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The boy from hell

In the first of a series of articles, **Alison Thompson** provides a candid account of life with her child with **ADHD**



As a new parent, you map out your child's life. You look forward to his first steps, his first word and his first tooth. You picture him on his first day at school, but you don't visualise him being excluded from that school. You don't anticipate him getting so angry that he hurts people. And you certainly don't imagine having to take him to your local police station to face assault charges, especially when your child is just ten years old.

Yet for me, and for thousands of other parents, this kind of extraordinary scenario is just part of our very ordinary lives because we are parenting children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

With ADHD, the part of the brain that manages functions like concentration, impulsiveness, memory, focus and distraction doesn't get enough stimulation, so these functions are impaired. No-one knows exactly what

causes ADHD but it is thought to be mostly genetic – and not due to too much sugar or TV, or bad parenting.

ADHD affects around five per cent of children and, while some grow out of it – or more likely learn techniques to help them deal with it – it is believed that around 60 per cent still have difficulties in adulthood. People with ADHD have difficulty focusing on tasks and can't filter out the background noise of everyday life; they are forgetful, badly organised and find it hard to concentrate. They can be hyperactive and react in extreme ways to simple things. They can also be impulsive – doing before thinking – because the part of the brain that manages the stop/go button doesn't react to situations quickly enough.

The implications of these common ADHD traits are frightening. Roughly 50 per cent of children with ADHD will be excluded from school at some point – 11 per cent more than once – and 80 per cent of kids with ADHD have academic

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problems. People with ADHD have a much higher risk of substance abuse, depression and suicide than the rest of society. It is believed that 30 per cent of adult males in prison have a childhood history of ADHD, mostly undiagnosed and untreated.

Daniel's story

My son Daniel was diagnosed with ADHD when he was six, but it was obvious long before this that he had a problem. As a baby, he never slept and as a toddler, he was the child who was constantly on the go, bouncing around the house like a Duracell bunny, knocking down the other children's Lego towers at nursery and getting into fights.

He was a charming, funny, lovable little boy, obsessed with his purple teddy bear and watching Only Fools and Horses on TV; for weeks he kept telling people to “Shut up, you tart”, much to my horror. Yet he had a darker side too. He was easily distracted; I’d often have to prompt him to finish his meals, or I’d find him halfway through getting dressed, one leg in his trousers and the other out, because something had caught his attention. He found it difficult to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes and was impatient to the extreme. And when he got angry or frustrated, he would turn into a pint-sized Incredible Hulk, and woe betide anyone who got in his way. My shins were constantly covered in bruises where he’d lashed out at me. Our home was full of broken toys – victims of his rage.

Daniel struggled in school too. He was a bright boy but he couldn’t sit still in class, couldn’t concentrate on the work, couldn’t resist back-chatting the teacher or pointing out when he thought she was wrong. The tantrums escalated both at home and at school and eventually the school permanently excluded him, saying that this was the only way he could get the help he so obviously needed.

It turned out that the school had acted illegally. I did my research and discovered that there was a lot of support available, but the school had chosen not to explore it – they just washed their hands of Daniel. At that point, I realised I had to be my son’s number one supporter, because if I wasn’t there looking out for him, no-one else was going to do it.

The exclusion did have some positive results, though. Daniel was assessed and diagnosed with ADHD. He was eventually given medication – yes, the dreaded Ritalin – which mostly made a huge difference to his behaviour. He got some one-to-one help and went

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back into mainstream education, in a small village school that understood his difficulties and was willing to support his needs. All was going well, for a time at least.

I’ve learnt that life with a child with ADHD is never easy for long, though, and soon the tempers and rages returned and he began to fail in school again. The more he struggled at school, the more frustrated he felt and the angrier he was with himself. His behaviour worsened; it was a vicious circle with no respite. One night, he lost his temper because he’d dropped a pack of Yu-Gi-Oh! cards in a puddle. Without the control to stop and think about his response, he lashed out at me with the metal tin he kept the cards in. He cut my head. As soon as he saw the blood streaming down my face he was remorseful and upset, but the damage had already been done. And things were no better at school. After a meltdown of mega proportions, he ended up in a situation where he lashed out at teachers. A second permanent exclusion followed, along with the trip

to the police station to face possible assault charges.

As I drove home from the police station with my ten-year-old son sobbing in the back of the car, a million thoughts went through my head. No-one in my family had ever been in trouble with the police before. We weren’t a violent family; we were pacifists, not fighters. I was shocked, scared, embarrassed and disappointed by my son’s behaviour. I was terrified by what the future held for him. All I could see was a life of crime and violence, court appearances and visits to see him in prison. I was close to giving up.

Sometimes, though, things have to hit rock bottom before they get better. The situation was so serious that the authorities took action. Daniel was given a police warning, assessed for a statement of SEN and placed in a special school – and it has been the making of him. Today he is a quirky, kind, intelligent teenager. He loves his computer, sports and playing the drums. He’s taking GCSEs and plans to be a special school teacher, helping kids just like him to overcome their challenges. I’m so proud of my boy, and of myself for being there for him regardless of everything he threw at me – sometimes quite literally. **SEN**

In the next issue of SEN Magazine, Alison discusses how she learnt to manage Daniel’s challenging behaviour

Further information

Alison Thompson is the author of *The Boy From Hell: Life with a Child with ADHD*:
www.theboyfromhell.co.uk