

“We’re waiting on a diagnosis and suspect ASD/ADHD”

What am I dealing with?

Whether you and your partner are together or are separated and are co-parenting, it can often be a difficult time when you suspect that your child may have additional needs and you are waiting for the assessment to take place to see whether you will receive a diagnosis.

Some disabilities and conditions can be diagnosed early on in a child’s life. For some it may even be during the pregnancy. Others can take a lot longer, which can be difficult for parents who are waiting to find out. Sometimes parents wait for months or even years after the baby is born. This is particularly common for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This time of limbo can also be a time of friction for many parents whether they are together, divorced or separated parents. They might argue about what issue the child has or how to cope with it.

Why is communication so difficult?

- ‘Disability’ is a very broad term. Each disability or condition will affect the person and their families in different ways. Where certain conditions are harder to diagnose like Autism or ADHD, studies show divorced parents will typically argue over whether or not the child has the condition they suspect (1). They also argue a lot about the steps that need to be taken to get a diagnosis.
- As the loving parents of your baby, one (or both) of you might be struggling to accept that your baby could have a disability. You may feel reluctant about having your baby tested. You might also find it difficult to talk about things practically and realistically.
- Parents that live together can sometimes find it easier to create routines and rules and an environment that works for the child. When parents live apart, this may mean that the child has two sets of rules and routines. For children who have ASD or ADHD this may be a challenge which they need support to adapt to.

- Even following a diagnosis such as ADHD or ASD, it's not as though there's then a right or wrong way to raise your child. There's no rulebook. It's all about learning about your child as a person and supporting them to manage any difficulties they may encounter. And because there's no right way or wrong way, one parent may think they understand the condition better than the other, which can lead to disagreements and conflict.
- If one parent spends more time than the other with their child, they may feel they have a better understanding of the disability. This can cause one parent to feel they are better informed to make decisions.

How do I help the situation?

- Learning to communicate better is even more difficult if you're divorced or separated. But communicating better with your ex could make everyone's lives a lot easier, including your child's.
- Coming to terms with a potential disability is tough for any parent. And if your partner is showing signs of finding it hard to understand or accept, you will need to talk to them sensitively given that they are using these approaches to cope with the situation. Try to approach the subject with care and take it slowly. They may just need some time to think things through. Always try to be positive, even though this is a tough conversation to have.
- While your romantic relationship is over, the relationship will function in a different way as parents. That relationship still needs work and effort. Although this is certainly easier said than done, try to put aside your feelings for the good of your child, and try to encourage your ex to do the same. You can still show each other respect, particularly where decisions need to be made.
- A recent study found that when the child spends more balanced time with both parents in their homes, the parents are less likely to clash [1]. This likely comes down to the parents feeling that there's a shared effort and both of them are playing their parts.
- Another way you could improve communication is a parenting plan. You may be able to complete this without being in the same room. Parenting plans like Put Kids First are online. They enable you to work together separately in an easier way to help reach decisions without conflict or fuss.

References:

[1] Pickar, Daniel B., and Robert L. Kaufman. "Parenting Plans for Special Needs Children: Applying a Risk-Assessment Model." *Family Court Review* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 113–33.

* Note: this research relates specifically to parents that have children diagnosed with ADHD.

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and adapted for Hartlepool for
the Relationships Matter 2019
Campaign by:



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