Is that enough? Like, it's a hard thing to decide.

Lisa: It is a hard thing to decide. And it is hard because people don't know, like, is this, do we do it now or is it bad? I always hear, is it bad enough? Like, we don't want to go till it's bad enough.

Lori: Exactly.

Lisa: If you can learn how to communicate more effectively together, then you're going to be making your family's life, your children's life just improved in so many different ways. So certainly if you're really struggling, I think that's a very clear answer. Yes, let's do it. But again, remember that somebody who has a specialty in ADHD is going to be very, very important because I have people, we've tried two therapists. We've tried five therapists. 1. They should be a couple therapists 2. They should have training in ADHD. That's really key.

Lori: Yeah, that is really key. I think that's so important. We say the same thing for parents who are looking for a therapist for their child, it's the same thing. It's like if you just go to any child therapist that doesn't understand ADHD, you're gonna potentially be, you know, playing games in the office and it's never going to translate to any skills in the home, right. So, I think that's so critical for couples therapy and for kids.

Katie: Yes, I totally hear that. So, are there any habits or rituals that couples can implement that can help strengthen their relationship, especially while they're raising kids with ADHD?

Lisa: Right. So, the Gottman's did 40 plus years of research on thousands of couples and there's a number of things. One thing that I talked to couples about is taking time. If we don't take, and it can be 15 minutes, 15 minutes a day. And I know you might have to figure out when that's going to be, have that conversation, but have those 15 minutes that this is our

dedicated time. Whether it is to talk about logistics or what's happening with the child or the appointments that are coming up or, you know, we're struggling on this issue. What are we going to do and how are we going to handle it? That's going to be a tremendous thing. And in my second idea that I'm gonna say is dates and I know it is so hard to find time to get out of the house and then the babysitter and, and I understand. So I'm gonna give you just a little bit of help if you can't get out of the house. You can do an in-home date. Get the kids to bed, tucked in and then light some candles, put on some soft music, get a game out if you like playing games, do a puzzle. You don't have to go far, you don't have to spend a lot of money if it's just a little time that this is our time. Because you work so hard, whether you have ADHD or not to raise a family, to do all the things that you have to do that can you make sure that you're taking care of this relationship which will then impact the children in a very positive way. And don't forget about yourself though. You need to do something for yourself. A little bit of self-care.

Lori: Yeah. I mean again, I think we talk about this all the time in the child parent connection of like taking time to connect with our kids and play, even if it's for five minutes a day is so important to developing that positive relationship and it's such a buffer for all the hard stuff that happens during the day. And it is so true with a marriage relationship too. It's like you have a friendship and it's gonna, it's important to, like, buffer all the other, like, really hard stuff that comes up.

Katie: And I think, Lori, you are like a role model about going on dates. I feel like you guys do such a good job at going on all the time. It's like, oh, we're going out on Saturday night, we have a babysitter. And it's a reminder for me. I feel like I always talk about this, but I have, like, different things I learned from each of my friends. And that's one of the things that I'm always like, Lori and Brandt are going on a date. Like, babe, we need to get a babysitter.

Lori: It's funny, we have not done it. We have not done it for a long time, but we really struggled, like, during COVID, like, my kids really didn't have a babysitter for, like, years. And we were doing a lot of in home. We did definitely do in home date nights.

Katie: Yeah, definitely. Is there any final advice that you would offer to our audience, Lisa? Any kind of, like, wrap up words of wisdom that you want to share?

Lisa: I think I'm going to just focus back on the idea of being a team. When we take care of the team, everything else trickles down and gets taken care of. My link that's going to have the giveaway, do you mind if I pivot into that or did you have another?

Katie: Absolutely, yeah. Tell us all about it.

Lisa: Yeah. So that is a great opportunity to work, I mentioned communication. So there's different exercises on there, and it's all based on communication and how to improve your communication. I help you set up, you know, where are you going to speak? Because this is what I have. We're in the kitchen and I'm washing dishes and he's in the refrigerator. I'm like, your backs are to each other.

Katie: Oh, my gosh. Are you in my house?

Lori: I know!

Lisa: We're gonna sit down and we're gonna face each other. You know, we fall in love through the eyes. So, and when we have kids, we don't look at each other very often because we're chasing after the kid or we're putting them to bed or, right. So we sit down and we face each other and I give you step by step instructions on how to really improve the communication. And so, communication in your team, in your partnership is going to be key. So, I really hope that you'll take that opportunity to read through and do some of the exercises.

Lori: I love that. Well, thank you so much for coming on today. And we will make sure to put a link to that free guide in the show notes. So, make sure to grab that, so you can, you know, again, start getting some better communication at home, which I know will help your relationship and your child and your whole family. So, thank you so much, Lisa, and we really appreciate having you on today.

Lisa: Thank you both. So you're doing so much for this community. The ADHD community really needs you and thank you.

Katie: Thank you. 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!