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ADHD and Girls

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When it comes to ADHD, girls are different than boys. One estimate is that between 3 -5% of all children have some form of ADHD. Experts have thought that ADHD occurs in three times as many boys as girls. Recently, however, more girls with ADHD are being identified as specific research is done on the types of ADHD and how they show up in women and girls.

ADHD can express as inattentive type, hyperactive/impulsive type, or a combination of inattentive and hyperactive.

Hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD is characterized by an inability to sit still when sitting still is required, a tendency to blurt out in class, and poor impulse control that hurts relationships at school and home. This type is simply impossible to overlook.

Hyperactive and combination types of ADHD seem to be more frequent in boys. These children often disrupt class or respond impulsively to correction, which leads to referrals to professionals. The few girls who have been diagnosed with ADHD are more likely to have this type.

Inattentive type symptoms can however be seen in both boys and girls. These children may seem unusually distracted, untidy, or late with assignments. They frequently are accused of not listening. While these behaviors may cause frustration and tension for the child they usually don't disrupt class or prompt parent-teacher conferences.

Boys make all the noise

In girls, the disorganization and distraction results in lack of activity--they are too confused to get things started. They tend to be daydreamers. This is in stark contrast to the boys.

Their distractibility is expressed as impulsivity--a flurry of activity. Both genders have trouble learning the nuances of social interactions but too often girls end up shy and withdrawn. They don't like the negative reactions they get when they don't clue in to the nuances. Boys are more likely to proceed with social behavior that is considered inappropriate. While they are bewildered when they get negative reactions, they continue.

A girl's environment is more likely to be disorganized -- their locker, their bedroom, even their handwriting is a mess. Both genders have problems in this area. But put simply, girls are expected to be the organizers for themselves and others. Males on the other hand are more likely to get this done for them, when they can't do it on their own.

As these girls hit the teen years, the increased organizational demands of secondary school can become very difficult. They may become tired and disheartened by poor school performance. The girls with hyperactivity may throw themselves into social relationships to compensate. They may be described as "boy-crazy" or "party girls". Girls with ADHD may begin to show more risky sexual and other behaviors. They may use drugs or alcohol both due to increasing impulsivity and to self-medicate. Shoplifting, teen pregnancy, and eating disorders are also found more often in females with ADHD.

The differences in actual environmental disorganization are clearly due to social factors but no one knows for certain why there is such a large difference in hyperactive behavior between the two genders. It could be that girls have more pressure to conform. Coarse, loud social behavior in a boy may be tolerated but, a girl may be more pressured into silence. Likewise for girls, the impulsive actions may get a more negative reaction from adults and peers alike. In fact, it has been found that girls with ADHD (those who do express the hyperactive qualities) have more negative social consequences than boys. This is true even though the boys have more hyperactivity. No physical differences have been identified.

Girls with Inattentive ADHD are much more likely to be overlooked. Because a girl doesn't tear up the classroom, her problem does not create a problem to be solved for the adults in her life. Her inability to concentrate and execute goals is likely to be overlooked.

Usually a girl with ADHD has fewer learning problems in the early years, than her male counterparts. Boys often get diagnosed through evaluation of learning problems. Girls with ADHD, especially those with high intelligence, may actually be good students and/or well-behaved.

The girls who do have low academic performance may not be as big a concern to their parents. Parents may worry more about their boy's future. The girls' quiet, people pleasing behavior may be considered desirable, when it would be viewed as wimpy in a boy.

When girls with ADD do not conform to social roles, it is often described in gender-specific terms, rather than as a medical problem. They are labeled tomboys or spacey as girls, and boy-crazy or party girls, as teens. Again, girls meet more social pressure to conform, rather than recognition and treatment of a disease.

The symptoms of ADHD in girls often overlap with the symptoms of depression. In both problems there are low energy levels, disorganization, social withdrawal, and trouble concentrating. Even more confusing, the unrecognized ADHD can lead to major coping problems, which in turn lead to actual depression on top of the ADHD. This most often occurs at adolescence (although it can happen earlier).

Doctors tend to zoom in on the diagnosis of depression, which is more common in females and especially female adolescents. They think of ADHD as a "boy' problem".

Below is a brief questionnaire that can be used as an initial screening device when assessing a girl for (ADHD). (Other, more extensive questionnaires for girls are available - see resources listed below.)

- I have trouble remembering and following my teachers' directions.
- I lose track of things like my house key or my jacket.
- I often forget to bring things to school that I need (lunch money, permission slips).
- I have difficulty completing school projects and writing assignments.
- At home, I get in a lot of arguments and upsets.
- Sometimes it feels like I am not good at anything.
- I have trouble being on time.
- It's hard for me to concentrate when other things are going on around me.
- My parents and teachers tell me I need to try harder.
- Other kids tease me about being spacey.
- I feel different from most other girls.
- My room at home is usually very messy.
- I talk a lot, even in class when I'm supposed to be quiet.

While children who do not have ADHD can occasionally demonstrate some of these behaviors, children with ADHD exhibit them chronically and across multiple settings, impairing the child's ability to function academically or socially on a daily basis.

Resources for girls with AD/HD:

More information about girls with ADHD, including separate age-appropriate checklists from preschool through high school can be found in [Understanding Girls with ADHD](#) by Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D., Ellen Littman, Ph.D. and Patricia Quinn, M.D.