



"How to Explain ADHD to Kids" by Dr. Liz Angoff

Taken from post: <https://drlizangoff.com/2021/02/09/how-to-explain-adhd-to-kids/>

Explaining ADHD to anyone is complicated, never mind a young child! Based on what we know now, "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: "

- Is not actually a deficit in attention
- Does not always involve hyperactivity, and
- Does not lead to disorder in every environment

ADHD may be better characterized as a pattern of difficulties with self-regulation. These include **difficulties** with regulating attention (as opposed to a lack of attention), emotions, and behavior, which can cause significant roadblocks in certain environments - most notably, school. However, we are also learning that the ADHD brain tends to be characterized by a pattern of strengths and **superpowers**, too. These include hyperfocus, creativity, memory, passion, enthusiasm, humor, and quick-wittedness, to name a few. When we sit down to talk to a child about ADHD, it's critical that we present the whole picture. **The way we talk about ADHD now will influence how a child sees themselves for the rest of their lives.** It's too simplistic - and just not accurate - to say that ADHD means you have trouble with attention. Rather, ADHD is a pattern of strengths and challenges that makes some environments easy to navigate, and others much more challenging. So how do we explain ADHD in a way that's easy for the child to understand, and accurately represents their amazing brain?

In a [previous post](#), Dr. Liz Angoff shares a sentence frame she uses. You can use these words to help explain your child's diagnosis based on what we discovered during our assessment"

"We all have things that make some situations easier than others. In your work with Abbie, we learned that your brain is built in a way that makes

_____ and _____

come easily and _____ much more difficult.

It turns out - you're not alone! This pattern happens a lot, and we call it

_____.

Now that we know, our job is to maximize your amazing super powers and find ways to build those trickier skills so that the hard part gets easier. **Let's make a plan!"**



Creating an Empowering ADHD Diagnosis

The goal of presenting a diagnosis in this way is to help the child:

- **Understand** their experience in school, at home, and in the community
- **Engage** in their intervention plan
- **Advocate** for what they need

When we break it down, there are 5 parts to the sentence frame above:

1. Identifying Strengths
2. Naming Challenges
3. Defining the Diagnosis
4. You're Not Alone!
5. Let's Make a Plan

Let's see what this might look like for ADHD.

1. Identifying ADHD Strengths:

As the first piece of the diagnosis, we talk about the strengths we discovered throughout testing. Using the "brain-building" metaphor, this may sound like:

"In your work with Abbie, we learned that your brain is built in a way that makes a lot of things come easily! These are like the super-fast highways in your brain."

While every child will have a different list, here are a few common strengths, or "highways," that may emerge from testing for kids with an ADHD diagnosis: (It is important to note that these highways are not in spite of ADHD - they are the **benefits** of ADHD!)

- Coming up with creative ideas for writing or story-telling
- Remembering stories and experiences
- Doing better as things get harder
- Making people laugh
- Taking in a lot of information at once
- Processing information very quickly
- Jumping into new experiences
- Focusing intensely on things you enjoy



2. Naming ADHD Challenges:

The next piece is to name the challenges that are coming up.

We've just made a list of how awesome the child is - but their experience is not always that awesome. Naming challenges validates a child's experience in a world that may not be supporting them in the way that they need. For me, this sounds like:

"In your work with Abbie, we also found some things that were tricky. These are your construction zones, or the skills your brain is working to build."

Again, while every child will have a slightly different list, here are a few common "construction zones" that may emerge from testing:

- Waiting to share your awesome ideas
- Writing your ideas down on paper
- Staying focused on boring or easy things
- Getting started on your work
- Keeping track of all the steps
- Catching your errors
- Keeping things organized
- Moving or fidgeting without disrupting others

Often, it's possible to draw a connection between a child's highways and construction zones. When your brain is taking in so many things at once, it's hard to know where to put your focus! When you have so many amazing ideas, it's hard for your hand to keep up!

3. Defining the ADHD Diagnosis:

A diagnosis is simply a way of bringing the highways and construction zones together. For me, this sounds like:

"It turns out, many people have highways and construction zones just like yours. You're not alone! When we see this pattern, we call it ADHD."

By defining ADHD by the child's experience - and not the DSM definition - it is easier for the child to understand and empowers them to be an active participant in their intervention plan. Here are a few "definitions" of ADHD you can use:



- "ADHD means your brain is built in a way that makes memory and creativity easy, but writing and waiting your turn more difficult."
- "ADHD means your brain is noticing a lot of things at once, but it may be tricky to focus in on the one thing your teacher is asking."
- "ADHD means your brain enjoys things that are new and exciting, but it may be harder to learn things you have to repeat a lot, like math facts."

4. You're Not Alone!

I find it helpful to show kids examples of others who share their diagnosis and have been successful. This includes actors, artists, entrepreneurs, and other children. Everyone is a little different, so this is a great opportunity to emphasize that the way ADHD shows up for them may be different than how it shows up for other kids in their class, even though it has the same name. Here are a few resources that may resonate with the children you work with:

- [Famous People with Learning Differences](#)
- [Through Your Child's Eyes](#)
- [My Favorite Things About Having ADHD](#)
- [ADHD Comics](#)

5. Let's Make a Plan:

Finally, come up with a list of tools and strategies that will be helpful for maximizing their strengths and building new skills.

- "You will be working with the Learning Specialist twice a week to learn strategies for getting those great ideas down on paper."
- "Let's brainstorm some helpful ways for you to move and fidget during class to keep your brain engaged."
- "You'll be getting some extra time on tests to go back and check for little errors before turning it in."
- "We will help you make a checklist for cleaning your room so it's easier to get through it."

Now, the child is actively engaged in their intervention plan because **they know exactly why** it's happening.

We're also giving the child **language to advocate** for what they need from their teachers and you as their parents to be their best selves - a skill they can use now and for the rest of their lives.

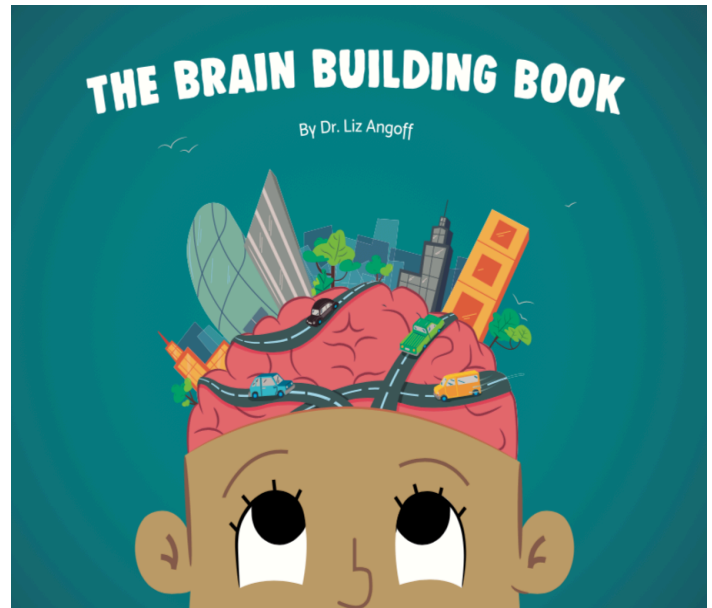


Bringing it all Together

This feedback was shared by Dr. Liz Angoff on her blog www.drlizangoff.com. Dr. Liz Angoff is a Licensed Educational Psychologist with a Diplomate in School Neuropsychology. She has been practicing for over 15 years, as both a school psychologist in the public schools, as well as in private practice. Dr. Angoff provides assessment and consultation services to families in the Bay Area, CA. She is currently in the process of publishing [The Brain Building Book](#), an interactive, engaging workbook designed to help kids understand their brains, using the strategies outlined above!

This workbook provides helpful language to use with the child throughout the assessment, so that they leave with an understanding of their profile and learn what they need to do to build their skills and advocate for what they need. Children are proud to share their book with their teachers and will continue to read it with their parents for years to come!

The Brain Building Book is currently available for preorder through Kickstarter through 2/26/21. If you haven't already checked it out, click below for a preview!



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