

UNDERSTANDING ADHD



What Is ADHD?

Rapidly shifting attention (inattention), **quick reactions** (impulsivity), and **high energy** (hyperactivity) are behaviors that all humans experience. In part, these behaviors may have developed to allow early humans to scan the environment for danger, and to react quickly. However, in today's world requiring high levels of sustained focus, these behaviors can cause problems.

When Are These Behaviors A Problem?

Rapidly shifting attention (inattention), quick reactions (impulsivity), and high energy (hyperactivity) become a problem when these behaviors **occur often in multiple settings** where such behavior is not appropriate, and cause **impairment at school, home, or with peers**. These behaviors are then called a **disorder**. Here are some signs of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which must occur "often" to be considered a disorder:

- > Difficulty attending to details or making careless mistakes
- > Difficulty sustaining focus on tasks or play
- > Difficulty organizing or finishing tasks and activities
- > Losing things or being forgetful
- > Fidgeting, squirming, leaving seat, or running about when inappropriate
- > Talking excessively, interrupting or intruding on others, or blurting out answers before questions are completed

What Causes ADHD?

ADHD is caused by a delay in maturation or a difference in the **structure or function** of the parts of the brain that control attention, behavior, and motivation. Vulnerability to ADHD can be **inherited** from members of the family tree. ADHD symptoms can worsen in an **unstructured, unpredictable environment**.

How Is ADHD diagnosed?

Your child's **primary care practitioner (PCP)** will be able to recognize and treat **mild to moderate** forms of ADHD. For more **severe or complicated forms, behavioral health specialists** experienced with children and adolescents are best trained to diagnose and treat the disorder.

How Is ADHD Treated?

The most effective treatment for ADHD is **medication**, typically stimulant medication. Stimulant medication works by "stimulating" the part of the brain that controls attention, behavior, and motivation. Another type of medication that can be helpful is alpha adrenergic medication, which calms an overactive brain. At school, "**504 Plan**" accommodations for inattention can be requested, such as frequent reminders to stay on task; reducing distractions; rewarding persistence; and providing reminders to double-check work and to complete and turn in assignments. Accommodations for hyperactive/impulsive behavior also can be requested, such as providing opportunities for movement or "boredom breaks" during the day; providing a variety of interesting approaches to learning; and giving rewards for behavioral control and consequences for misbehavior. Some children with ADHD also have learning disabilities that can be identified through educational testing and remediated through an **Individualized Education Plan** ("IEP"); 504 Plans and IEPs should be requested from the school.



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Other Things Kids and Teens Can Do to Help With ADHD



Keep a healthy lifestyle

Get plenty of sleep, eat a healthy diet, get physical exercise daily (outdoors if possible), and participate in activities that make you feel happy and confident.



Avoid alcohol or drugs

These substances can worsen ADHD by their effect on the brain and can also lead to low mood or worry.



Make "to do" lists

Make checklists of the things you need to do. Be specific about each task, set reminders to check the lists a few times a day, and check things off as you do them.



Manage your time

Time yourself doing a quick activity or homework assignment so you can calculate how much time you need to do things. Use a calendar to keep track of important dates, and try to follow a regular schedule.



Avoid excessive media

Excessive media use can interfere with planning, goal setting, working memory, and staying on task. Take regular breaks from screens, try not to multi-task, and limit screen time before bed.



Solve problems

Talk with a trusted person about how to fix or improve things that are causing distractions. Learn good planning, and organization skills.



Make a "roadmap" to plan, start, and finish tasks

Break the tasks on your "to do" lists into steps ("mini tasks"). Decide how long you need to do each step, when you will do them, and in what order. Be sure to get the materials you need and to take short breaks!



Organize your stuff

Give your belongings a "home" so they don't get lost, and schedule regular time to put things away. Use a planner or agenda to write down important school information.

Things Parents Can Do to Help a Child or Teen With ADHD

Create an organized home through household rules and structure

Having clear routines and rules at home helps children and teens fulfill everyday responsibilities, meet expectations, and get along with others. Be sure to praise your child for their efforts.

Provide a supportive environment for homework

Successful homework routines reduce stress for the whole family. Use organizational tools like planners, calendars, and "to do lists;" create a detailed homework routine with your child that they can follow every day; help them break assignments into smaller steps; and coach them to double-check finished work. Be sure to offer support and supervision as they build new habits!

Provide rewards at home for good behavior at school

Partner with your child's teacher(s) to identify problematic behaviors at school and then reward your child when they behave more appropriately. Decide together how you will track their progress, and offer a variety of sustainable rewards that match the difficulty of the task, such as items, activities, or privileges that are free, small, medium, or large.

Offer praise and encouragement for doing hard things

Parental support carries a lot of weight, so let your child know you see them working hard to learn new skills. Praise their efforts to practice strategies and take on more independence!



Ask your child or teen's PCP to "prescribe" the Guided Self-Management Toolkit for ADHD, so that you and your child or teen can begin to learn and practice ADHD management skills at home!

This handout was created by Heather Walter, MD, MPH, Erica Lee, PhD, Keneisha Sinclair-McBride, PhD, and Zoë Judd, MS. © Boston Children's Hospital