

ADHD Parenting

TEENS WITH ADHD

Grow Up Already! Why It Takes So Long to Mature

The school-to-work transition can take longer for young adults with ADHD, who don't mature at the same pace as their peers. Here's how parents can nudge without pushing.



| By [Ellen Kingsley](#) | ✓ [Verified](#) | Updated on April 1, 2024

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The phone is ringing again at the posh day spa where Betsy Patterson ushers in an elegant new client. A customer is calling to schedule an eyebrow wax, but Betsy can't fit her in; the 41-year-old esthetician and masseuse is fully booked for the next week. "Tell her I'm sorry" Betsy asks the receptionist. Then, self-assuredly, she leads the way back to her high-tech facial treatment room.

Watching this confident professional analyze her client's vexing skin problems, it's hard to believe there was ever a time when Betsy *herself* didn't fit in. This irony is not lost on the vibrant, dark-haired beauty who twenty years ago was a divorced, unemployed high school dropout forced to move back home with her parents after her second child was born.

"I didn't develop the patterns of behavior it took to be an adult," Betsy recalls during a brief break between clients. "I'd go out and buy an expensive car and make the first payment, but that was it. My Dad would always have to pay the rest."

The attention deficit disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)) that made Betsy's high school years so miserable made her early adulthood a daily disaster. "My twenties was a period of going from job to job," she says. "I was always getting fired or screwing up."

Some of the screw ups scared her. Once, while employed at a nursing home, she confused two patients' medications. "I had thought I might want to be a nurse," she says. "But I realized then that it was never going to happen." A job in finance ended in a similar disaster. "My boss said to me 'You have thirty days to straighten up.' But I told him, You might as well just go ahead and fire me now because it's not going to get any better." So he did.

[Time Management for Teens: "Scheduling is Power"]

Eventually things *did* get better for Betsy, a transformation she credits in part to having to care for her two young sons. "The one thing I knew how to do well was to be a great mother," she says. "I probably never would have [grown up](#) if I hadn't felt such a responsibility for them."

That sense of responsibility grew even greater when her second son was diagnosed with ADHD. Then in her mid-thirties, Betsy obtained her esthetician's license and sent herself to massage school. Today, she's busily employed, supporting her family, and finally content. "I found something I really love to do that I'm good at,

she says. The part I love most is the daily contact with people.”

A Question of Maturity

Betsy’s story is typical of many [young adults](#) with ADHD. The maturation process is slower for young adults with ADHD and it’s not linear, says [Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D.](#), Director of Chesapeake Psychological Services of Maryland and co-author of [Understanding Girls With ADHD](#). There’s a lot of up and down, back and forth. It’s slow, but that doesn’t mean they’re never going to get there. Sometimes they don’t until they’re 35 or 40 years old, which was the case for Betsy. “I don’t think I really reached adulthood until I was forty” she admits. But Betsy didn’t realize that the reason may be partly neurobiological.

The brain’s frontal lobes, which are involved in ADHD, continue to mature until we reach age 35. In practical terms, this means that people with ADHD can expect some lessening of their symptoms over time. Many will not match the emotional maturity of a 21-year-old until their late 30’s. So while most people graduating from college take time to adjust to adult life, people with ADHD need *more time, more family support, and more professional help*.

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More Time

Parents can’t solve their adult children’s problems, but their actions can hurt or help. Comparing newly graduated young adults with ADHD to higher achieving peers and siblings hurts. Patience helps.

Parents really need to alter their expectations, says Nadeau, who sees dozens of young adults in her practice. Lots of what I’m doing at work is really parent education. Parents are comparing their kids with ADHD to peers who are going to graduate school, doing internships, and getting high-paying jobs. I try to help parents understand that there are some things that people with ADHD are bad at and they always will be. They need support, not criticism.

At the same time, graduates with ADHD need to take more time. Don’t be in such a crazy hurry to settle down, says Nadeau, who advises recent graduates to spend a year or two living far from home on their own. She suggests they take menial jobs to support themselves temporarily before making a commitment to a significant career. They need to develop independent living skills first, says Nadeau, Paying the rent, registering the car, things like that. They can’t transition to self sufficiency *and* a demanding job successfully at the same time. And living far away gets parents out of the rescue mode.

Nadeau tells of one client who took off for Alaska to find herself. “Her parents were furious,” Nadeau recalls. We’re prone to want our kids to be clones of us. But during that time she worked her way up to a marketing job, and within a few years she had worked her way back to an executive job with a high powered marketing firm in her home town.

Sometimes you have to let kids follow their whim, she says.

More Parental Support

Parents can expect their twenty-something kids with ADHD to move back home from time to time, and should not regard it as a disaster. Like Betsy, young adults with ADHD often need to regroup. There's a lot of back and forth, from an apartment situation that doesn't work out with a room mate, back to the parents' home, back to an apartment, back home. You have to be willing to support them during this period but with clear limits. These limits should include:

- Rent: Tell them it's fine to move home, but that after three months they'll have to start paying rent.
- Telephones: They must agree to install their own phone line so the family avoids teenage arguments over using it.
- Belongings: They must be responsible for personal laundry, cleaning, and housework.
- Meals: They are responsible for their own meals, but are welcome to join the family as long as adequate notice is given.
- Expenditures: They must pay all their own bills. The biggest mistake I've seen parents make is paying off their kids' charge cards, says Nadeau. Young adults need to learn to put the brakes on themselves or suffer the consequences.

In short, parents should nudge but not push, support but not coddle. The maturation process for people with ADHD proceeds in fits and starts. It's a process, says Nadeau. You have to help them move toward self sufficiency. It's not going to happen overnight.

More Professional Help

People with ADHD absolutely have more trouble with the school-to-work transition, says Sonya Goodwin-Layton, an ADHD counselor in Louisville, Kentucky. They don't yet have enough self-reliance, self-discipline, ability to pay attention, time management skills, capacity to break down complex tasks, or focus to meet deadlines.

Layton finds the typical patient's need for constant stimulation leads to frequent job changes, which looks bad on a resume. That's one reason it's especially important to choose a career and job with extra care. Indeed, many of the time honored ways of finding employment – Mom is friendly with the boss, or the neighbor down the street owns the company B can be disastrous for people with ADHD, leading to disenchantment, failure, and excessive job hopping.

Career Counselors: Get thee to a career counselor. That's the principal advice of experts working with young adults with ADHD who are first entering the job market. A career counselor with ADHD experience will be adept at matching strengths and weaknesses with ADHD-friendly job situations. Night owls, for instance, may do better in a profession with late shift opportunities, such as hospitality. If hyperactivity is an issue, a career counselor can suggest occupations that don't require sitting at a desk all day.

Skilled counselors also may use tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality assessment tool that helps the counselor recommend careers and job environments based on how a client's personality interacts with their ADHD. For example:

Extroverts with ADHD may falter in a Dilbert style office because they're likely to be distracted frequently by co-

workers. Instead., they might consider field sales where they can put their extroversion to good use.

Intuitive people with ADHD who are bursting with new ideas may excel at first in creative tasks, but may be too distracted by their own thoughts to follow projects to completion. They'll probably need to work in environments with enough structure and supervision to help them stay focused and productive.

Certainly for Betsy, part of finding the right career also meant letting go of the expectations of others. Both of Betsy's parents and siblings were college graduates, and she constantly felt as if she didn't measure up. Her sense of failure was exacerbated by her unsuccessful attempts in fields such as finance and medicine, fields that were in keeping with her family's socioeconomic expectations but had little to do with her own predilections. When Betsy developed the emotional independence that comes with greater maturity, she finally ended up in a situation that was right for *her*.

ADHD Coaches: While the right career choice reduces the risk of failure, ADHD tendencies can still stand in the way of success. That's why experts recommend hiring an ADHD coach to help get through the first critical years on the job.

ADHD coaches are like sports coaches who help players from the sidelines. The coach's job is to challenge, encourage and motivate, says Nancy Ratey, a co-developer of ADHD coaching in the United States. People with ADHD need to re-create elements of the environment that made them successful in the past. Coaches can help them re-create these successes by identifying what helped them succeed."

Coaches usually work by telephone, providing help, concrete instruction, and encouragement up to three times per week. For young adults in their first jobs, a coach can:

- Develop planning and time management systems;
- Devise strategies for staying focused and on task;
- Help divide large, overwhelming tasks into smaller, manageable pieces;
- Foster a more realistic assessment of what can be accomplished in a given time period;
- Role-play to improve a client's social and professional interactions with colleagues, supervisors and others.

Coach Madelyn Griffith-Haynie recalls one ADHD client who felt that co-workers were avoiding him. She noticed right away that his speaking voice was more like a yell. She surmised that when he spoke to co-workers, they would back away so he wouldn't be yelling close up. Indeed, he was so unaware of his effect on people that he'd follow them until they were backed into a corner.

When Griffith-Haynie asked him if he'd ever noticed people backing away, he started to cry. Apparently he thought it was because people didn't like him, when in fact they were only trying to avoid his yelling voice. Griffith-Haynie started by instructing him to whisper when speaking with others up close. After three months of rehearsing by whispering, he learned to speak at the proper volume. Coaching did the trick.

It's all right for parents to help financially with coaching, which can cost between \$40 and \$120 per hour. But when coaching costs are beyond a family's means, parents should never act as their adult child's coach. It's too infantilizing, says Dr. Nadeau. Friends of the family and mature peers can be enlisted to provide some aspects of coaching; for example, reminding, role playing, and walking through tasks step by step.

Some clients ask coaches to prod, remind, motivate and even hound them every day; they need hands-on help

getting up in the morning, getting to work on time, completing tasks, and meeting deadlines. The objective is for the client to repeat appropriate behaviors until they become habit. The overall goal of coaching is to establish a routine, says Sonya Goodwin-Layton, who is also a certified professional coach.

Eventually, most people with ADHD do get there, even though some continue to need help every step of the way. I'm working right now with a 39-year-old who is graduating from college this summer and bursting with pride, says Nadeau. "Now I'm walking him through the job application process.

[The Case for (Working, Maturing) Gap Years]



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