

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #207: Does My Child REALLY Need an ADHD Diagnosis?

Mallory: Another sign that it might be time to get the diagnosis is if it's just really having an impact on your day-to-day family life. You can't, you're not doing the things you want to do because you're tiptoeing around your child. You feel like you're walking on eggshells. They're not participating in group sports even though they really want to or you want them to because it never goes well. They're struggling with friendships. So, when those things are really starting to have a really hard time on your family life, it's getting in the way of your family doing the things they want to do, your child doing the things they want to do, that's a sign that it's probably time to pursue a diagnosis.

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: I was starting an evaluation the other day on a child and the dad asked me at the end of our kind of first meeting, our parent interview, he said, do we really need to get a diagnosis? And I responded to his question and they did end up moving forward and doing the evaluation and getting a diagnosis. But then I thought, that's such a great question that I know so many parents have. And most of them are kind of asking that before they start the evaluation process, but I do think, like, that's a really good question. Do I need to get a diagnosis for my child? So, we thought today we would try and answer that on the podcast.

Katie: Absolutely. And you might be surprised. We're not just here to tell you yes, 100%, no matter what. So, spoiler alert, we're going to try to break down kind of some of the different reasons that you might be wondering about it. And, you know, there might be a situation where you feel like your child has, you know, really hard days and then really good days. And then you're like, wait, do I even need to get a diagnosis? What would be the point? Or am I just overreacting? You might be in a situation where one parent feels more strongly about getting a diagnosis, and maybe the other parent is like, no, I'm not interested in sort of opening that door right now. So, if you are struggling or maybe you've struggled in the past to make the decision about whether to pursue an ADHD diagnosis for your child, this episode is for you. So, we're going to talk through a couple situations where maybe it does make sense to hold off on getting that diagnosis. And then we're going to talk about, of course, as you would think, the times that it probably might be good to pursue and why getting that diagnosis and an evaluation can just be really helpful.

Mallory: Yep. And then, just our friendly reminder, the best way to support us is to share the podcast with your family and with your friends. If there's a particular episode that you loved that you think someone needs to hear, or you just love the show in general, by sharing our podcast with other friends and family members, you're helping us grow and reach more families like yours.

Katie: Absolutely. And if you are sharing us on social media, please tag us, because we love to see it. And it just really helps, like Mal said, for us to just reach a lot more families. So, we're going to get right into it, and we're going to start with situations where, you know, a parent might be thinking, I really, I may just need to hold off on getting a diagnosis. So, one of the really common ones that we hear, and this was something I faced as a parent, is when your child is pretty young, right. On the younger end, maybe age 4 or 5. And obviously you don't want your child to get a label too quickly, so you're like, I think I may just need to put the brakes on for a minute.

Lori: Yeah. The American Academy of Pediatrics would say we can do evaluations beginning at age 4 or 5, so we don't want to tell you, like, don't do an evaluation at that point. But sometimes, like, maybe you just started to see some of these things. You know, maybe it did sort of come, you know, as soon as they started pre-K and they hadn't been in school before and like, that transition, you're just starting to see things. Maybe it's not really

significant, but you're starting to notice some differences. Again, we can do those evaluations and we can give a diagnosis that young, but when we look at treatment options, we're really looking at parent training as being kind of the most effective treatment. So, a lot of times parents feel better maybe starting with some of that parent training and those behavioral interventions first, since that really is the first line of treatment when a child is young, before kind of moving on to get a diagnosis.

Mallory: Yeah. In a lot of cases, like, having that formal diagnosis is not a prerequisite to accessing that support. So back when I was still in private practice, parents would call, they'd have this exact question, like, do I have to get a diagnosis before I can do therapy, before I can do treatment? And, you don't always have to. So, in some cases, the family would decide to come see me. We do some parent training together and then through that process, I'd get to know them. I'd get to know their child and then I was able to guide them, like, yeah, I think a formal diagnosis would benefit your child because of these things. Or maybe after six sessions together things are going a lot better and we're starting to feel like they maybe don't even need a diagnosis because maybe their child doesn't have ADHD. So, starting with getting that extra support in some cases is the right move.

Katie: And I think when we understand what ADHD is right, it's a delay in the development of those executive functions. And so, what that means is that a lot of things that would be characteristics that we see in diagnosing ADHD are things that pretty much all kids do at a certain age. So, we think about 3-year-olds and they dump the bucket and they run around and they are constantly moving and that is very typical. We wouldn't be concerned to see a three-year-old who's really busy and climbing and you know, maybe talking and babbling and just having a lot to say. Then we think about a seven-year-old doing those same behaviors and we're like, oh, okay, yeah, that is where it starts to become significant. So, it is, there is value in waiting to some extent because we know that some kids will start to sort of outgrow those behaviors or like develop new skills and you, if you won't see a lot of that anymore.

Lori: And sometimes I think I've had different families call up and maybe they've just had kind of a big life transition and now they're starting to see behaviors and that can really complicate the situation. As somebody who does evaluations, if there's been kind of like a significant trauma or grief around a family member passing or a dog passing or maybe they

just started kindergarten and they've never had any kind of structured school experience before. It's very common for all kindergarteners to go through a period and sometimes it lasts a little while of figuring out the structure of sitting during a group and standing in a line and these are all things that those kids are kind of figuring out together. And you might see a lot of behavioral referrals, a lot of biting or kicking or things like that and that's not uncommon at that age. So sometimes we're kind of wanting to maybe monitor, give a little bit of time, especially if there's, you know, maybe there was a divorce or things like that. There's a big stressor. We often will see more defiance and more irritability, more anger that is occurring when we have sort of a trauma or big life transition. And so, it's hard to know, is this actually an underlying neurodevelopmental disorder? Is this a result of kind of that, you know, big life change?

Mallory: Yeah. I think that's an important distinction to make. And I think another situation where you may choose to delay getting a formal diagnosis is if you're really only experiencing the challenges at home, your child's doing fine at daycare, preschool and school. This again might be one of those situations where you just pursue a little extra support. You get that behavioral parent training. But I want to speak to your heart for a second when I say that. That doesn't mean, when I'm saying like, maybe it's just you need to change your parenting, it doesn't mean you're a bad parent, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. Kids with or without ADHD benefit from a lot of these strategies and a lot of times they don't come naturally to us parents, especially when we're trying to parent differently than we were raised. I go back to this conversation that I had with a friend about a decade ago, but it really stuck with me. And she was really, really struggling with one of her boys and she had been trying so many things and she was sharing her concerns with me and she was saying, I feel like I've tried everything and if the answer is that I need to change my behavior, I'm gonna, I feel really bad about that. Like she was feeling, she was feeling a lot of apprehension about getting more support because she was scared that the answer was that she needed to change her behavior and to her that meant that she was like parenting poorly or that she wasn't a good parent. And that's just not the case at all. So, I just, like I said, I want to speak to your heart when I say this, that if the first step is getting a little support for you on how to do things differently, how to parent differently, it's not because you're a bad parent or you're doing something wrong. It's just a lot of this stuff doesn't come instinctually. But there are strategies that really benefit all kids. So you might see great change with those few extra

supports. It might not take much. Especially again, if you're just, you're only seeing those struggles at home.

Lori: Yeah. And sometimes you'll have one child that responded really well to kind of all the typical things, and then you have another child come along and our kids are unique. They have different personalities, they respond differently to things. And sometimes it is like getting a different set of tools to know how to address that or respond to it. Like, no, nobody gives us a parenting, manual with our kids. We have them and then it's just like, have fun, figure out all the things. And you're just like, wow, that is overwhelming. You know, so sometimes it is really nice to have like the support of another person to kind of help you through that.

Katie: Yeah. And just to clarify, if you're listening and you're like, wait, parent behavior training, I don't even know what that means. You're in the right spot, congratulations. Because that's what we do! That's, that's what this podcast is. You'll find episodes all about parent behavior training and helping support parents. And really that's our goal, is to empower you. And so, we have online courses, our Instagram, our social media is all geared around parent behavior training.

Lori: Yeah. And I think our course is a good first step even if you don't have a diagnosis. So, it's not something that you have to hold off on to have a diagnosis to take our course. We really do encourage families to try some of these strategies if you consider your child potentially at risk for that diagnosis or you're seeing things that are considered consistent with it, but maybe you don't have the label yet, you can still do it.

Katie: Yeah. I think that's a really common thing where parents are like, I have some concerns, maybe, you know, they've noticed some things, but maybe you're just not ready yet to jump with both feet into the diagnosis. And so, the main takeaway here is that we want you to know, the answer probably isn't to do nothing. So, you don't need to go get that diagnosis, but you can get some parent behavior training and some support to help you and to help your child. So that again, these are best practices, like you're helping your child. Whether or not they go on to get that diagnosis of ADHD, it can still be really helpful.

So, some things that keep in mind for when it might be time to get a diagnosis or what are some of the things that we're going to ask you about in an interview? One of the first ones is do you have a family history of ADHD?

Lori: Yeah. So, if you're seeing those things early on and you or your spouse has a diagnosis, then that might be, that might lead you to seek out that diagnosis for them maybe a little bit earlier than you would have otherwise.

Mallory: And I think of all the families who ended up in my office for a diagnosis even before the parent knew they had ADHD, the most common thing is like, yeah, they did that, but I did that as a kid.

Lori: Right.

Mallory: Oh, I, but I was just... Yeah, they do that, but I was just like that. And then parents are having that aha moment, right. But that's, that's in situations where the parents don't know yet that they have ADHD, but that happens a lot.

Lori: It does, yes. For sure.

Mallory: I think another situation that might be a sign that it is time to get the formal diagnosis is if you've been struggling for a long time. You've been struggling with behaviors at home; things are not getting better as your child is getting older. Maybe you've tried to do things differently a couple times, it's not getting better. Maybe now you're seeing the same challenges outside of the home, on play dates, at school, at daycare. That might be a sign if kind of these challenges are kind of permeating life. They're not specific to home that it might be time for that formal diagnosis.

Lori: Yeah. And I think even going back to our example for a young child, we might want to wait during that transition, but maybe they have been in kindergarten for a long period and the teacher's kind of reaching out and saying these are out of the realm of normal. They're throwing chairs and we have to remove kids from the classroom. And it's like highly disruptive to the environment either at home, at school, that's when we want to start to think about seeking out a diagnosis so we can get some supports in place.

Katie: Yeah. And for those kids who generally do better in school, we all have known kids like that where the parents are like, really things are going great, like, are you sure? And the kids are doing well at school. But what we often see is that there's certain times in, you know, the child's academic career that things start to become more challenging. So, third grade is a big shift when where a lot more of the material, they have to read a lot more, they're really reading to learn. So now you read in science and social studies and English and now all of a sudden you're writing a lot more. This takes a ton of executive functioning. You're keeping track of more assignments. Sixth grade or seventh grade, depending on how middle school works is another big jump where a lot of times, you know, the school maybe has told you, everything's great, things are going well, and now all of a sudden you're like, oh, okay, we're missing assignments. Or my child is getting tardy because they're late to their class, because they go to their locker and they sort of get lost in that process each time. And so those are times where, especially if the school is reaching out and you've had concerns in the past, definitely listening and at that point probably, you know, starting to talk to a professional about getting a diagnosis because those are some of the times that we often see kind of just an influx of families. Those are some of the biggest big transitions.

Mallory: Another sign that it might be time to get the diagnosis is if it's just really having an impact on your day-to-day family life. You can't, you're not doing the things you want to do because you're tiptoeing around your child. You feel like you're walking on eggshells. They're not participating in group sports even though they really want to or you want them to because it never goes well. They're struggling with friendships. So, when those things are really starting to have a really hard time on your family life, it's getting in the way of your family doing the things they want to do, your child doing the things they want to do. That's a sign that it's probably time to pursue a diagnosis.

Lori: Yeah. And maybe again, maybe it isn't ADHD, but maybe it's something else that's going on that needs to be addressed. I think sometimes it's just nice to have answers and a clear plan at that point to know how to support your child and your family moving forward.

Mallory: Absolutely.

Katie: And we do have other episodes that talk about, you know, getting the diagnosis. There's a lot of different options of where you could go. For many families, they start with their pediatrician because that person already knows them. It's a little easier to get into your

pediatrician usually rather than a specialist. But as Lori mentioned, if you have concerns about other challenges, then there's a lot of options as to where you could get an evaluation with a psychologist. You could go to the school and ask them to evaluate. Sometimes they won't actually give the diagnosis, but that's like a whole another episode. But if you are questioning, I need to get the diagnosis, but I don't know where to go, we can link an episode in the show notes that goes over some of the options for you of pros and cons of all the different types of evaluations that you can get.

Mallory: So now we know that maybe you're in that situation where we're speaking to you with all of this saying it might be time to get a diagnosis 'if...' and you're like, yep, that's me, but something's holding you back, there's a roadblock or you're not pursuing it. One of the biggest concerns that we hear from parents is this thought that what if my child gets labeled forever? And we totally get that. But the truth is, and the way we see it, labels are tools. They don't define your child, but what they do is they unlock understanding, resources, support that your child might need. And I've had this conversation with so many friends who have gone through the process of getting their child a diagnosis and that's, you know, before and after the evaluation, your child is still the same lovable, amazing, great kid that they were before and after the diagnosis. Like it's the same kid. We just now have an understanding and explanation of how their brain is working. And really getting the right label for your child can be really powerful because without it, kids start to assign, you know, labels and internalize concepts for themselves like I'm a bad kid or I'm super stupid. But when we have an explanation that we can give to them and explain why their brain works the way it does, they can have more positive, more realistic self-talk like my brain just works differently or this is the way that my brain likes to do things and I'm not a bad kid. And this really serves to protect their self-esteem in the long run because we know kids with ADHD really do start to internalize a lot of those negative labels if we don't give them an explanation for why things are harder for them, more challenging for them, why they feel like they're getting in trouble more often. So, it really helped preserve our kid's self-esteem.

Katie: I completely agree with that. And as someone who was diagnosed as an adult, I can absolutely say that when I look back on myself as a kid and having certain beliefs about myself. Also, you know, teachers, other students, they would label me in a certain way. Like I was really chatty and it was really hard for me to just sit quietly. And it's, it's been really great actually to look back and reframe a lot of those things and be like, oh, that's why that was

hard for me. So, I do think as parents, being aware that our kids are going to have labels put on them basically one way or another. It's a really hard truth. But we can control it when we can choose what that looks like and how they perceive themselves when we give them accurate information about how their brain is working.

Lori: Yeah. And I know a lot of parents have concerns too, about what if I tell my child's teacher and they treat my child differently or they treat them like they, it's somehow bad to have ADHD. And I think again, for a lot of teachers, they're already seeing challenges in the classroom. A lot of times it just opens that line of communication with the teachers to kind of say, this is, and again, change the narrative with the teacher of, like, these are the things my child's really good at. These are the things that are hard. These are the things that work to really set your child up for success at the beginning of each school year so they're not like drowning and having challenges and you're just constantly putting out fires all school year. And again, with the school, the diagnosis really does open the door for a lot of supports and accommodations that most kids with ADHD really do need. There are 504 plans, there are individualized education plans to help your child be successful and to get the interventions that they need to really do well in school and thrive.

Katie: Absolutely. And I think just like it can give teachers a lot of clarity about our kids and help them access those supports, the same is true at home. When we understand what's going on in our child's brain, it really helps us as parents just to shift our mindset and come from a place of, okay, what do we need to do here? How can I be curious? How can I support? It really helps us to feel less frustrated and more aware. Okay, this is, this is what's challenging for my child. And this is why. It's not because I'm doing something wrong. It's not because my child is doing something wrong. And it just really helps us to be able to problem solve creatively with our kids. This is also something that we want them to be able to do, is self-advocate and understand what they need. But really, at the end of the day, getting the right diagnosis for your child is pivotal because it really helps us to guide treatment. It helps us know what is going to be the most effective. And you know, we know that behavioral therapy has a lot of evidence. We know that skill building is a huge part of it. Sometimes medication that is an evidence-based support for ADHD. And this just helps you to sort of streamline things so that you're not wasting time on something that maybe doesn't have a lot of evidence. You know, okay, if my child has a diagnosis of ADHD, we have years and years and years of research showing us the best way to support them.

Mallory: Absolutely. And we know that your time is valuable. Every penny you invest in your family matters. So, when you're able to invest your time, your energy, your money into the supports that we know work based on the evidence, you're just setting your whole family up for success. If you're wondering, if you're wanting more information about that, we do have a free ADHD treatment guide that we'll link for you in the show notes that just reviews kind of all of the ADHD treatment supports out there and the level of evidence we have to support them and what areas they may help with. So definitely grab that if you're kind of, you're wanting help prioritizing and using your energy and time wisely.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. And it's, it is great. We get into all different kinds of things that we get a lot of questions about, like what's the research say about diet? What does the research say about video games that are supposed to teach kids, you know, emotion regulation and all different kinds of things. So that's a great resource to check out. And as we mentioned at the beginning, if you are enjoying our podcast, please share it. Please share it with friends, family, share it on social media, tag us. That is definitely the way that we are growing and we love that. We love to see new listeners on the podcast as well as all the people that have been supporting us since the very beginning. So, thank you so much.

Mallory: So, our key takeaway today is that in some situations, it might make sense to try out some different supports before you start to go through the process of getting a diagnosis. However, if your child is struggling at home or at school or in other environments, it might be time to get some of those answers so you really have a clear plan moving forward to help your child and your family be successful.

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!