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Adolescents with ADD

Natural Born Leaders

by Louise Levin

As parents of children with ADD we know our kids have the potential to become future leaders of the 21st Century. But that birthright has been diminished by the dominant culture, which only sees their “disorder.” These natural born leaders deserve to have their potential recognized and honed. So what have we done as parents to facilitate that prospect?

As a generation, we boomer parents have made parenting both an art form and a competitive sport. We have done more than take care of our kids; we have provided classes, tutors, camps and coaches to give them the edge in school, sports and life. We have monitored their progress, their whereabouts, their schedules. We have spent our lives walking in front of our kids and falling down for them. Nowhere is this truer than with parents of ADD children.

Parents of ADD kids want to protect their children from the slings and arrows of daily life by managing and organizing their every moment. As a mother of 22 year old twins with ADD, with Masters Degrees in

Education and Psychology, I know all too well the struggle between micro-managing my children’s lives and getting out of the way so they will come up with their own solutions.

For years I provided all that was necessary and more. But ultimately it occurred to me that if I wanted to prepare my adolescents to lead their own lives, I needed to stop looking at their disabilities and see their potential. I needed to transition them into the realization that they had to take ownership of their ADD,

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and their lives. If I wanted to protect them successfully, I needed to hand down the mantle and imbue them with the confidence to leave home knowing they could thrive on their own.

The urgency to accomplish this was triggered by the laws preventing colleges and universities from providing me any information about my children once they turned 18 without their express permission. I would be unable to find out how they were doing academically, psychologically, or financially. And if they were injured, got overwhelmed or crashed and burned I would not be there to notice or to fix it.

It was then that I realized

that in my eagerness to love, protect and provide for my ADD children, I may have set them up for failure. If parents want to ensure their ADD children’s success and foster their leadership potential, they need to equip them with the skills and tools to manage their own lives well before they leave home.

Teens with ADD need to know what their ADD looks and feels like. They deserve to understand how they are wired and how they impact others and others impact them, so that when—not if—challenges arise, they have the tools to be solution-rather than problem-focused around those challenges. They need the disorder normalized and de-mystified in order to become their own advocates and to internalize the resources and tools that will help them realize their greatest potential.

One of the greatest gifts we can bequeath to our ADD children is to provide them with the ability to stop their negative conversation around their disability and to help them develop the skills to manage their own particular pathologies.

These skills won’t come naturally nor will learning them happen overnight. Kids with ADD have trouble generalizing. They are situation specific which is why they continue to respond inappropriately to stress in situations they have encountered

again and again.

But practice does make perfect. So before our children leave the protective shelter of home and zealous parenting, we need to help them practice basic techniques and instill competencies that will enable them to:

1. Feel comfortable conversing about their disability so that they have no embarrassment or shame about it and so they don’t feel uninformed and helpless.

2. Own their own particular “brand” of ADD so that they can identify their warning signs for their cycles and symptoms.

3. Advocate for themselves in school, with medical professionals, peers and employers.

4. Locate and choose a coach who will help them keep track of their schedules, time, workload and commitments so that they can manage their lives.

5. Have a sense of humor about ADD, the challenges of the disorder and their own particular foibles.

Doing everything for your children may make you feel like a successful parent but it may not let your child be a successful person.

Louise Levin is the director of a leadership program for students with ADD (www.addstudentleadership.org).