

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #217: Early Signs of ADHD: What to Look for and Where to Start

Katie: Occasionally we'll have a reel that just goes to the wrong side of the Internet. It's not the algorithm that we want to be in, but somehow we end up over there. And the most common thing that we hear is, yeah, this is all kids, right? Like, oh, you said that your kid has tantrums or forgets to brush their teeth or is struggling. Yeah, it's not ADHD. Every single kid has that issue. And it's, we kind of, you know, we navigate that with as much grace as we can, but it's important to understand that to some extent that is true. But when we think about, is this affecting them across their daily life and is this something that's you're spending hours every day or every week managing that is when it starts to become much more obvious and much more concerning. And so again, it's, it's like saying, well, every kid does that. And you're like, yes, they do, but not to the same extent.

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: Hello everyone, and welcome back to Shining with ADHD. I'm here today with Katie and Lori. And really quick, before we jump into today's topic, if you have been loving the podcast, if you have found something helpful, if you have shared it with a friend because you thought they needed to hear it too, would you please consider leaving us a five-star

review wherever you listen? That is truly the best way for us to reach more families like yours that desperately need this information. So, let's jump in.

Katie: Yes, and just as a side note, we do take screenshots of our reviews and send them around the group chat. And it's actually very exciting for us when we get a review. So, you might not think it matters, but it actually really does. So, thank you so much. So, today's episode is for all those parents who have young kids, you know, those late toddler to pre-kindergarten years.

Lori: Yes. This episode is for you parents who might be feeling like parenting has been harder than expected in these early years.

Mallory: Yeah. So maybe you found yourself wondering, could my child have ADHD? This episode is just for you.

Katie: And I love this topic because I recently had a friend reach out to me about this exact thing. And she has two kids and her older one really didn't have any challenges with behavior, good sleeper, great with school, all the things. And she was crushing it as a parent. And then her second one has had a lot more difficulty and especially things like she talked about the tantrums in the middle of Target, difficulty with leaving play dates or birthday parties, even if they've been there for hours her daughter is just really stressed out to leave. And she's so, my friend is just so overwhelmed by all of this, and she was sort of asking me, like, you know, what to do, what should I do? Where do I start? And so, this episode is personally really important to us. And you might feel like your child is too young for a diagnosis at their current age, but maybe your wheels are still spinning while you're laying awake in bed at night, or when you see them really struggling at play dates or trying to get out of Costco without a tantrum.

Lori: Yes. And the fact that you were even asking yourself this question shows that you're already paying attention in the best way. So today we hope to offer you a little bit more reassurance and also that ADHD or not, there are things that are within your control that you can pay attention to, things that you can invest your time in to continue raising an amazing kid.

Mallory: Absolutely. So, let's talk through some of those early signs of ADHD. And I wanna just mention this is really important, that all of these early signs exist in some way at some intensity in typical child development. So, if we're saying, you know, kids with ADHD tend to show this sign in early childhood, if your child is showing that sign, that doesn't mean, yep, for sure your child has ADHD. Because this is what's tricky about ADHD in early childhood, is that all of these things exist in typical development, but what really matters is the frequency, the intensity, and then how long it takes them to recover from, like, big emotions and things like that.

Lori: Absolutely. And again, we're kind of looking at patterns over time with behaviors. And are these things kind of just happening at home or now you've enrolled your child in preschool and now it's like you've been having concerns about behaviors at home and now the school's even coming to you with concerns about those same behaviors. Maybe your child has meltdowns, which all kids do at this age, but maybe those meltdowns last like an hour. And it's very hard for your child to recover, and it feels much more intense than other kids. And maybe on top of that, you have a family history of ADHD, and there's, you know, you as a parent or another parent or someone within your family has ADHD, that just places your child at an increased risk. So, we do want to keep a closer eye on that.

Katie: And I think the key here, like you were saying, Lori, is that intensity. And, you know, we have a really amazing community online. Like, I love our Instagram, the people that we interact with through social media, and occasionally we'll have a reel that just goes to the wrong side of the Internet. It's not the algorithm that we want to be in, but somehow we end up over there. And the most common thing that we hear is, yeah, this is all kids, right? Like, oh, you said that your kid has tantrums or forgets to brush their teeth or is struggling. Yeah, it's not ADHD. Every single kid has that issue. And it's, we kind of, you know, we navigate that with as much grace as we can, but it's important to understand that to some extent that is true. But when we think about is this affecting them across their daily life and is this something that's you're spending hours every day or every week managing, that is when it starts to become much more obvious and much more concerning. And so, again, it's like saying, well, every kid does that. And you're like, yes, they do, but not to the same extent. And some other early signs that probably deserve some attention would be those big emotions. They come on really fast. And like I was just saying, they last a very long time. We can see, you know, the kids who are able to bounce back on the playground. And then a lot of

times kids with ADHD, they struggle to bounce back. Like, they sort of, once they fall off a little bit, then it's really hard for them to get back into a good place. And, you know, even when you're there, you're offering support, lots of compassion and this is where parents, you know, they want to validate the emotion. Sometimes for a kid with ADHD, that's just going to trigger them even more. And you're like, but I saw it on social media and it should work, but it's really hard for our kids to recover from being upset. And that might be an early sign of ADHD.

Lori: Yeah. Or you as a parent just feel like you're kind of walking on eggshells all day long. Like, what's going to set them off? You know, it's sometimes that feeling that a parent will state of, like, I'm just worried all day long that I'm going to set them off and what's it going to be like and how's the rest of the day going to go? That is very telling.

Mallory: Yeah. So those parents have started to arrange their lives around avoiding those triggers. They start to arrange their lives in a way that they are walking on eggshells and that's a really hard place to be in. But we see that a lot in families that have young kids that go on to get that ADHD diagnosis. Another thing that we see in early childhood is impulsivity. And again, toddlers, preschoolers, pre kindergarteners, they're going to do things that are impulsive. But again, it's the frequency, it's the intensity. A lot of times we see that go on to get that ADHD diagnosis, the impulsivity is leading to safety concerns. They're the kid that like figures out a way to get to the top of the playground that they're not supposed to be on and they do that and you know, the time it takes to blink your eyes. And so, we see that intensity that's leading to those safety concerns. Again, young kids have a high activity level, but oftentimes these kids, they're like the energizer bunny. It doesn't matter how much exercise they've had that day, just extremely high activity levels. They just keep going and going. A lot of times it's paired with really poor body awareness. So, they might be bumped and bruised quite often.

Katie: That one came up for me when I remember when my son was in pre-K and we went on a field trip and we were at the aquarium and the kids were running around all day. It was a huge day and all the parents were like, oh, he's going to sleep so well tonight. She's going to sleep so well tonight. And that was one of the first things where I was like, really like your kids just going to go right to sleep because they ran around at the, you know, I need to go to

three or four aquariums in order to wear out my kids. So, you might notice that that really high activity level, like you said, Mal, where it just doesn't feel like they wear out.

Lori: I remember my dad saying with my older brother that he would have to like physically hold him down to get him to take a nap. Like, just like getting them to sleep and to lay and be still in bed long enough to sleep. Like, you know, having to physically hold you down is like the only way to do that. Speaking of sleep, that is one of the other things when we look at the research on kids who eventually go on to get an ADHD diagnosis, sleep struggles early on is one of the most important factors that we look at. And so many kids are going to have difficulty with falling asleep at night. Again, like I just said, like being able to kind of wind down and quiet your body enough to fall asleep. So, you're having kids staying up really late, or sometimes they wake up really, really early in the morning. That's a very common one. Or they're just not able to sleep through the night. They're waking up sometimes for hours. I mean, I have families come in and say, like, they've been up for hours in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep. They're up doing stuff. So sleep challenges are definitely one that we see very commonly in kids with ADHD. Sensory sensitivities are also another thing. So, when I say sensory sensitivities, like sensitivity to noises or bright lights or food and textures and food or clothing. Sometimes clothing can make mornings really hard. Or food challenges, mornings can be really hard to get out the door because they don't want to put their shoes and socks on, or, they don't want to eat whatever you have for breakfast. Again, sensory challenges are common in ADHD. They're not like a part of the criteria, but I do want to say many, with autism and the diagnosis of autism, sensory sensitivities are a part of the criteria and diagnosis. So, if you are seeing really significant sensory issues and the sensory sensitivities are kind of the main concern you have. Like, I have many families say, like, there's just so much anxiety in my child around eating food and loud noises and things like that. That's the biggest issue. That might be more of an indicator of autism. And to let you know, we can diagnose autism much earlier than ADHD, starting typically at the earliest, around 18 months, sometimes early, if there is a family history. So if you are seeing things like that, just know that it is possible to start an evaluation a little bit earlier if you have those concerns.

Katie: Yeah, that's such an important clarification for parents. And, you know, when we say, parents hear that, wait and see. And a lot of times that's just really delaying services and important information that you need to have. So definitely, you know, I think the pediatrician

is a great place to start if you are having those concerns and pointing them out. You know, because they are short appointments, a lot of times the pediatrician might not be seeing everything that you're seeing. But I just wanted to make a really quick note here that if you're nodding along and you're feeling like, wow, you are describing my child like, I'm struggling with the super high activity. And my child does have bruises because they're crashing into things all the time. And sleep is such a hard thing in our family. We just want you to know that whether or not your child has ADHD, this is not because of bad parenting or a discipline failure. You know, it's really important that you understand you have not ruined your child. And I think that's a fear that a lot of parents hold. So, we just want to acknowledge that right away and say this is not your fault.

Mallory: And I think it's really important to note too that if strategies that your friends are telling you they're trying with their kids, or your parents used with you or strategy you're seeing on social media, you're seeing these other strategies that are working for other kids and other parents. If those are consistently not working for you, again, that doesn't mean you're a failure. But that's also really good information to have in this process to say this works for everyone else and everyone's kids seem to rebound when they do this and it doesn't work for me. It's not because you're failing, it's not because you're doing it wrong. But that is really important information in this process.

Katie: Yeah. My example from earlier is a really good case study of that. Like if you are trying to validate your child's emotions and you feel like that's just making it worse and worse and worse, that's a really important thing to know and explain to the doctor when you're talking with them about that. And I know that both of you have done thousands of ADHD evaluations, so maybe you could just take a minute and explain to us why ADHD can be hard to diagnose in those preschool years.

Lori: Yeah. So, I think part of it is, we've already kind of touched on a little bit is that these executive functioning skills of being able to like, control impulses and focus and pay attention, like, are very much developing and there's a broad range in young children. And so, knowing like what is outside of that is a little bit hard because again most young children are going to have a hard time paying attention, focusing, have impulse control. It's not unusual for kids to hit in preschool or bite or do those things like those are all still behaviors that they're kind of developing. And so that's why it can be harder to diagnose and I would say

most people are not going to diagnose under the age of four. Like and I would say that that's kind of a strict cutoff I have for myself. In situations where kids are between four and five years old, it can be a little bit harder. And one of the reasons is we need to kind of see based on the criteria for ADHD that those behaviors are impacting them in multiple settings. And so that's where it can be a little bit tricky because not all kids are in school yet. They just be at home so you as a parent are just seeing them at home. But it's not impossible. Like there are plenty of kids who are in pre-K or preschool programs. They've sometimes been in those programs for many years and that there is a pattern there. And that's what we talk about, is there a pattern to this? And we do have behavior rating skills that we give to parents and teachers that are, they are norm reference, meaning that we can look at how is this child's behavior compared to other kids their same age. So, we can kind of look at not just do they have these symptoms, but how are their symptoms different from other kids their same age within like 5-year-olds in general or 5-year one-month olds? So, we do have some tools to kind of help rule that out. So, we again, we're looking at how is this impacting multiple settings and so it comes becomes a little bit harder if your child isn't in preschool or isn't in any other settings where we can kind of look at that. And that's why many kids aren't referred until they start into kindergarten or school and then it's more evident that they're having challenges across both home and school settings, if that makes sense.

Katie: Definitely. So, let's say that you're listening to this and you're like, yes, I do see a lot of the things that you're talking about. But for whatever reason, maybe it's your child's age or they're not in school yet and you don't feel like you're ready for the evaluation yet. So, let's talk about some practical steps that you can take even without a diagnosis. You definitely do not need a diagnosis of ADHD to support your child and start using some evidence-based strategies that will really help.

Mallory: I think that's really important for parents to hear. Like you don't have to wait to do something until you have that diagnosis. There's a lot you can do leading up to the diagnosis or even if your child doesn't even go on to get a diagnosis because you're probably listening to this because you're questioning in some way, right, so something's hard. So, the first thing to do would be to, as we're saying, ADHD diagnosis comes with patterns and the frequency and the intensity across environments of these signs. So start noticing those patterns, because leading up to that diagnosis, it will help a lot if you've started to really tune into when things are hard. Why do they seem hard? Under what situations? I respond this way, does it work or

not? Those are all things that are going to help you when the time does come, if it does come, to get that evaluation. So, start tuning in. The fact that you're paying attention is so great. So, start tuning into these things, how frequently they're happening, when they're more likely to happen, what's working when you respond to it, what's not working. Because all of that information is going to help you down the line.

Katie: Yeah. And how we kind of start to think about this is kind of what you're describing, Mal, is let's get curious, right? What's going on? When do we see it? What does it look like? And the goal here is to figure out how can you support your child's executive functions? So, for kids with ADHD and all kids, our executive functions are developing. And so, we are here as parents to help support and scaffold and build those skills. And there's very specific things that we can start doing, even with really young kids. One of my favorites, you'll be shocked to hear this, because I am a speech therapist and I love to talk, but one of the best ways we can support our kids is to say less words. Okay. We actually have a whole episode on this, which we will link below. And it's all about saying less, because the more that we talk at our kids and explain things. And I am so guilty of this. I love to give my kids, like, really specific instructions and just explain. I want them to understand the why. I think because I was a kid that wanted to know why, so I really want them to know. And it just can be so overwhelming to their brain. So, less words, more visuals. We use a lot of visual supports in our own homes, whether that's timers that sort of can they have red on them and then they disappear as you do the task. Putting things in really clear bins or baskets so that you have a specific spot for the socks and a specific spot for the shoes. And then you're not saying to your child, pick up your shoes, don't forget those. You need flip flops, because it's hot, right? It's just too many words, especially for those preschoolers. And with alongside that, building in predictable routines. So, we know that ADHD brains really thrive when they know what's coming. And, you know, unfortunately, they also can get annoyed when things are too predictable, because they do like that flexibility and that fun spontaneity. But the more predictability that you have, the better. So, thinking about something like a bedtime routine, you can really start to build it out and think, okay, what are the four main things we have to do before bed? Maybe you have them take a bath, or maybe it's brushing teeth. Hopefully it's brushing teeth. But maybe there's a story and you have a special spot that you sit to read that story. So, this is feels like a bedtime routine and you're just trying to get your child to bed peacefully so you can watch tv, but what you're really doing is you are building their executive functions. You're helping them to understand the order things need to happen,

the things that they need, all of that. And so, these are just a couple simple ways that you can start to build executive functions just in little tweaks throughout your day of things that you're already doing.

Mallory: And these are strategies that benefit all kids, not just kids with ADHD. These are great for all kids, but especially kids with ADHD.

Lori: Yeah. And if you are looking for support in that area, we'll put a link to our printable routines. So, we do have routines, and again, those are, you can set them up as pictures. If your kids are older, you can write on them. But for younger kids, preschoolers, even toddlers, you can have just pictures for those routines that you have in the morning, in the evening that you can point to, again, to kind of limit the verbal reminders and things like that, and just point to the pictures so they know what is coming and what to expect.

Katie: And my husband and I joke about this because we use a lot of visual schedules and routines with our own kids. And we have, since they were really small, but we tease each other because we have ADHD and we're like, okay so the visual for our kids is actually really helpful to us because then we know what's coming next. And it can be just a real game changer for the whole family to have that kind of printed out and you can see exactly what the expectations are.

Lori: Exactly. And I think there are so many, one of the main things we hear from families about our courses and our printables is like, I have ADHD, does this work for me? And part of our response is like we do these things in our homes because we also have ADHD and we forget what the routine is. Like we forget to pack water bottles and lunches and snacks and things like that. So those visuals are equally as important to us as parents as they are for our kids too. So those are, I mean those are just helpful for everyone. The other thing to think about is adjusting expectations too. And we don't, again, our theory is not like we're lowering expectations for your child with ADHD. Like we don't want you to say, oh well, we're just not going to have an expectation that they're not going to hit or they're like these different things. We don't want to lower our expectations, but we do want to meet our kids where they are at in their unique stage of development. And again, understanding that if it's hard for them to process verbal instructions or they get distracted very easily, we're going to be changing the environment and how we're giving directions knowing that their brain is working a little bit differently.

Mallory: I think that's such an important reframe for parents. And again, as we always say, like our kids want to do well. It's not because they're bad kids, it's not because you're doing a bad job parenting. But for a lot of these kids, their brain is developing differently and so we need to meet them where they are. Recognizing that when we, and we are setting up the environment to support their success, we're giving them the tools they need to succeed, that they will do well.

Lori: Some kids can only handle a playdate with one other kid. You know, sometimes they just really aren't ready for a playdate with four kids and they're just not going to be successful in that setting. They're just going to get wound up and super hyperactive and it just, they tend to not end well. So maybe we kind of choose one kid to do that with and we work up to that. So that's kind of another example of like meeting them where they're at and making, creating situations where we're not avoiding things, but we're also creating a situation where they're going to have more success.

Mallory: And along those lines, because it just this, you know, I can really relate to this too when it comes to play date along with maybe trying one on one is a lot of times our young kids that go on to get the ADHD diagnosis need a lot more supervision during these play dates too, than their playmates like their play dates might. So, while one parent might say, oh yeah, the kids can go upstairs and play, it'll be fine. No, I need to be there with my child supervising to catch early signs of a meltdown or dysregulation or just impulsivity. So, I think that's another key too that a lot of parents find is while other parents can kind of sit back and chat and enjoy themselves at this young age, our kids need a lot more supervision. And you might not be able to do that. You might not be able to sit at the picnic table across the park while the kids are over on the playground. You need to be right there watching, monitoring, supporting. and again that's, we're still going on the play date, but we're providing a level of support that's going to make it more successful.

Katie: Or if you do sit at the play, the picnic table, you might find that your child goes and runs through the sprinklers, which is what happened at our most recent park play date. And my child is not in preschool, just to be clear. But we ended up very wet by the end of the play date. So, you know, you run the risk. But yeah, I think if you, if you're feeling that way, because that is something that I've really experienced. Even at family gatherings, Mal. Like, I know we've talked about with cousins and stuff, and it's like, man, I really want my kid to be

able to just go hang out in the basement, you know, with all the other kids. But if you're feeling that and you're feeling isolated or, you know, like, gosh, why is it so much harder for me? You're not alone. Like, there's a huge community of us that are in that same boat and it might just feel very isolating to you, but know that it's not just you. Like, we, this is something we've, we deal with and we hear from families all the time that are feeling the same. We wrote an email about it actually to our list and we got so many responses of people being like, yes, that was my, I think it was Thanksgiving. And they were like, yeah, I spent all of Thanksgiving just watching my kid. So, it is really tough and we just want to encourage you that you're not alone.

Mallory: So, we've talked through lots of things that you can do before a diagnosis if your child is too young or you're not ready to pursue that diagnosis yet from like keeping data, paying attention to ways you can grow EF at home and support your child. Let's talk about when it would be time to consider professional support. So, when should you take that next step? Even if your child is really young and you know there's no way they're gonna get an ADHD diagnosis, maybe they're two. When do you consider that professional support? So, let's talk through that. So, think about how you're feeling. If you're feeling like daily life is really hard and it's a lot harder for everyone in the family than it should be, maybe it's time to seek some professional support. Maybe it's not an evaluation, but maybe it's the help of a family therapist or someone who can, you know, get to know your family and give you some tools, individualized tools, one-on-one tools. Another sign might be your child's emotional intensity is interfering with you being you being able to put them in daycare or preschool. So maybe your kid has gotten kicked out of preschool or child care because of the behavior, because of the emotions, and so now you're not able to work, or you're having a hard time keeping your job because your child keeps getting kicked out of preschool, that's a sign that it might be time for some professional support. If your child's safety is just an ongoing recurring concern because of that impulsivity, you're having a hard time keeping them safe. Time for some professional support. When you're feeling completely drained, exhausted, find yourself dysregulated all the time because you're pouring so much into keeping the peace at home and supporting your child, that's probably a sign that it's time for some professional support. Another sign that it might be time to get a professional opinion, professional support is if you're noticing other delays. So maybe you're noticing your child is energetic, is having trouble sleeping. Okay. That's normal for most toddlers. Is it ADHD, is it not? But you're noticing other developmental delays. Like things with your child's physical development.

They're not hitting physical milestones. Maybe with their language development, you have concerns about their speech. They're several years old, but they're unintelligible or they're not using spoken language. Maybe the teachers are reporting learning concerns in preschool, like they're not matching like other kids or solving simple problems like other kids. Those would all be signs that it might be time for a professional opinion.

Katie: Yeah. And a lot of parents will say, okay, yes, check, check, check. And where do I go? And so, we like to refer families to start with your pediatrician. And that may not be the last stop on your journey, but it's a good first one because many times it's easier to get into them. You know, you're paying maybe like a copay or something, so it's more affordable. And it's usually someone that knows your family, knows your child, has watched them. And when you go to those appointments, it's really important to, just as we've talked about so often on here, just keep a notes app in your phone of what are your questions? What are your concerns? I know this happens to me when I go to the pediatrician with my kids. I almost freeze under the pressure of like, oh, gosh, I know I needed to ask you something, but I don't remember what it was. And so, you know, if you, if things come up, jotting those down and then starting with your pediatrician can be really a great place to start. And they might refer you out to a child psychologist or a developmental pediatrician, depending on what the concerns are. But also, you know, occupational therapy, speech therapy, a lot of these services can be accessed through school. So even if your child is young, there may be a special education preschool option where you can have them after the age of three evaluated. And if they qualify for services, like if they have speech or language issues or difficulty with fine motor or sensory needs, they may be able to get those services for free through your public school district.

Lori: Yeah, and I think it's very important to kind of know that, that early support when kids are, you know, around 3-5, we're really focusing on skills. It's not as much of a focus on labels often. And so if you're going to see a child psychologist, you might not start, like we said, with a full evaluation. It might just be more, getting some resources and support to change how you're parenting or understand your child's brain a little bit better, and get some tools to kind of help see how they respond to that. And that's also important information if you do eventually go on to get an evaluation. Again, we created our online course, *Creating Calm*, and we've talked, you know, about different things that you can do, if you suspect your child maybe has ADHD, as far as changing expectations and changing routines and things

like that. We go into much more depth about that in our online course, *Creating Calm*. And we really created that because there are many kids who are too young for a diagnosis, but you strongly suspect that that might be going on, but you're not going to be doing medication. You're really focused on skill building and that, again, you don't have to have a diagnosis of ADHD to do our course, we have lots of information and support and tools for parents, that our hope is to prevent further challenges as your kid, gets older and that you guys have the resources and support to kind of create an environment at home that just makes things less chaotic and more calm and helps you to be a more confident parent.

Mallory: Yeah. So, to just kind of wrap up here, I just want to encourage you to trust the noticing. Trust what you have been noticing. And you are allowed to be curious about what's going on with your child without being certain. You're allowed to provide your child support, seek support, seek therapies without putting a label on it in these early childhood years. So just want to encourage you to keep noticing that paying attention to these things is a strength and your child will be better for it.

Katie: Absolutely. And so, our key takeaway is that you're not trying to predict your child's future. You are just supporting the child that you have right in front of you today. And as always, we are here to support 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!