

The Importance of Giving Your Child a Key to Their ADHD Mind

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I never dreamed that attending Harvard would be part of my life, but in two months, I start a Master's degree in Education-Human Development at Harvard University.

Let me tell you why my admission to Harvard is a knockout surprise. The simple answer for anyone with a short attention span reading this is, "I got diagnosed with ADHD and learning disorders in reading, writing, and math shortly before my 20th birthday." Read on to learn how my neurodiversity diagnosis changed my life.

I was a curious child who loved to learn anything and everything. Being a good student was extremely important to me, but there was a problem. I was not a good student. I was a failure as a student, with my teachers telling me I was lazy, unfocused, did not try hard enough, and did not take school seriously. I did take my schoolwork seriously, but no one believed me. They did not see how hard I tried to be a good student.

I struggled to sit and study for more than 15 minutes at a time. I zoned out, forgot what I had just learned, or had my head in the clouds, thinking of imaginary places and people. Doodles filled my homework papers with no blank spaces anywhere on the page. I struggled even more in high school because my future was approaching--university, career, life. I was barely graduating, and I experienced significant stress. I had mental health challenges as well as

I spent nights crying, wondering, "What is wrong with me?" I managed to graduate from high school and was accepted to Capilano University in Vancouver, Canada. It is a great university, and I graduated with a bachelor's degree! But even in university, I struggled.

For example, I started to take an online timed quiz and zoned out for 30 minutes. The next thing I knew, the quiz was over, and I failed. I repeatedly left class because sitting for a long time made me feel like I was crawling inside my skin. I knew other students didn't need to do this and continued to wonder, "Why am I like this?"

Growing up, I felt different and misunderstood. I found it hard to make friends and fit in. There was a huge piece of me that I didn't understand. Why am I called "lazy" when I try so hard? I didn't know I was trying to fit into a world not made for my brain. I masked my struggles and wasted my energy trying to replicate the behaviors of others.

I wanted so desperately to fit in.

I clearly remember the day I learned about ADHD. It was on a Tuesday afternoon in my university psychology class. My professor entered the classroom, turned on the projector, and began teaching the week's lesson on "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder." As she talked, I thought she was speaking directly to me. Everything she said resonated with me.

I went home that day thinking I might have ADHD and that it could explain much of my life. After discussing my newfound belief with my parents, I was tested. While I waited for the psychoeducational assessment results, I finally hoped to have the answer to my struggles; and I did!

It has been two years since my diagnosis, and my life could not be more different. My failing grades became A's and B's. I started an organization, The Abstract Genius, to support neurodiverse students. I have spoken at conferences and podcasts, achieved awards, and been accepted into graduate school.

In a million years, I would never think that I, the girl who barely graduated high school, would be where I am today. My diagnosis empowered me to fight for the opportunities I deserve and get the support I need.

I wish I could comfort the little child who cried herself to sleep over things that were not her fault. Had I been diagnosed earlier, I would have had a much easier time getting to where I am today.

I have heard several reasons from educators and parents about why they don't want a child to be diagnosed with ADHD, but, at the core, they don't want something to be "wrong" with the child. They incorrectly believe, "Once a child is diagnosed; she has a damning label for life."

I don't believe a neurodiverse label is negative. "ADHD" is just a word that explains a part of you. If we consider what is most important for the child, we will realize that understanding who they are is the prime consideration.

I know that labels, such as ADHD, create prejudices and assumptions that affect how an educator, an employer or another person views your child. The fear of prejudices and stigma often keeps parents from seeking a diagnosis. They only see the negatives of a diagnosis, not the positives. If a child does not know she has a differently wired brain, her mental health and self-esteem will suffer.

With a diagnosis and understanding, the child has the potential to be so much more. Do not deny them this opportunity because of your fears. Provide them with the answers and support they need to be the best version of themselves.

The sooner children learn what makes them unique and how to advocate for themselves, the easier it will be for them to succeed. There is nothing "wrong" with a child with ADHD. They are different, but not less.

No one will ever understand a child's inner turmoil when they are different but lack the tools to understand themselves and get the support they need.

Living in a world not built for your mind is not easy. An early diagnosis may not eliminate all the struggles your child will face. Still, it will give them the support they need to navigate adversity. Many challenges for people with ADHD result from a society and education system not open to neurodiversity. If the world committed to accommodating neurodiverse individuals, their struggles in life would be significantly diminished.

Ultimately, each person gets to choose when and how they share their ADHD diagnosis; but getting an early diagnosis and giving a child the gift of a key to their mind is what every child deserves.