Don’t Let ADHD Crush Children’s Self-Esteem

BY MICHAEL S. JELLINNEK, M.D.

Children with low self-esteem suffer from the pain of being themselves. They learn to expect failure rather than to succeed. They recoil from the idea of trying new things—even things they might be terrified of, like, sports, or music, or dance—because they figure the odds of being naturally talented at something, or being able to patiently develop the skills to be a winner, are pretty low.

When we look at statistics on how children with ADHD fare down the line, in terms of lower-than-average educational achievement, employment, and marriage stability, one wonders how much is the disorder itself holding people back, versus how the disorder made them feel about themselves and their capabilities from earliest childhood.

The way to approach this important issue is with parents and teachers is to emphasize that in treating ADHD, we should do our damnedest to respect the child, 24 hours a day. Beyond medication and behavior modification, we need a new sensitivity to preserving and enhancing self-esteem.

My guidelines begin with these suggestions:

▶ Set reasonable expectations for all children, but especially children with ADHD. If you don’t set the bar too high and setting the stage for a disappointment tomorrow.

▶ Consider other factors. When evaluating the performance of a child with ADHD, take other factors into account: comorbidities, problems in the family, and chronic illness. See whether improvements in those other areas might boost their accomplishments.

▶ Focus on building strengths rather than remediating weaknesses whenever possible. An extra 2-3 hours of math tutoring is not likely to make a child with ADHD a great success at math. The same 2-3 hours after school honing a skill, whether it’s a computer game or karate or ice hockey, might give the child an avenue in which to excel and provide a genuine source of pride. Keep in mind that in the long term, most people choose a career based on a strength, not a weakness they’ve tried to overcome.

▶ Think about summer as a time to take the pressure off and cultivate successes. Ask families to consider an engeretic camp, one with activities suited to the individual child, rather than endless hours of academic skills building.

▶ Encourage play! Remind families that kids with ADHD crave moments of senseless fun with their parents. Swimming lessons are important, but so is splashing in the pool. I like to brainstorm with families about ideas for rituals in which there is no lesson to be learned or skill to be practiced, like watching a favorite (noneducational) television show each week. Even better is to ask the child to pick an activity he or she does well—like playing computer games—and using “fun” time to teach parents how to play.

While working with these children, don’t forget to ask what’s great about the kid?

DR. JELLINNEK is chief of child psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital and professor of psychiatry and of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, Boston.