

Activity 16.1

ADHD and Family Dysfunction

Having a child with ADHD is certain to be a challenging experience for parents and other family members. Parents may well suffer burnout in their attempts to control a hyperactive child, deal with the disruption that this can cause in peer and family relationships, and in dealing with the inevitable problems that will arise at school.

In an interesting study published in the *Journal of Attention Disorders*, [Kaplan, Crawford, Fisher & Dewey \(1998\)](#) began their study with the premise that having any child who is struggling at school (such as one with ADHD) is likely to create stress for the parents and detrimentally affect family functioning. However, in their study they wanted to find out whether having a child with ADHD posed additional problems above and beyond the stresses and problems encountered as a result of having a child who was struggling at school.

In their study they obtained information on family functioning from parents whose children were having difficulty at school for different reasons – specifically parents who had children with (1) ADHD, (2) a reading disorder, or (3) both ADHD and a reading disorder. They compared these with parents of children who had no disability.

Their survey asked parents to say how much they would endorse statements of the following kind (on a 4-point scale):

- There are lots of bad feelings in the family
- We don't get along well together
- We are not able to make decisions on how to solve problems

Parents endorsing these kinds of statements would be acknowledging high levels of dissatisfaction with how things are going in their family.

The results found that parents of children with ADHD reported significantly higher levels of dissatisfaction with family life than did parents of children with a primary reading disability. This suggests that problems in families with ADHD children are significantly greater than if the child simply has a basic schooling difficulty. Why do you think this might be? Use some of the evidence you've read about in this section to come to some view on this. For example are families with children diagnosed with ADHD more dysfunctional because:

- ADHD disrupts more aspects of family life than those related to learning and education?
- ADHD runs in families, so parents of such children may also be suffering from dysfunctions caused by ADHD?
- Having an individual with ADHD in the family disrupts effective communication between members, resulting in disagreements about how to solve problems?
- Parents of children with ADHD are less likely than parents of children with a learning disorder to accept that their children have a disorder at all (and thus seek effective help for the problem)?
- ADHD causes frustrations in the family because it is less easy to treat than, say, a reading disability?