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# Michael Phelps' Mom on How to Raise an ADHD Superstar

Meet the mothers of three ADHD super-achievers — an Olympic record-breaker, a TV heavyweight, and a world-class adventurer — and learn how they helped their kids beat the odds.

by Judy Dutton

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What does it take to succeed despite attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD)? It takes hard work, for starters — a willingness to meet challenges head-on. It takes support from family members, teachers, therapists, and coaches. And, of course, it's hard to overstate the benefits of ADHD medication.

But, of all the ingredients needed to make a happy, successful life, nothing is more important than good parenting. Behind almost every ADHD success story is a devoted parent (or two). In honor of mothers, let's give credit where credit is due.

The three mothers profiled here helped their sons and daughters achieve great things — more than they could have imagined. Steadfast and resourceful, they saw strength where others saw weakness, and kept looking for ways to help their children after others were ready to give up. Let their stories inspire you!

## “I built off the gifts ADD gave him”

**Yvonne Pennington, clinical psychologist in Marietta, Georgia, and mother of Ty Pennington, star of the ABC-TV series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition***

As the happy-go-lucky handyman on the hit TV series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, Ty Pennington has hammered (and hammed) his way into our hearts. His mother, Yvonne Pennington, is, of course, his biggest fan — although she's quick to point out that Ty's manic energy wasn't always an asset.

“In first grade, he'd hoist his desk onto his shoulders and wear it, running around the classroom as the other kids laughed,” she says. “Teachers insisted he was bright, but just couldn't sit still. I was constantly getting calls from the principal's office. I felt like the worst mother in the world.” At home, Ty was a handful. Yvonne says he was always jumping off the roof and running into the street without checking for cars.

At the time, Yvonne was a single mom struggling to raise two kids — while attending graduate school by day and working nights as a waitress. She sensed that something was amiss with Ty, then seven years of age. But what?

One day, while doing research for a psychology class, she stumbled onto the answer. “I read some case studies about kids who had trouble focusing, and they sounded a lot like Ty,” she says. She had Ty evaluated by a doctor, who confirmed the diagnosis.

In the early 1970s, doctors didn't use the term “attention-deficit disorder.” Kids like Ty were given a more ominous-sounding label: “minimal brain dysfunction.” Yvonne wasn't sure she should tell her son. “Imagine hearing that,” she says. “He already felt like a bad kid. Why make things worse by telling him?”

Yvonne decided against informing Ty about his diagnosis. But she hit the psychology textbooks, learning all she could about minimal brain dysfunction and ways to treat it. She read about a form of behavioral therapy that involved the use of tokens, and decided to give it a try.

Here's how it worked: For every 10 seconds that Ty managed to stay focused and do as he was asked, he earned a token (one of Yvonne's drink coasters). Ty was allowed to exchange the tokens for rewards — 10 coasters for, say, an extra half hour of TV or time to play with his Erector Set.

At first, Ty rarely earned more than a token or two before returning to his usual antics. But Yvonne kept at it; she even persuaded Ty's special-education teacher to use the technique in the classroom. Ty's behavior slowly improved, and that gave his self-esteem a much-needed boost.

"In the past, people had only paid attention to Ty when he did something wrong," says Yvonne. "But with the token economy, we turned that around."

As Ty learned to channel his energy, he became passionate about building things — the bigger the better. "At age 11, he swapped his comic books for his friends' help in building a three-story tree house," says Yvonne. "I knew then that he'd grow up to be a carpenter — or a Hollywood stuntman."

Ty earned mostly Bs and Cs in high school. But he hit a wall soon after entering Kennesaw State University in Georgia in 1982. The lack of structure sent him reeling; he dropped out a year later.

Around that time, in the early 1980s, the term ADHD came into use, and, with the stigma surrounding the condition waning, Yvonne decided to tell Ty the truth. "He always knew he was hyperactive, and I figured that was all he needed to know," she says. "But when I realized that it was ADHD that was holding him back, I told him about it and suggested we see a doctor."

With the help of stimulant medication, which he continues to take, Ty finally learned how to focus. He returned to school — this time at The Art Institute of Atlanta — and graduated with honors. After that, he dabbled in construction work and graphic design, and did some modeling and acting. Then he landed a job as a carpenter on The Learning Channel's *Trading Spaces*. Three years later, he was tapped to lead his own renovation team on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

"Even today, his spontaneity gives me heart attacks," admits Yvonne, recounting the time when she switched on the TV to see Ty zooming down a steep driveway using an ottoman for a skateboard. Still, if her experiences have taught her anything, it's that parents should learn to appreciate the unique gifts ADHD can offer. "The very traits that once held Ty back are now his biggest assets," she says. "Many parents in this situation focus on what their kids are doing wrong. I encourage them to focus on what they're doing right. Do that, and the possibilities are endless."

To learn more about making a token economy, go to Yvonne's website, **Psychology.am**; an instructional DVD and book will be available in May.



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## Moms, Part 2

### “We worked as a team to overcome ADD”

**Debbie Phelps, middle-school principal in Towson, Maryland, and mother of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps**

No doubt about it, Michael Phelps has made waves in his chosen sport. In 2004, at the age of 18, he swam his way to eight medals (six of them gold) at the summer Olympics in Athens. Now 21, he holds 13 world records, including the 200-meter butterfly and the 4 x 100-meter freestyle relay.

Yet Michael might not have loved swimming at all, were it not for the ingenuity of his mother, Debbie Phelps. "At age seven, he hated getting his face wet," says Debbie. "We flipped him over and taught him the backstroke."

Michael showed swimming prowess on his back, then on his front, side, and every way in between. But in the classroom, he floundered. An inability to concentrate was his biggest problem.

"I was told by one of his teachers that he couldn't focus on anything," says Debbie. She consulted a doctor, and nine-year-old Michael was diagnosed with ADHD.

"That just hit my heart," says Debbie. "It made me want to prove everyone wrong. I knew that, if I collaborated with Michael, he could achieve anything he set his mind to."

Debbie, who had taught middle school for more than two decades, began working closely with Michael's school to get him the extra attention he needed. "Whenever a teacher would say, 'Michael can't do this,' I'd counter with, 'Well, what are you doing to help him?'" she recalls.

After Michael kept grabbing a classmate's paper, Debbie suggested that he be seated at his own table. When he moaned about how much he hated reading, she started handing him the sports section of the paper or books about sports. Noticing that Michael's attention strayed during math, she hired a tutor and encouraged him to use word problems tailored to Michael's interests: "How long would it take to swim 500 meters if you swim three meters per second?"

At swim meets, Debbie helped Michael stay focused by reminding him to consider the consequences of his behavior. She recalls the time when 10-year-old Michael came in second and got so upset that he ripped off his goggles and threw them angrily onto the pool deck.

During their drive home, she told him that sportsmanship counted as much as winning. "We came up with a signal I could give him from the stands," she says. "I'd form a 'C' with my hand, which stood for 'compose yourself.' Every time I saw him getting frustrated, I'd give him the sign. Once, he gave me the 'C' when I got stressed while making dinner. You never know what's sinking in until the tables are turned!"

Debbie used various strategies to keep Michael in line. Over time, as his love of swimming grew, she was delighted to see that he was developing self-discipline. "For the past 10 years, at least, he's never missed a practice," she says. "Even on Christmas, the pool is the first place we go, and he's happy to be there."

Debbie also made sure to listen to her son. In the sixth grade, he told her he wanted to stop taking his stimulant medication. Despite serious misgivings, she agreed to let him stop — and he did fine. Michael's busy schedule of practices and meets imposed so much structure on his life that he was able to stay focused without medication.

Debbie and Michael didn't see eye to eye on every challenge that came his way, but he always understood the role she played in his swimming success. Immediately after being awarded his first gold medal at Athens, he stepped off the winner's platform and walked to the stands, to hand Debbie a bouquet and the garland that crowned his head. That moment is vivid in Debbie's memory. "I was so happy, I was in tears," she recalls.

Michael now attends the University of Michigan, where he's majoring in sports marketing, while training for the 2008 Olympics. Debbie has become the principal of Windsor Mill middle school in Baltimore, Maryland. She applies what she learned raising Michael to all of her students, whether or not they have ADHD. "All kids can fail us at times," she says. "But if you work with them, nine times out of 10, they'll make you proud."



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## Moms, Part 3

### I told my daughter, the sky's the limit"

**Karen Fisher, middle-school teacher in Bow, Washington, and mother of Danielle Fisher, the youngest person to scale all seven of the world's tallest mountains**

Follow-through was always a challenge for Danielle Fisher. "She'd start her homework but not finish it, or finish it but not turn it in," recalls her mother, Karen Fisher. But Karen was sympathetic, because she, too, often got sidetracked. "It would take all day for me to clean the kitchen, because I'd move to another room, then another," she says. "Things didn't seem as easy for me as they were for other parents."

When Danielle entered sixth grade, it occurred to Karen that they both might have ADHD. After a doctor confirmed their diagnoses, mother and daughter went on medication. Each one's ability to focus improved, but problems persisted. "In the classroom, girls with ADHD often get overlooked," says Karen, a middle-school teacher. "It's difficult to believe a student has ADHD if she's a good, pleasant, quiet kid who doesn't cause problems."

To make sure Danielle got extra help in the classroom, Karen filed for a 504 Plan, which grants students accommodations, like extra time to complete homework and the option to take tests in a private, distraction-free room.

Through it all, Karen has done her best to maintain a positive relationship with Danielle. "Relationships are very important to girls with ADHD," she says. "If I got mad at her, she'd have a difficult time. But if I could convey that she's needed and appreciated, she'd do better. And I do, too. I tell Danielle that she can do or be whoever she wants to be."

With her mother's encouragement, Danielle latched onto one of the loftiest goals imaginable: to scale the Seven Summits (the tallest peaks on each of the seven continents). An avid hiker as a child, Danielle got serious about mountaineering in high school. In January 2003, she flew to Argentina to climb her first big mountain, the 22,848-foot Aconcagua — the tallest mountain in the Southern Hemisphere.

"Mountains focus her," explains Karen. "Maybe it's the exercise, or the fact that there's less chaos up there, and no daily concerns like housecleaning or laundry. Or maybe it's the fact that all climbers have the same goal — to get to the top. It's a comfort to her."

Two years and six mountains later, on June 2, 2005, Karen and her husband got the call: Danielle, then 20, was phoning from Mount Everest, having just become the youngest American ever to scale the world's tallest mountain (and the youngest person to scale all of the Seven Summits). Karen couldn't be prouder, and she encourages other parents of kids with ADHD to maintain high hopes for their kids.

"I always tell my daughter not to give up," Karen says. "It's hard, but if you focus on one step at a time, you'll reach those mini-goals on the way up. Eventually, you'll get where you're going."



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