

# Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is defined as a neurodevelopmental condition, thought to be caused by differences in the way the brain develops, that affects the parts controlling attention, concentration, impulsivity, activity levels and memory. This means a child or young person's behaviour can be anything from being 'very dreamy' (unable to pay attention) through to being 'always on the go' (hyperactive). Everybody is different, but a person with a diagnosis of ADHD has difficulty filtering out unimportant information coming into the brain, so may be easily overstimulated and distracted, struggle to identify and retain the important information, have memory difficulties, feel overwhelmed by their own thoughts, respond before considering things properly, and find it difficult to regulate their feelings and behaviours.

**The British Psychological Society (1996) offers the following definition:**

**"ADHD is a changing and evolving concept which refers to children and young persons whose behaviour is impulsive, overactive and/or inattentive to an extent that is unwarranted for their developmental age and is a significant hindrance to their social and educational success."**

## What causes ADHD?

There is ongoing debate about the causes of ADHD, but it seems to result from an underlying genetic basis interacting with factors within the child's specific environment. Many experts believe ADHD is partly due to areas of the brain that affect behaviour not developing as they should, and as a consequence there are changes in the structure of, function of and communication within and between areas of the brain.

Some of the currently understood factors are:

- Specific genes – recent studies show that 70-80% of the risk for ADHD is genetic (Larsson et al, 2013; 2014). This is why ADHD tends to run in families.
- Environmental factors – premature birth, birth trauma, low birth weight, prenatal tobacco exposure (ADHD Institute, 2017).

Certain aspects of the family environment are found more often in children with ADHD, e.g. family stress and adverse life events. It isn't clear if these factors can cause ADHD. They may just increase the likelihood that ADHD will develop in a child who is already genetically predisposed to it.

## ADHD is not caused by:

- Poor parenting (although parenting styles, and interaction with the child's personality, can affect a child's behaviour, which can, in turn, affect the parent's ability to manage difficult behaviour)
- Diet (although dietary supplements such as fish oil - omega 3 and 6 - may help)
- Hormones

## Finally, ADHD is not:

- Laziness or lack of motivation
- Deliberate misconduct or misbehaviour
- Complete absence of attachment ability
- Indication of low intelligence

There are 3 broad characteristics of the behaviour of children and young people with attention difficulties, which for some children and young people occur together. They can be summarized as:

Hyperactivity	Impulsivity	Inattention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often shows high levels of restlessness, fidgeting and movement</li> <li>• Tends to be continually on the go</li> <li>• Is often noisy and talkative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a tendency to interrupt conversations</li> <li>• Tends to talk out of turn</li> <li>• Answers questions before they have been completed</li> <li>• Has difficulty taking turns in games or group situations</li> <li>• Often shifts from one uncompleted activity to another</li> <li>• Often interrupts or intrudes on others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often finds it difficult to settle to a task</li> <li>• Is easily distracted by extraneous stimuli</li> <li>• Is inattentive, forgetful and disorganised</li> <li>• Often does not seem to listen to what is being said to them</li> <li>• Often loses things necessary for activities at home or at school</li> <li>• Often engages in physically dangerous activities without considering the possible consequences</li> </ul>

### ADHD and other difficulties ('co-morbidity')

50% of children and young people with attention difficulties have other challenges, the presence of which may affect the degree of symptom manifestation, the response to treatment and the long-term outcome (ADHD Institute, 2017). Common conditions that are often diagnosed as co-existing with attention difficulties include:

- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (and Conduct Disorder)
- Mood disorders (anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder)
- Specific developmental conditions affecting language, learning and motor skills
- Other neurodiversity conditions such as autism spectrum, Tourette's, OCD
- Non medical (recreational, self medicating or problematic) substance use
- Sleep problems
- Accidental injuries

### Seeking help for children with attention difficulties

For some children and young people attention and concentration difficulties have a significant impact on life both at home and at school. These children are often overactive and impulsive and may have other emotional and behavioural difficulties. Further assessment for ADHD may be appropriate. Children, young people and families can access health services by a number of routes.

- A parent may approach their GP for advice. A GP can then ask for a more specialist health assessment.
- A school, in consultation with parents and often via the education support services e.g. education psychology, may also approach health services.
- CAMHS will make an assessment for ADHD, so it is advisable to speak to your Primary Mental Health Worker if you are concerned about a child or young person's difficulties with attention.

Table 7 overleaf offers some scenarios and ways of working with attention difficulties using the Resilience Framework.

## How to support children and young people with a diagnosis of ADHD

Challenge	How to support the child or young person
<b>You notice that a child or young person really struggles to concentrate and to organise themselves</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The best place for them is near you and the smartboard at the front of the room, away from windows and other distractions. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Support them to organise themselves with reminders on their phone, or lists and timetables etc. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Build in daydreaming time as a structured activity for everyone. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Provide access to breakfast clubs before starting school, as a good, consistent diet is especially important. <b>(Basics)</b></li> <li>• Co-deliver parent workshops in the school co-designed with parents of children and young people with attention difficulties, to raise awareness of how other parents can support these challenges at home. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Identify any challenging behaviours, and together with the child or young person identify the consequences and pay off for each behaviour. Take it in small steps – between you decide to focus on one or two behaviours at a time, and use more appropriate rewards identified as relevant by the student. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Be aware and intervene appropriately if other class children bully or mock the child. <b>(Coping)</b></li> <li>• Use a good behaviour diary. Review each day / once a week and give specific positive feedback. This will help keep the child or young person on track, remind them what you expect, and encourage them to meet goals. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• If the student is a fidgeter, consider encouraging them to use a stress ball, Tangle or other (silent) fidget toy. Some children concentrate better when they are allowed to increase their physical stimulation in situations where they can't get up and move about. <b>(Coping)</b></li> <li>• At the end of the class remind all students about what work has been set, deadlines, and the instructions you've given. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Give a realistic amount of responsibility to the child or young person to support them to take responsibility for themselves. <b>(Core Self)</b>. See The Resilient Classroom for ideas on taking responsibility: <a href="http://www.boingboing.org.uk/academic-resilience-resources-directory/">http://www.boingboing.org.uk/academic-resilience-resources-directory/</a></li> </ul>
<b>A child or young person is constantly forgetting their homework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note homework in a home-school diary so the parents can help remind the child what to do. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• If they are struggling with the amount of homework, try to reduce it where possible. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Talk to them about time management and study skills – some don't know how where to start in long assignments and leave it too late before they start working. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Check if homework has been handed in. Completing homework can be difficult for children or young people with attention difficulties, as can handing it in before it gets forgotten. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Remind them to check their work so it becomes second nature. They may complete work and hand it in without checking it through. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Discuss strategies with the parents, such as breaking homework into blocks, and having some 'letting off steam' time in between. <b>(Learning)</b></li> </ul>

Challenge	How to support the child or young person
<b>A child or young person is constantly forgetting their homework (continued)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop learning mentors in the school who can support them. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Approach this with care and compassion. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental issue and therefore out of the child or young person's control. If missing homework is not due to attention difficulties, then there is always another reason for behaviour. <b>(Learning)</b></li> </ul>
<b>A child or young person confides in you that they are not popular with others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an honest relationship with the child or young person in order to make them feel secure and confident to share their worries. It is important for them to feel that they are heard. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Try not to misunderstand or criticise their need to share thoughts, as they are feeling isolated or rejected. <b>(Basics)</b></li> <li>• Try to develop a confidential network involving others in the school and related community supports in order to offer additional help and information <b>(Coping)</b></li> <li>• Encourage them to participate in school or sport activities, like science laboratory experiments, football team, hiking etc. <b>(Belonging)</b></li> <li>• Boost positive behaviours demonstrated in class, to enhance self-esteem and team spirit. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Organise team work presentations focusing on the principals of non-verbal communication, to help them develop social skills through gestures, body posture, subtle shades of voice tone etc. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Teach all students about the social impact of stigmatization and provide oral opportunities to the other students of the class to think together about inclusion and social acceptance <b>(Learning)</b></li> </ul>
<b>A child or young person's aggressive behaviour is becoming exasperating</b>	<p>Children and young people with behaviours relating to attention difficulties can often feel different to their peers. Subsequently they can be bullied or teased and this can impact on their self-esteem and anger.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try not to take it personally if the child or young person lashes out. Approach the situation with unconditional positive regard, and try to find the cause before you blame anyone. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• If the child or young person has misread a situation, help them understand what happened and how they can react differently to similar situations in the future. Children and young people with attention difficulty related behaviours may have a poor sense of how their behaviour comes across. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Don't argue with the child or young person or allow long debates. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Agree ground rules and boundaries with immediate rewards or consequences for genuinely unacceptable behaviour. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Try to step in in time to dissipate the tension and help them get control of their behaviour <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Recognize the "signs" that occur when there is sensory overload from environmental stimuli and classroom activities <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Give praise and specific positive feedback for constructive, pro-social and positive behaviours. <b>(Core Self)</b></li> <li>• Provide routine and safe boundaries for all children and young people in the class.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for physical movement and responsibility, e.g. small errands, and incorporate them into their daily routine. <b>(Learning)</b></li> </ul>

Challenge	How to support the child or young person
<b>A child or young person is not retaining learning from the lesson</b>	<p>ADHD causes problems with concentration. When students can't maintain focus, they won't learn everything you're teaching.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use frequent eye contact and stand near when giving instructions (if appropriate). <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Keep instructions short and precise, and make sure the first stage is carried out before you move to the next. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Ask the student to repeat instructions back to you. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Use key words to alert students to important parts of the lesson. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Use a routine and write it on the board. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Try to schedule tasks that require attention in the morning or in the early part of the lesson. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Find out what the child is good at or enjoys, and try to incorporate this in activities. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Break down large tasks into small tasks so that each part is more manageable and provides a sense of achievement. <b>(Learning)</b></li> <li>• Give the student a table or list with an outline of key concepts and vocabulary to refer to if they get lost. <b>(Learning)</b></li> </ul>

**Table 7: Ways to support a child or young person who has ADHD type behaviours.**

### **Recommended further reading about ADHD**

Susan Yarney and Chris Martin (2013) *Can I tell you about ADHD? A guide for friends, family and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kim Frank and Susan J Smith-Rex (2001) *ADHD: 102 Practical Strategies for "Reducing the Deficit"* (2nd ed). Chapin, SC: YouthLight, Inc.

Fintan O'Regan (2002) *How to teach and manage children with ADHD*. Cambridge, UK: LDA Learning Publishing.

Fintan O'Regan (2011) *The challenging behaviours pocketbook*. Alresford, UK: Teachers' Pocketbooks.

Fintan O'Regan (2014) *Successful managing ADHD: A handbook for SENCOs and teachers*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Paul H Wender (2000) *ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in children and adults*. Oxford: University Press.

### **Support groups and other useful resources**

ADDISS - [www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk) 0208 952 2800

ADHD Foundation - [www.adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk) 0157 237 2661

Young Minds - [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) 0808 802 5544

Contact a Family - [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk) 0808 808 3555

### **Professional Organisations**

UKAP the UK ADHD Partnership - [www.ukadhd.com](http://www.ukadhd.com)

NASEN - [www.nasen.org.uk](http://www.nasen.org.uk) 01827 311 5000