

What is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?

ADHD is one of a number of behavioural and developmental disorders. It is not an illness or a sign of low intelligence. The key feature of ADHD is difficulty in concentrating (attention deficit) and may also

include hyperactivity and impulsivity. As a result, some children with ADHD find it hard to concentrate and behave appropriately at school and at home. Also their low frustration tolerance may mean that some of these children struggle in social situations and may find it hard to make friends and keep them.

How do I know if my child has ADHD?

A paediatrician or clinical psychologist can help you identify if your child has ADHD rather than some other reading difficulty or behaviour problem. Mostly, children are diagnosed when they are between four and nine years old. ADHD is usually noticed when children have to "sit down and learn". Sometimes adolescents and adults are affected and it seems that boys are three times more likely than girls to have ADHD.

It is hard to diagnose ADHD because children mature at different rates and there is a wide variation in patterns of behaviour and self-management. It is harder for five-year-olds to pay attention, control themselves and concentrate than it is for nine-year-olds. Also boys and girls often mature differently.

Your school age child may have ADHD if he or she has difficulty with inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. These are the three main problem areas usually identified as the key symptoms of this disorder.



Inattention

Does your child often:

- Find it hard to concentrate on work or play?
- Not listen when spoken to?
- Have trouble organising tasks and activities?
- Lose toys, homework, pencils?
- Get easily distracted?

Hyperactivity

Does your child often:

- Fidget and squirm?
- Have trouble staying seated?
- Run about or climb when not supposed to?
- Seem on the go as if 'driven by a motor'?

Impulsivity

Does your child often:

- Blurt out answers before questions are finished?
- Butt into conversations or games and can't wait in turn?

Because the effects of ADHD are apparent in such a wide range of behaviours there is no one test used to diagnose it. This means that an assessment will include gathering information from several sources. Usually, teachers and parents are asked for information and your child's behaviour is carefully observed. Checklists that capture your child's level of attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity are used alongside tests of attention as well as a detailed interview. Computer attention tests and educational tests can also be used.

A number of children may have some of the symptoms listed above. Sometimes children with oppositional behaviour or learning difficulties have some of the symptoms. A diagnosis of ADHD depends on how many symptoms are present, how severe they are and how much of a problem they are for your child.

Is ADHD common?

There has been a steady increase in diagnosis of ADHD in the past 10–15 years. It affects between three and five per cent of school age children although figures differ between centres and states.

What are the causes of ADHD?

Despite more than 30 years of research, there is currently no clear explanation why ADHD affects some children. Recently it has been found that there may be differences in the way the brain works in relation to concentration and self regulation. Research shows that chemicals in the brain, called neurotransmitters, also seem to play a significant role. This aspect of ADHD may be genetic. Food sensitivities have been shown to play a role in less than 5% of children with ADHD.

Will my child grow out of it?

ADHD cannot be cured but good management helps. There is no firm evidence that children grow out of ADHD. Left untreated, ADHD may cause significant problems at home, at school and in making and keeping friends.

What can parents do?

Because ADHD affects so many aspects of life, several strategies rather than a single approach are needed. The following points explain some of the things you might like to try if your child has been diagnosed or has some of the symptoms.

Tool Kit

1 Management skills

Living with an ADHD child can be very frustrating but there are techniques that can help you set boundaries, encourage and support your child.

All children find it easier to learn responsible behaviour if parents set firm limits and give a clear idea of what is expected, but children with ADHD really need clear instructions and boundaries. Here are some techniques that may help:

Give clear instructions

- Try to use instructions such as “Please clear your toys up now”, rather than comments or questions e.g. “Isn’t it time to clear up your toys?”

- Speak in a normal tone and say exactly what your child has to do.

Don’t tell your child to do something if you

- Are busy doing something else e.g. ironing, washing up, etc.
- Can’t check it gets done e.g. you are watching TV in another room.
- Don’t have time to follow up – you need to go out or make a phone call.
- Don’t really care whether it gets done or not.

When talking to your child

- Keep it simple. If you want several things done, make sure the first task is finished before giving the second instruction.
- Call your child’s name, so he or she looks at you and pays attention.
- Make sure noise, games or toys don’t distract your child.
- Get your child to repeat what you have said so that you know they have listened and understood.
- Concentrate on your child and don’t get distracted yourself until the task is well under way.

2 Encouragement

Children with ADHD are often in trouble or feel frustrated by things they find difficult. Children cannot improve without positive messages so make sure you remember to encourage them often. Say things like: “I have confidence in you...” and “I like the way you handled that”. As they say ‘An ounce of praise is worth more than a thousand reprimands’. Praise goes a long way.

Good behaviour deserves attention. Parents of children with ADHD often unintentionally reinforce negative



behaviour by paying it attention. It's really important to encourage good behaviour, and not misbehaviour. Don't wait for 100% good behaviour before praising, try praising a third of the way through or whenever you catch your children doing the right thing. Notice good behaviour. Say you are pleased.

3 Behaviour modification training

These techniques help children learn appropriate behaviour. They reward good behaviour and take away privileges for bad behaviour. Stickers and charts can be fun and help your child keep track. They are also a way of monitoring progress towards a negotiated reward.

Training time

Children with ADHD need clear structures to help them behave well. But don't start without teaching your child what you want. When a football team takes the field they have already trained for hours. They have the skills and teamwork to play the game. They know what the coach wants.

- Tell your child what behaviour is good and bad.
- Set aside time over a week or a fortnight for 'training'.
- Explain consequences clearly e.g. rewards and punishments.
- Ask your child to make 'responsibility statements' so they understand they are responsible for managing their behaviour e.g. "Each day I will put my school bag into my room", "I will go to bed at 7.30 pm". Your child needs to agree to a statement for each behaviour being rewarded.
- Use sentences like: "I know that you can do (the good behaviour)".
- Children with ADHD need immediate recognition for their achievements such as a choice of stickers for their chart. Some parents find it helpful to have a system of short-term rewards, say a food treat, colouring a picture, 20 minutes on the computer or watching a favourite TV show, building to a reward your child really wants after an agreed target has been reached. In general rewards should be fast, frequent and something your child really wants.

Training a child is like using scaffolding to construct a building

It may be helpful to think of these strategies as rather like building a house. You need to put up

scaffolding before a building can take shape. Later the scaffold is removed and the building can stand alone. In the same way, you can show your child how to finish a job. Then let them try, coach them and give feedback. Finally step back and let your child work alone. The scaffold has been removed.

4 Stimulant medications

Although it seems strange that a hyperactive child might need stimulant medication, research shows medication may reduce many symptoms. The medication improves the child's ability to concentrate by regulating the chemicals in the brain. However they don't work for everyone. Medications can cause side effects and some parents don't like using them. These tablets are fast acting, but wash out of the system quickly so are usually taken twice daily.

Medication alone will not fix poor reading or mathematical skills, or the other problems a child with ADHD faces but it may help your child concentrate or settle long enough to benefit from other educational and behavioural strategies.

Stimulant medication is only available from a specially registered professional, usually a paediatrician or psychiatrist. You will need to see your GP for a referral. Medication must be carefully monitored to check for any possible side effects and to make sure your child is receiving the right dose.

5 Educational strategies

Teachers are often one of the first people to recognise that a child may have some of the difficulties associated with ADHD. It is very important to involve your child's teachers in helping you and your child overcome the problems associated with ADHD.

Children with ADHD are easily distracted and struggle with multiple tasks so teachers need to use skills to support and encourage their learning. Just like at home, tasks at school need to be demonstrated – "watch this", "now you try" – and supervised. It often helps children with ADHD to sit at the front of the class so the teacher can remind them of the task if their attention wanders. Tasks should not be too hard and need to be broken up

into small bits, so that one part can be finished before the next instruction is given. Give fast feedback when each stage is completed and always try to include some praise. These children also respond better when presented with a limited number of choices as they can find too much choice bewildering. At home, they will need support and encouragement to complete their homework.

It is important to remember that ADHD does not cause reading or other learning problems, although it may make things worse. It seems logical to think that starting on medication, which helps a child concentrate and pay attention, will automatically fix problems with reading and other schoolwork. Unfortunately, this is usually not true. The causes of reading and other learning problems are separate to ADHD. Children with ADHD may require special reading programs or interventions to help them catch up. If possible, try to get professional help with reading or learning problems.

6 Caring for yourself

Living with a child with ADHD can be very tiring and demanding. You need to make sure that you get the support you need. Many people find it particularly helpful to contact a support group. Often just talking on the phone with a parent facing similar difficulties is a real help. Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 for information on how to contact a group near you. Finally, make sure you arrange to have some time for yourself to relax and do things you enjoy.

Many of these tips appear very simplistic or rather artificial. In practice they will require seemingly endless repetition and great determination to be consistent. Don't get discouraged! These strategies have been shown to be effective so it's worth persevering.

Useful books and resources

Barkley. RA (2001) *Taking charge of ADHD: The Complete Authoritative Guide for Parents*. Guildford Press (\$40).

Green. C (2001) *Understanding ADHD*, Revised edition. Doubleday: Sydney (\$25).

Grainger. J (1997) *Children's Behaviour, Attention and Reading Problems*. Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne (\$30).

Useful web sites

Parenting South Australia, Parent Easy Guide 55 Attention Deficit Disorder www.parenting.sa.gov.au

The National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (USA) www.add.org

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (USA) www.chadd.org

Children's Hospital Westmead, Sydney (for useful books) www.chw.edu.au/parents/kidshealth/books



This Tool Kit has been produced by the Lifeline Information Service as a public service. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration.

We invite your feedback and comments at infoservice@lifeline.org.au



Prime Super is the proud sponsor of the Lifeline Information Service – your mental health and self-help resource. Prime Super is the largest not-for-profit superannuation fund dedicated to serving the needs of rural and regional Australians. For more information on Prime Super, please ring 1800 675 839 or visit their website www.primesuper.com.au Lifeline and Prime Super are working in partnership to promote mental health awareness, help-seeking and suicide prevention.



The assistance of the Illawarra Institute for Mental Health in reviewing this fact sheet is gratefully acknowledged.