Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #232: ADHD Medication: Swallowing Pills, Med Shortages, and When Your Child Says No

Lori: ADHD is a, it doesn't go away on the weekends. You know, like, it doesn't go away in your child's sports practices and their games on Saturday morning in soccer. It doesn't go away on vacations. And so, you know, a lot of times it's hard to take those breaks. And I think kids really do need that executive functioning support every day to be the best versions of themselves and to really be able to regulate and it's really essential to your family to function well as a family.

Katie: Hey, everyone, Katie here. So we are jumping right back into our ADHD medication conversation from two weeks ago. And if you missed it, we recorded a very long episode that was supposed to be one big episode with all of your Q&A about ADHD meds. But in true Childhood Collective fashion, it actually got to be very long winded, and we decided to split it into two parts. So if you have not listened to part one yet, you may want to jump back to that. In that episode, we talked a lot more about what types of medication are most effective for kids with ADHD, common side effects, strategies to mitigate those. So if you want to check that out, please do. In part two, which we're doing today, we're going to be talking more about those practical questions that come up once your child actually starts taking a medication. So these are questions we hear from parents all the time, and I'm really excited to jump right back into this conversation.

Mallory: Okay, so there are a lot of logistics when it comes to having your child take ADHD medication. So let's chat through some of the things that maybe you haven't thought about or maybe you have thought about and you're worried about it. Let's start with really basic, and we've kind of alluded to this just a little bit, but who can prescribe ADHD medication? So in, I would say in most cases, it's going to be your child's pediatrician. You know, that's where your medical home is. That is where you are doing most of your visits. But that's not the only person who can and will prescribe ADHD medication. It could be a psychiatrist, it could be a developmental pediatrician, it could be another specialist. And each of them have pros and cons, right. I'd say the pro of your pediatrician is that it's the most accessible. Those tend to be closest to home. If you're traveling to see a specialist, like a psychiatrist or developmental

pediatrician, you might be driving across town or to another town, because they're, you know, a lot less of them. And in general a pediatrician is a great person to prescribe and manage usually a single medication. So if medication is growing more complicated, multiple medications, that's where the pediatrician might feel more comfortable having someone else manage that medication.

Lori: You know, I do evaluations, for more complex situations. These aren't kind of straightforward ADHD situations. Like many of them have co-occurring like autism, anxiety, depression, things like that. In those situations when you have kind of more emotional symptoms and it's a more complex presentation, I will definitely like encourage parents to maybe meet with a psychiatrist versus just a pediatrician. Just because your pediatrician has to know a lot about a little bit about a lot of things. And, and they just aren't gonna, unless they've really taken the time to do a deep dive and get a lot of like extra continuing education on ADHD, they're just not, they're gonna have more surface level education around that. So sometimes when it's a more complex presentation, it's helpful to see a psychiatrist or somebody that really specializes in mental health.

Mallory: And in some cases, once you're working with a psychiatrist and you feel like you've found a really good medication or combination of medications, in some cases they can then transfer that to the pediatrician to manage the meds from there on out if that's a lot easier for your family. It just, it depends on the individual situation. I'd say most, most people are having their child's pediatrician manage stimulant medications if it's just a single one.

Katie: Yeah. So another logistical thing that has come up, especially in the past, I don't know if it's as big of an issue right now, is the medication shortages. So if you don't know, there was a big shortage of Vyvanse, which is one of the common stimulants, and that sort of had this trickle down effect because then doctors weren't prescribing that anymore, they were prescribing other meds which made other stimulants have a shortage. And this was a really big issue for me a few years ago. I was taking medication that was hard to get. So I just want to talk through that because, because ADHD medication is a controlled substance, you can't just take your prescription and walk it over to a different pharmacy. They can't transfer a lot of times a prescription from one pharmacy to the next. It has to go straight from the provider to that pharmacy. If they are out, they can't transfer it. Like so we use Walgreens. Sometimes Walgreens can't send it somewhere else. So it can be time intensive. So being aware of that,

that sometimes they'll run out of a medication. Even now that will happen. You need to call back to your provider or get on your portal and have them send it somewhere else. So I will actually call and check a pharmacy and say, do you have this? This is not a sponsored thing but for me Costco has been the best because Costco is relentless and will just continuously keep pushing the button and helping me where other pharmacies that I've worked with, I feel we're kind of like, I don't know, take it or leave it. Which is hard when you're trying to track down meds. But Costco can be great for that because they do seem to have just like really clear systems. But things that you can run into with that is, you know, can you take a generic form? This is something you'd want to talk about with your doctor and understand if there's any difference between those. Sometimes insurance will only cover generic or they're only cover brand and so that can really change your copay. So just understanding that also they do have many times the prescriber will have like some kind of a discount card or medication card. So that's something to look into as well because over time this can really start to add up. You know, co pays and doctor's appointments and all those things. So that's just something that I personally experienced. And my best tip is just to call directly to the pharmacy before you have your prescriber send a prescription because then they have to unsend it and it's a whole thing.

Mallory: My little, my little soapbox here. Tangential soapbox. When it comes to medication shortages or not being able to medicate your child for any reason when you have planned to medicate them, this is why it's so important to have supports for your child at school. This is why we relentlessly talk about getting your child a 504 plan or an IEP because for any of these reasons there's a chance your child is going to show up to school unmedicated. And when they don't have the protections of a formal plan or your teacher isn't in the loop, it's a big challenge. And so I know this is just a little tangential but just a little plug for, like, having formal support for your child at school is so important, even if they are taking medication, because there's always a chance they're going to show up to school one day unmedicated because of a shortage, because you forgot. So just something to keep in mind.

Lori: Yeah. I mean, that I worked in the schools, and that was such a huge issue. I mean, it just was and especially for various populations or even with kids who are in divorced families where, like, one forgot to refill the medication or send it or there's so many issues that can come up with that. And it really is something that you need to be communicating with the school about.

Katie: Can I just say, I like soapbox Mal. Like, I'm here for this. Anytime you want to get on a soapbox. Yeah, I'm into this. Okay. And I think that's such a great, you know, that's what we would tell if we were sitting down with you at a coffee shop as a friend, you know, just chatting. It would be like, hey, no matter what your plan is as far as medication, definitely look into getting some supports documented at school. It's such a huge part of an ADHD kid's day and their life, right. They're spending a lot of hours there. And on that note, you know, medication may need to be given during school. Like, we talked about them getting a booster in the early afternoon or late afternoon. So that would, probably this is so obvious, but you need to make sure to go through the appropriate channels. Give that to your child's nurse, not sending it in your child's backpack and crossing their fingers that they're going to have that with them. And another logistical thing that comes up a lot is what if my child can't swallow a pill? And this is something that's actually really common, right. Sensory issues, all the things. And they may just not have learned that skill yet. So, I'm a speech language pathologist, and that's something that we actually work on is swallowing support. And so there's a couple different strategies I want to offer you. So one is you can talk to your provider if your child cannot swallow a pill. There are some formulations that you can pop open a capsule and then just mix the powder in with applesauce or yogurt or whatever that might be. That's not the case for every med, so definitely ask that question. Even if you're not sure if your child will be able to swallow the pill, just clarify so you kind of have a plan because day one is not the time to like figure out that it's not going to work and I have 30 days of meds that you can't use, so definitely ask about that. But also, you know, one strategy is to put a pill into more of a solid. And we like to do kind of like a graduated exposure. So you might put it in a little bite of yogurt. So if I was working with a child in therapy, I would have them swallow a bite of yogurt with no pill and then show them like, we're going to stick this little pill in here and I want you to do the exact same thing you just did and have them swallow with yogurt, applesauce, pudding, maybe pudding, because that's so motivating like nice chocolate pudding first thing in the morning. That'll get them to eat the breakfast. We solved two problems there. But also you can practice swallowing very small things, right. So, I don't know what else you guys would do with that.

Mallory: My supervisor on internship had her whole little pill swallowing kit that she would bring into therapy sessions and help kids learn how to swallow pills. And nerds, they're so small and your kid probably loves them. Start with something so small as practicing swallowing a nerd. She had many M&M's. She had full sized M&M's. You know, get your

child comfortable with the practice of swallowing something without chewing it first and start small. Nerds small. Ice, nugget ice small. And sometimes with just a little bit of practice, it can really help them grow that confidence that they need to swallow the pill.

Lori: Another thing a lot of parents, have questions about and are given kind of advice a lot of times for their pediatrician is to like take medication breaks on weekends, vacations, summers. So a lot of parents are like, should my child be taking it every day? Should we take, be taking these breaks? I do think that it's almost over recommended. I don't know what you guys think, but I feel like I hear that a lot from doctors like to take those breaks. I will say again, like we specialize in ADHD and we work with a lot of families. ADHD is a, it doesn't go away on the weekends. You know, like it doesn't go away in your child's sports practices and their games on Saturday morning and soccer. It doesn't go away on vacations. And so, you know, a lot of times it's hard to take those breaks. And I think kids really do need that executive functioning support every day to be the best versions of themselves and to really be able to regulate and you're, it's really essential to your family to function well as a family. So you should not feel bad about that. There are reasons why a doctor might recommend that. So if your child is not growing or they're, you know, falling off the growth chart, they might recommend doing something like that. I would just, if your doctor is recommending that, I would talk with them about like, why they're recommending that? Is there a kind of like a health reason for that? And you know, kind of follow that decision after, after some discussion. But if there isn't like a good reason for that, I would try and talk with your doctor about like how that affects your home life and how it affects things on the weekends and things like that.

Mallory: And I would say if you're, if you're considering the medication breaks and you haven't talked about that with the prescribing provider, make sure you, your child is taking a medication that it would be okay to take a break from on the weekends over the summer.

Lori: Yeah, exactly. So you would not be wanting to do that with a non stimulant medication. That's like building up in their system. That's not going to be a good decision.

Katie: Yeah, but I like to think of it like if my child needs glasses to read and the majority of time that he reads is at school, but I would still want him to have glasses all the other times, like while we're shopping at Ikea or while we're driving in the car and he's looking at signs. So the same idea of, I think parents many times think that, oh, they mostly just need

executive functioning support at school. But to your point, Lori, everything we do requires executive functioning. Playing with our friends, keeping our stuff together while we play a competitive game, being able to transition to help with chores. Like these are all things where meds can really be helpful. So yeah, it's, it's something that anytime we've talked about it, we get really, really strong opinions from people in our community and for the most part saying, no, no med breaks ever. Why would you recommend that? But the truth is it is going to be unique to your child. So just a conversation to have.

Lori: And I feel like when I hear from parents about, like when they talk to me about the amazing impact it's had on their kids, it's, I mean, school is a big part of that for sure, but I feel like a lot of times it's the emotion regulation at home. It's that they can, they're now getting invited on play dates, and they now have close friends because they're not, like, reacting in this, like, you know, impulsive way where they're hitting other kids, you know, again, a lot of it is social, a lot of it is emotional. So it's not just school when you talk to parents about the positive impact.

Katie: Yeah. So for our last section today, let's talk a little bit about how parents can bring our children into these types of conversations. So a big question is, how can I explain to my child why they're taking medication? And I get this, right. We don't want to say, oh, you need this medication, because there's just something so terribly wrong with you, right. So one way to frame it is that the medication can help with doing things that are hard. And I do this all the time when I see kids for speech and language testing where they might say, like, why do we have to do this eval? And they're kind of asking their parent. Usually they don't ask me directly, but I'll say, you know, my goal today is to make things easier for you at school. Like, wouldn't it be awesome if we could set up some strategies to make writing easier for you and less boring? And they're like, yes. So when we can frame it around, our goal is to just make life a little bit easier. And I think these are conversations, as we've talked about many times, that we are having constantly with our families. Ideally, you're talking about things that are hard for you, things that you're working on, things that everyone is working on. And so just framing it as this is just another tool that can help you. Definitely I think as kids get older, more awareness and us encouraging that awareness of how does it feel? Is it helping you? Is it making something harder? Is it making something easier? How does it feel in your body? Do you still feel like yourself? And kind of encouraging that meta awareness? I've talked about this a lot on the podcast, but I struggle with this. Like, how am I feeling

today? And I'm always like, great, I feel good, but I'm generally a little dehydrated. Maybe I have a little bit of a headache, maybe my toe hurts, I don't know. But I'm not even noticing that. I'm just not a somatic person or however you would say. So it takes a lot for me to become aware of how something is impacting my body, and I think that's something we can teach our kids starting with this conversation. How does that feel when you take your meds? How did it feel when you didn't take your meds? And helping invite them in can really help them to just feel like they have a voice in the process.

Mallory: And inviting them in and giving them a voice is important when we're also thinking about sometimes parents are DMing us and saying they're getting pushback from their child, their child doesn't want to take the medication. And I'd say generally a lot of times this is stemming from just unknowns. When we kind of leave our kids in the dark about truly what the medication is for and what the side effects might be and how it's going to help them. Yeah. Like with all those unknowns, I don't want to take something every morning either, especially if it's hard for me to swallow a pill or it tastes yucky, I don't want to do that. So bringing your kid into the conversation, educating them about how this is helping them, like this is not just a random decision I made is for you to take this pill every morning. Like, this is really why we think this might help you. And of course, as your kids get older, they're going to be providing more input about it and we should be open to more input about it. And I think that I like to pose it a lot to kids as it's kind of an experiment. We're trying to see what works best for your brain. And there is a chance that this one isn't the one that's going to work best for you, but we have to try it to find out. And again, reminding them and keeping in mind that medication is just one tool that we have when it comes to supporting our kids with ADHD. So medication is not the end all, be all. There's lots of other stuff we're doing, but a lot of times the medication helps our kids access those other supports that we're offering to them too. And so we know that some of you might be getting pushback. That's not uncommon. Kids are worried that they're not going to be funny anymore, that they're going to lose their spark and their personality and it's going to change them. And so having those conversations, opening the door for those conversations with your kids about that, we don't want that to be happening. And if that's happening, it's not the right medication.

Lori: Yeah. And I, but I will say, like, we do get, we also get a lot of emails from families that are saying, like, this medication is working really well in a lot of different areas, but my child just doesn't want to take it. And I would also say to parents like you, you are making the

best decisions for your family. Like, there are going to be things that your child doesn't want to do. Like they might have diabetes, and they don't want to take medication for that.

Mallory: They don't want to do a shot.

Lori: Yeah, they don't want to take a shot.

Mallory: They don't want a blood test every day, a finger prick. Yeah.

Lori: So I think a lot of times we, we want to take those, we do want to listen to side effects that they're having, and we want to talk with a doctor. But ultimately, like, you are the one making those medical decisions for your child. And sometimes I see kids who are really successful and doing very well, and the parents are like, well, they don't want to take it, so they take them off of it and then things are really bad again, right. Just encouraging you that you are the parent and you are the one making those decisions. And sometimes you have to make hard decisions that they might not really want to do, but we know are best for them.

Mallory: I was having this conversation with my kids just last night, not about medication, but about video games. And they're mad that they're not allowed to play video games on school days. And they don't understand why I'm not willing to compromise on this. And I just told them, sometimes parents have to make hard decisions that we know is best for our family, even when kids don't quite understand it. And that's just the truth of the matter. We do, you know, we are making these decisions all day, even if our kids don't understand it, even if they don't like it. That doesn't mean we don't bring them into the conversation, shut them out. But at the end of the day, sometimes we are having to make those decisions because we're adults and we have the fully developed frontal lobe, and we have to make those hard decisions for our family, because that's our job as parents.

Lori: Exactly. And if you are struggling with the behaviors or pushback or things like that, we have our online course Creating Calm, again to support you and you can check that out in the show notes. But as we wrap up today, we want to go back to the reason we started the series. Medication decisions are very personal and individualized. There's not one right answer, but we want to encourage you to ask questions with your child's provider and bring up your concerns. And at the end of the we want you to have accurate information about how to support your family. And as always, we are here to support you.