

Explaining ADHD to Kids

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Explaining ADHD to anyone is complicated, never mind a young child! For starters, “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder:”

- Is not actually a deficit in attention,
- Does not always involve hyperactivity, and
- Does not lead to disorder in every environment



Phew!

ADHD may be better explained as a pattern of difficulties with self-regulation. These may include difficulties with regulating attention (as opposed to a lack of attention), emotions, and behavior, which can cause significant roadblocks in certain environments – most notably, school.

However, we are also learning that the ADHD brain is characterized by a pattern of strengths and superpowers, too. These include hyperfocus, creativity, memory, passion, enthusiasm, humor, and quick-wittedness, to name a few.

When we sit down to talk to a child about ADHD, it’s critical that we present the whole picture.

The way we talk about ADHD now will influence how a child sees themselves for the rest of their lives.

It’s too simplistic – and just not accurate – to say that ADHD means you have trouble with attention. Rather, ADHD is a pattern of strengths and challenges that makes some environments easy to navigate, and others much more challenging.

So how do we explain ADHD in a way that's easy for the child to understand, and accurately represents their amazing brain?

An Empowering Diagnosis

To help explain a diagnosis to children in a positive and empowering way, I've found the following sentence frame helpful:

We learned that your brain is built in a way that makes **(strengths)** come easily and **(challenges)** much more difficult.

It turns out - you're not alone! This pattern happens a lot, and we call it **(ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Anxiety, etc.)**

Now that we know, our job is to maximize your amazing strengths and find ways to build those trickier skills so that the hard part gets easier.

Let's make a plan!



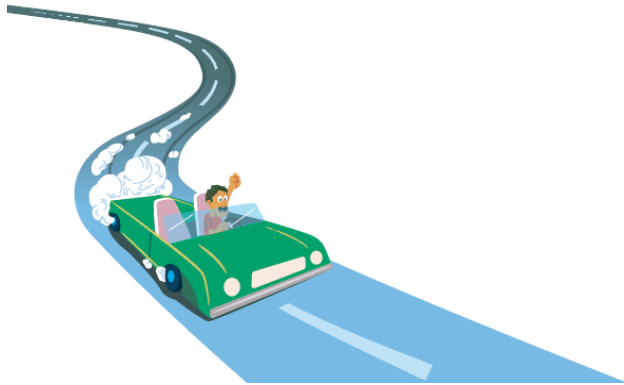
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The goal of presenting a diagnosis in this way is to help the child:

- **Understand** their experience in school, at home, and in the community
- **Engage** in their intervention plan
- **Advocate** for what they need

Let's see what this might look like for ADHD.

Identifying ADHD Strengths



As the first piece of the diagnosis, we talk about the strengths we discovered throughout testing. Using the “brain-building” metaphor that I tend to reference most, this may sound like:

*“We learned that your brain is built in a way that makes a lot of things come easily! These are like the super-fast **highways** in your brain.”*

While every child will have a different list, here are a few common strengths, or “highways,” that may be true for ADHD brains::

- Coming up with creative ideas for writing or story-telling
- Remembering stories and experiences
- Doing better as things get harder
- Making people laugh
- Taking in a lot of information at once
- Processing information very quickly
- Jumping into new experiences
- Focusing intensely on things you enjoy

It is important to note that these highways are not in spite of ADHD – they are the **benefits** of ADHD!

Naming ADHD Challenges



The next piece is to name the challenges that are coming up.

We’ve just made a list of how awesome the child is – but their experience is not always that awesome. Naming challenges validates a child’s experience in a world that may not be supporting them in the way that they need. For me, this sounds like:

*"We also learned that some things can be tricky. These are your **construction zones**, or the skills your brain is working to build."*

Again, while every child will have a slightly different list, here are a few common "construction zones" that may be true for an ADHD brain:

- Waiting to share your awesome ideas
- Writing your ideas down on paper
- Staying focused on boring or easy things
- Getting started on your work
- Keeping track of all the steps
- Catching your errors
- Keeping things organized
- Moving or fidgeting without disrupting others

Now, let's put these together!

Defining ADHD for Your Child

A diagnosis is simply a way of bringing the highways and construction zones together. For me, this sounds like:

"It turns out, many people have highways and construction zones just like yours. You're not alone! When we see this pattern, we call it ADHD."

By defining ADHD by the child's experience – and not the DSM definition – it is easier for the child to understand and empowers them to be an active participant in their intervention plan.

Here are a few "definitions" of ADHD I've used for kids in my practice.

- ADHD means your brain is built in a way that makes memory and creativity easy, but writing and waiting your turn more difficult.



- ADHD means your brain is noticing a lot of things at once, but it may be tricky to focus in on the one thing your teacher is asking.
- ADHD means your brain enjoys things that are new and exciting, but it may be harder to learn things you have to repeat a lot, like math facts.
- ADHD means your brain is great at organizing people, but struggles to organize things.

You're Not Alone!

I find it helpful to show kids examples of others who share their profile and have been successful. This includes actors, artists, entrepreneurs, and other children.

Everyone is a little different, so this is a great opportunity to emphasize that the way ADHD shows up for them may be different than how it shows up for other kids in their class, even though it has the same name.

Here are a few resources that may resonate with your child. Click the links below or scan the QR code for the [complete list](#).

- [My Favorite Things About Having ADHD](#)
- [ADHD Comics](#)
- [Famous People with Learning Differences](#)
- [Through Your Child's Eyes](#)



Let's Make a Plan!

Finally, the child and I come up with a list of tools and strategies that will be helpful for maximizing their strengths and building new skills.

For example:

- You will be working with the Learning Specialist twice a week to learn strategies for getting those great ideas down on paper.



- Let's brainstorm some helpful ways for you to move and fidget during class to keep your brain engaged.
- You'll be getting some extra time on tests to go back and check for little errors before turning it in.
- Your parents will help you make a checklist for cleaning your room so it's easier to get through it.
- Check out this circus class to build your performance and improv skills!

Now, the child is actively engaged in their intervention plan because **they know exactly why** it's happening.

We're also giving the child **language to advocate** for what they need from their teachers and parents to be their best selves – a skill they can use now and for the rest of their lives.



I hope this has been helpful to you and your ADHD child! For more helpful articles like this, please visit www.ExplainingBrains.com/Parents.