



---

# ADHD: Symptoms and Treatment

## *Family, Youth, and Caregiver Guide*

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, more commonly known as ADHD, is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Children with ADHD might struggle to concentrate on tasks for extended periods of time or regulate their thoughts and actions. They might have trouble adhering to strict rules and schedules, and they could have a tendency to say or do things at socially inappropriate times.

ADHD occurs in about 1 in 11 children ages 4–17, making it one of the most common childhood mental illnesses. Boys are about twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with ADHD. The typical age of onset is 4 years old, but some children may not be diagnosed until ages 9–10.

Although symptoms can wax and wane and may differ depending on level of structure or change efforts, ADHD is a chronic disorder. ADHD often produces symptoms that interfere with a child's ability to function in their natural environment, which in turn can have a negative impact on their self-esteem.

## **Types and Symptoms**

There are three different types of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Inattentive type, Hyperactive/Impulsive type, and Combined type. In order for someone to be diagnosed with ADHD, six or more of the symptoms below must be present, and these symptoms must cause problems in at least two of the following areas: home, school, and social settings.

### ➤ **ADHD — Inattentive type**

- Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes
- Has difficulty holding attention
- Does not appear to listen
- Struggles to follow through on instructions
- Has difficulty with organization
- Avoids or does not like tasks requiring sustained mental effort

- Loses things easily
- Is easily distracted
- Is forgetful in daily activities

➤ **ADHD – Hyperactive/Impulsive type**

- Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in chair
- Has difficulty remaining seated
- Runs about or climbs excessively
- Has difficulty engaging in activities quietly
- Acts as if driven by a motor
- Talks excessively
- Blurts out answers before questions have been completed
- Has difficulty waiting or taking turns
- Interrupts or intrudes upon others

➤ **ADHD – Combined type**

- Individual meets both sets of inattention and hyperactive/impulsive criteria

## Treatments

ADHD is very treatable, and many children who are diagnosed with ADHD go on to live full, normal lives. They just need a little help learning to manage and cope with their disorder.

ADHD and other mental health disorders tend to be highly intertwined with a child's personal relationships. As such, it is imperative for caregivers and family members to be involved in and supportive of their child's treatment. If their relationships and home/school environments do not change to support their treatment, then its efficacy will be greatly reduced.

➤ **Medication**

Just as a child who struggles to see clearly might need glasses to help their eyes focus, a child with ADHD may need psychiatric medications to help them focus on tasks, ignore distractions, and not act on impulses.

ADHD is typically treated with either stimulants, non-stimulants, or antidepressants. Although each type of medication works differently, they all increase the levels of the neurotransmitters dopamine and/or norepinephrine in the brain, which in turn helps to regulate impulsive behavior and improve attention span.

Stimulants are the most commonly prescribed medication for ADHD, as they have been shown to improve symptoms in 70–80% of children.

## ➤ Therapy and Skills Training

Professional therapy and counseling are important components of treatment for many children with ADHD. Treatments like individual therapy, family therapy, and skills training are important for helping children and their families learn how to manage symptoms of ADHD.

Some common therapeutic practices include:

- Teaching you and your child techniques to help with organization.
- Helping your child identify ways to stop, think, and then react to situations.
- Teaching you and your child about ADHD and how their behaviors affect others.
- Talking about the way your child thinks about themselves and how these thoughts make them feel. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist may be able to help change them and help your child feel and act differently.
- Setting small goals in order to track progress and behaviors.
- Encouraging your child to pay attention to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and to connect those to mood states.
- Talking about whom your child feels close to and the different relationships in their life, and encouraging positive communication with others.
- Helping your child monitor their behaviors and become more aware of how they react to certain situations.
- Praise, rewards and reinforcement of positive behaviors.
- Use of timeouts, commands, and behavioral contracting depending on age and development level.
- Teaching your child how to manage anger and other feelings of hostility or irritability.
- Discussing your child's talents or working on improving old and new skills they have.

## **Supporting a Child with ADHD**

Parents, caregivers, and other family members play an important role in supporting children diagnosed with ADHD. The younger the child, the more likely they'll need help learning how to manage the symptoms of their disorder. Family members can be instrumental in modeling and guiding new coping behaviors.

The following section includes tips that can be helpful for supporting your child's progress. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your family, but it could be useful to give them a try.

**Educate yourself**

Stay educated on what ADHD is, what it looks like, and how it is affecting you, your child and your family. Encourage your child to be open in treatment and to educate themselves on how their behavior is affecting others.

**Get involved in therapy**

Actively participate with the clinician in your child's treatment plan. Be open and flexible about meeting for treatment. Make time for both you and your child to participate individually and as a family.

**Encourage movement**

Moving the body for just five minutes can help with managing ADHD symptoms. Encourage your child to get up and move whenever socially appropriate. Time spent outdoors can be especially helpful.

**Help to solve problems**

Use rewards and reinforcement of positive behaviors with your child. Encourage communication and relationship building with others. Assist with monitoring behavior and utilizing problem solving techniques that you learn from your child's clinician.

**Stay involved with school**

ADHD is often identified through a child's behavior or performance in school, and it can directly affect their academic progress. Communicate constantly with school staff to monitor what is going on with your child when you are not around. Encourage regular attendance and assist with homework if necessary.

**Create support systems**

Make sure everyone who lives in your home is informed about what is going on in order to create a strong family support for your child. Find people you can trust and confide in to help you with transportation to appointments, taking care of other family members, and emotional support.

**Develop structures**

Changes in routine are inevitable if your child begins treatment of any kind. Do your best to stay organized with appointments, medication, work, and social plans with friends and family. Creating structure for your child will help them stay on track with a daily routine.

**Take care of yourself**

Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services, and seek professional guidance if you think it would be helpful. You are your child's source of support and comfort, so feeling your best will help your child feel their best!

**Reduce your stress**

You may laugh at this one, but it is important nonetheless. The less stress you have in your life, the better off everyone will be. Continue doing things you love and be sure to stay healthy (exercise and eat nutritious foods).

**Discipline thoughtfully**

Don't be afraid to discipline your child if necessary. Use of time outs, commands, and behavioral contracting can be effective for supporting your child's progress.

**Don't place blame**

Blaming yourself, your child, or anyone else will not help the situation. Be supportive in any way possible and don't feel guilty about what your child is going through.

**Be proud of yourself**

This is a difficult time. You are already on the right path just by staying informed and involved in your child's life.

**References**

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019, September 25). *Understanding ADHD: Information for Parents*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/Understanding-A-DHD.aspx>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, September 27). *Symptoms and Diagnosis of ADHD*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/diagnosis.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, September 27). *Treatment of ADHD*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/treatment.html>
- Cleveland Clinic. (2022, October 6). *ADHD Medication*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/11766-adhd-medication>
- Family Caregiver Alliance. (n.d.) *Taking Care of YOU: Self-Care for Family Caregivers*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://www.caregiver.org/resource/taking-care-you-self-care-family-caregivers/>
- National Institute of Mental Health. (2023, September). *Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd>
- National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.) *Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)*. Retrieved November 2023. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd>