

How to talk to your partner or co-parent about learning differences and ADHD

When you're raising kids with another person, things can get tricky if you have different ideas on the best way to support a child who learns and thinks differently. Use this guide to help navigate important conversations.

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General tips

If you're new to learning and thinking differences, you may want your partner to start looking into the basics, like common signs of ADHD and dyslexia. Or you may be ready to talk about formal steps, like asking for more support at school. No matter where you are in your journey, use these tips to form an active partnership with your co-parent.

1. Choose the right time to talk.

Look for a time to talk when both of you can focus on the conversation and neither of you is in a hurry. If you've set up a time in advance, it's a good idea to ask, "Is this still a good time to talk?" The conversation will go more smoothly if you both feel ready.

2. Keep the focus on your child.

Avoid bringing up your relationship history or other issues that can take the focus away from supporting your child. If either of you go off-topic, you can get things back on track by saying, "We can talk more about that tomorrow. But let's focus on this today."

3. Stay present.

It can be hard not to interrupt if emotions are running high. It can also be hard to resist the urge to start thinking about your next comment while your partner is mid-sentence. Try to pause and consider what you've heard before you start talking again.

4. Show that you're listening.

Make eye contact, nod, and avoid the temptation to check your phone. Reflect on what your co-parent says — even if you don't agree. Repeat it or summarize it in your own words. You can start with something like "Let me see if I understand what you're saying." This can help clear up misunderstandings and keep tension from rising.

5. Talk about the past.

Talk with your partner about your own childhoods. But remember that what worked for you may not work for your child. Discuss how your experiences may affect your thinking. Maybe it's hard for you or your co-parent to trust big systems like health care and education. Learn what's changed since you were a kid, like [mainstreaming special education](#) and [fine-tuning ADHD medication](#).

6. Talk about your own challenges.

You or your partner may be struggling with some of the same things as your child. This can bring up a lot of feelings and can make the conversation even harder. Be sensitive if you bring up challenges that you may also have noticed in your co-parent.

7. Share success stories.

Make it clear that kids and adults can thrive with learning and thinking differences. Look for examples that will resonate with your partner:

- [Actors](#)
- [Musicians](#)
- [Athletes](#)
- [Business leaders](#)
- [Scientists](#)
- [Elected officials](#)



If you don't know why your child is struggling

You may be wondering if your child is showing signs of learning and thinking differences. Maybe you've already started looking into how to [request a free evaluation at school](#). Use these tips to help raise your concerns with your co-parent as you think about next steps, like talking with your child's teacher or pediatrician.

Tips	What you can say
Make an appointment. It might feel strange to give your partner this kind of advance notice, but the extra time can help you both get ready to talk. Suggest a time when each of you can give the conversation your full attention.	"I've noticed some things going on with our child that I'm concerned about. Can we talk after the kids are in bed tonight? Or pick a time to talk tomorrow?"
Start on a positive note. Show how much you appreciate your co-parent's willingness to talk and to work with you to find a solution.	"Thanks for talking with me about our child. It's really been weighing on my mind. But I always feel better when we can think things through together."
Be specific. Give details to help your partner understand your concerns. Share things like samples of your child's schoolwork, notes from the teacher, or behavior patterns you've noticed at home.	"I've noticed that our child has been [acting in a certain way or showing a lot of frustration or other emotion]. This tends to happen when...."
Give your partner time to respond. Ask for input, but don't expect responses right away. You may have been thinking about this for a while, but your co-parent may need time to process new information.	"Thanks for listening. Are you seeing these things, too?" "I know this is a lot to process. We don't need to decide on next steps right now."
Check in again soon. End the conversation by scheduling the next one. Plan to share observations and talk about what you might want to do next.	"I'm really glad we talked." "Let's talk again [next Monday, next weekend, etc]."

Get a [step-by-step guide](#) to noticing patterns in your child's behavior and talking with other people who can help support your child.

Clearing up misconceptions

There are a lot of mistaken beliefs about learning and thinking differences. If your partner is worrying about something that isn't true, you can be ready with the facts.

Facts	Helpful details
Learning and thinking differences are real.	Differences in brain development and function can make it hard to do things like focus, read, and do math. These differences often run in families.
Learning and thinking differences are common.	Millions of people learn and think differently. These challenges aren't always easy to spot and may go unnoticed at school and at work.
People who learn and think differently are as smart as other people. They can even be gifted.	People who are neurodivergent may struggle if they aren't getting the right support. That can lead others to wrongly assume they aren't smart.
Kids who learn and think differently aren't "just being lazy."	Kids with differences like ADHD and dyslexia are often trying as hard as they can. They need the right kind of support to thrive.
Kids don't grow out of learning and thinking differently.	These challenges are lifelong. But the sooner kids get the support they need, the sooner they start to make progress.
Kids who receive special education services don't have to be in a separate classroom.	According to federal data , three-fourths of kids who receive special education for learning disabilities spend 80% or more of the day in general education classrooms.
People with learning and thinking differences can do well in school and at work.	With the right support, people who learn and think differently can thrive in any field.

Want to clear up misconceptions about specific topics? Use these resources about [ADHD](#), [dyslexia](#), [dyscalculia](#), and [special education](#).

If you disagree

Whether you're married or divorced, have been co-parenting for a while, or are just starting a new relationship, at some point you're going to disagree. Use these tips to help get through it.

Tips	What you can say
<p>Try to find some common ground. Maybe you strongly believe the opposite of what your co-parent is saying. But agreeing even on something small can help you both feel like you're moving toward a solution.</p>	<p>"I know you worry that our child's [teachers, coaches, grandparents, etc.] are being [too soft, too harsh, etc.]. I agree with you that we should talk with them about our child's challenges."</p>
<p>Try not to assign blame. Avoid statements like "You always do this!" Making your partner feel defensive can shut down the conversation and halt whatever progress you two were making.</p>	<p>"I'm not saying you caused this problem. I just want us to work together to help our child."</p>
<p>Give up the need to be right. Remind yourself and your co-parent that the goal is to support your child.</p>	<p>"It doesn't matter who's right or wrong. What matters is we're working together to meet our child's needs."</p>
<p>Take a time-out if you need it. The discussion may reach a point where it's too heated to continue. Take a break and, if needed, think about bringing in a third person, like a faith leader or a mutual friend.</p>	<p>"Let's stop for now, and set a time to speak again in the next day or two."</p>

Couples: Listen to an [Understood podcast](#) on how to stay connected as a couple when you're raising kids who learn and think differently.

Former couples: Get [tips to help work with your ex](#) when your child is struggling.

More resources

Ready to learn more about learning differences and ADHD? Explore these resources from [Understood.org](https://www.understood.org), a free, nonprofit resource vetted by experts and not associated with any pharmaceutical companies.

- [Signs and symptoms](#)
- [Through My Eyes](#)
 - Simulations that show what it feels like to have learning differences and ADHD
 - Discussion guides to help you talk with your child, pediatrician, and teachers
 - Interactive resources for kids
- Podcasts for parents:
 - [In It](#) focuses on the joys and frustrations of raising kids who learn and think differently
 - [The Opportunity Gap](#) tailors advice for parents of kids of color
 - [Parenting Behavior with Dr. Andy Kahn](#) offers bite-size tips for all kinds of parenting challenges
 - [Understood Explains: Evaluations for Special Education](#)
 - [Understood Explains: Individualized Education Programs \(IEPs\)](#)