

When They All Look Alike: ADHD, Anxiety, & SPD

Cary M. Hamilton and Sarah Moran

As the parent of a complicated child you strive to understand the different labels your child is given and how professionals know the difference between those labels. It is a challenging task particularly when many professionals struggle to understand themselves, passing the confusion on to parents. You can hear from one professional, "oh it's definitely ADHD, let's medicate," another says "he is just anxious, go to therapy," and yet another says "I'm not sure what we are looking at." It is beyond frustrating. As a professional and a parent, I can relate. With this article I'm hoping to provide some information that will help us to focus on the right path.

We can all think of a child who is easily overwhelmed, has frequent meltdowns, and often appears to be lost in thought or "spaced out." Maybe this child also has poor self-esteem and has a hard time making friends because they are too loud or too close or too rough with their peers, perhaps unintentionally. Everyone has a viewpoint on what's happening for these kids- Everyone knows a kid like this.

Often these kids are mislabeled and given the diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This happens because parents and teachers notice the child's inability to sit still at school, or they have a hard time staying focused, or they are impulsive, or in constant motion. I don't know about you, but I don't think many adults could sit still and learn facts for eight hours a day without feeling the need to bounce their feet or run around a little! As a parent how do you know what is developmentally appropriate, what is just your "quirky kid," and what really is problematic?

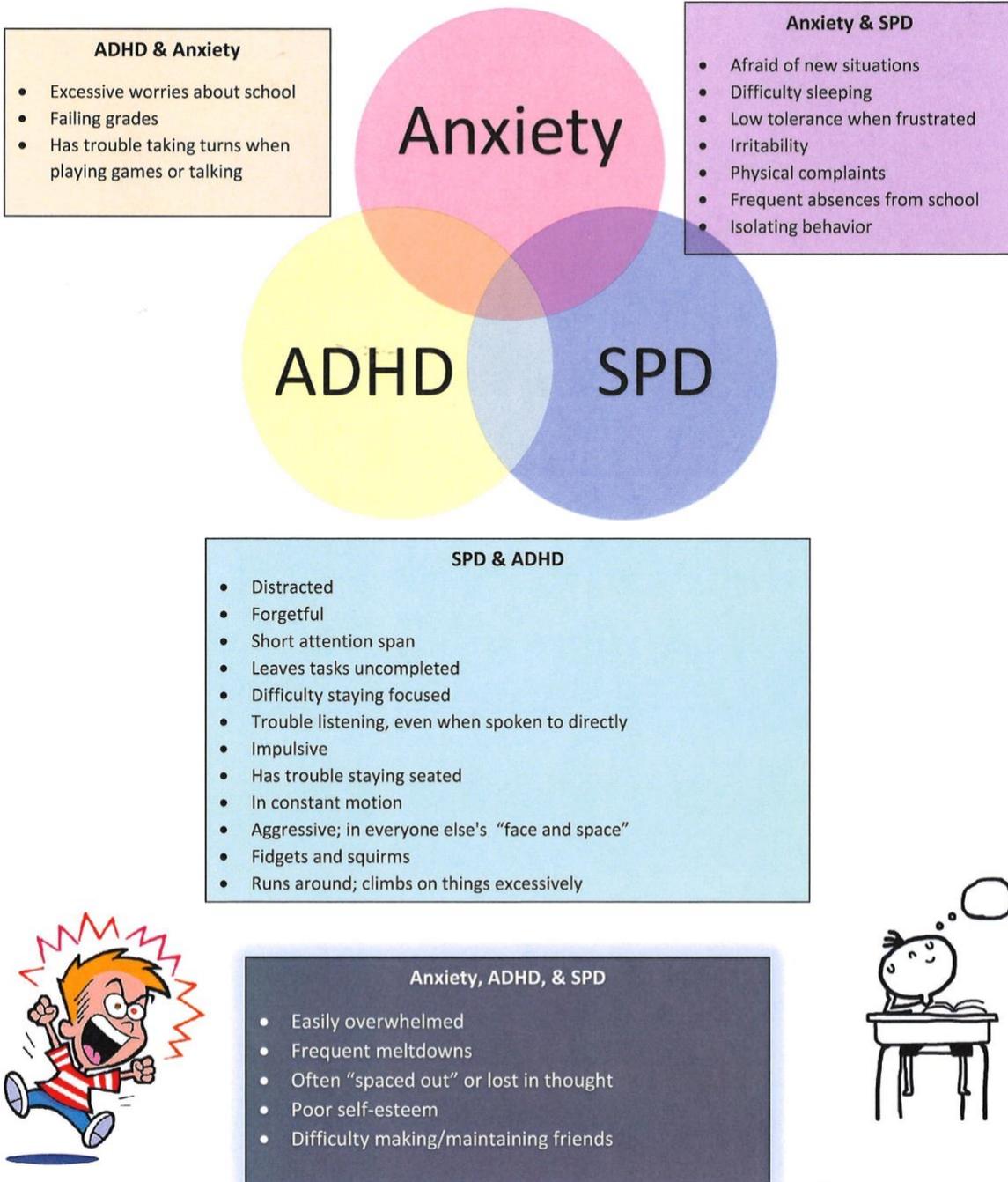
Sometimes kids worry about school, or have trouble sleeping at night because of their worries. Some kids complain of physical ailments, even when it appears nothing is wrong with their bodies. Some kids have strong preferences about the types of food they eat or about the clothes they wear. If any little thing does not fit into their preferred experience, then a big meltdown occurs! When this happens, parents are left trying to figure out why changing the child's problematic socks, isn't helping them calm down. As nothing seems to work you start looking for answers. Looking online provides even more of a confusing mix of information. Because there is no single answer, we need to learn where a child's development, neurodiversity, and mood intersect.

It turns out that Anxiety, ADHD, and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) all have overlapping symptoms. Many parents turn to physicians for medications or to therapy to express emotions. While both of these options can, and do, work for many individuals, a combination of treatments often works best. Another important factor frequently gets left out: a child with sensory challenges needs Occupational Therapy to address their needs. Occupational Therapy assesses the various areas of body development and delays. This is their expertise and they often work in conjunction with child therapists to help children learn body regulation which comes before emotional regulation.

Although the many labels your child may be attaining can be overwhelming and confusing, often it is because frequently symptoms of ADHD, Anxiety, and SPD overlap. Below you will see a diagram showing exactly how they do so. What's most important is figuring out what your individual child needs. Does the child need therapy? Medications? Occupational Therapy? Some combination of these? It is important to find a professional who understands the nuances of the disorders in order to help decipher these overlapping symptoms to determine a best path of treatment for your child.

You can also find helpful information at: The Star Institute for Sensory Processing Disorder <https://www.spdstar.org>, and ADDitude Magazine <https://www.additudemag.com>.

Overlapping Symptoms of Anxiety, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) Symptoms in Children ages 3-12



About the Authors

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Sarah Moran, LMFTA is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapy Associate and completed her certificate in Play Therapy at Antioch University Seattle. At Olympia Therapy, Sarah works with children, families, and parents using Play Therapy, Sandtray Therapy, and Child-Parent Relationship Therapy. Prior to graduate school Sarah worked with children in a variety of settings, including homes, orphanages, daycares, and preschools. Sarah primarily works with preschool-aged children and frequently encounters families struggling with the overlapping symptoms of Anxiety, ADHD, and SPD.