

ADD/ADHD in Children

Signs and Symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder in Kids

It's normal for children to occasionally forget their homework, daydream during class, act without thinking, or get fidgety at the dinner table. But inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity are also signs of attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD), which can affect your child's ability to learn and get along with others. The first step to addressing the problem is to recognize the signs and symptoms.

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What is ADD/ADHD?

We all know kids who can't sit still, who never seem to listen, who don't follow instructions no matter how clearly you present them, or who blurt out inappropriate comments at inappropriate times. Sometimes these children are labeled as troublemakers, or criticized for being lazy and undisciplined. However, they may have ADD/ADHD.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder that appears in early childhood. You may know it by the name *attention deficit disorder* or ADD. ADD/ADHD makes it difficult for people to inhibit their spontaneous responses—responses that can involve everything from movement to speech to attentiveness.

Is it normal kid behavior or is it ADHD?

The signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD typically appear before the age of seven. However, it can be difficult to distinguish between attention deficit disorder and normal “kid behavior.” If you spot just a few signs, or the symptoms appear only in some situations, it’s probably not ADD/ADHD. On the other hand, if your child shows a number of ADD/ADHD signs and symptoms that are present across all situations—at home, at school, and at play—it’s time to take a closer look.

Once you understand the issues your child is struggling with, such as forgetfulness or difficulty paying attention in school, you can work together to find creative solutions and capitalize on strengths.

Myths about Attention Deficit Disorder

Myth #1: All kids with ADD/ADHD are hyperactive.

Fact: Some children with ADD/ADHD are hyperactive, but many others with attention problems are not. Children with ADD/ADHD, who are inattentive, but not overly active, may appear to be spacey and unmotivated.

Myth #2: Kids with ADD/ADHD can never pay attention.

Fact: Children with ADD/ADHD are often able to concentrate on activities they enjoy. But no matter how hard they try, they have trouble maintaining focus when the task at hand is boring or repetitive.

Myth #3: Kids with ADD/ADHD could behave better if they wanted to.

Fact: Children with ADD/ADHD may do their best to be good, but still be unable to sit still, stay quiet, or pay attention. They may appear disobedient, but that doesn’t mean they’re acting out on purpose.

Myth #4: Kids will eventually grow out of ADD/ADHD.

Fact: ADD/ADHD often continues into adulthood, so don’t wait for your child to outgrow the problem. Treatment can help your child learn to manage and minimize the symptoms.

Myth #5: Medication is the best treatment option for ADD/ADHD.

Fact: Medication is often prescribed for attention deficit disorder, but it might not be the best option for your child. Effective treatment for ADD/ADHD also includes education, behavior therapy, support at home and school, exercise, and proper nutrition.

The primary characteristics of ADD / ADHD

When many people think of attention deficit disorder, they picture an out-of-control kid in constant motion, bouncing off the walls and disrupting everyone around. But this is not the only possible picture.

Some children with ADD/ADHD are hyperactive, while others sit quietly—with their attention miles away. Some put too much focus on a task and have trouble shifting it to something else. Others are only mildly inattentive, but overly impulsive.

Which one of these children may have ADD/ADHD?

- A. The hyperactive boy who talks nonstop and can't sit still.
- B. The quiet dreamer who sits at her desk and stares off into space.
- C. Both A and B

The correct answer is “C.”

The three primary characteristics of ADD/ADHD are; inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. The signs and symptoms a child with attention deficit disorder has depended on which characteristics predominate.

Children with ADD/ADHD may be:

- Inattentive, but not hyperactive or impulsive.
- Hyperactive and impulsive, but able to pay attention.
- Inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive (the most common form of ADD/ADHD).

Children who only have inattentive symptoms of ADD/ADHD are often overlooked since they're not disruptive. However, the symptoms of inattention have consequences: getting in hot water with parents and teachers for not following directions; underperforming in school, or clashing with other kids over not playing by the rules.

Spotting ADD / ADHD at different ages

Because we expect very young children to be easily distractible and hyperactive, it's the impulsive behaviors—the dangerous climb, the blurted insult—that often stand out in preschoolers with ADD/ADHD. By age four or five, though, most children have learned how to pay attention to others, to sit quietly when instructed to, and not to say everything that pops into their heads. So by the time children reach school age, those with ADD/ADHD stand out in all three behaviors: inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.

Inattentive signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD

It isn't that children with ADD/ADHD can't pay attention: when they're doing things they enjoy or hearing about topics in which they're interested, they have no trouble focusing and staying on task. But when the task is repetitive or boring, they quickly tune out.

Staying on track is another common problem. Children with ADD/ADHD often bounce from task to task without completing any of them or skip necessary steps in procedures. Organizing their schoolwork and their time is harder for them than it is for most children. Kids with ADD/ADHD also have trouble concentrating if there are things going on around them; they usually need a calm, quiet environment in order to stay focused.

Symptoms of inattention in children:

- Doesn't pay attention to details
- Makes careless mistakes
- Has trouble staying focused; is easily distracted
- Appears not to listen when spoken to
- Has difficulty remembering things and following instructions
- Has trouble staying organized, planning ahead, and finishing projects
- Gets bored with a task before it's completed
- Frequently loses or misplaces homework, books, toys, or other items

Hyperactive signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD

The most obvious sign of ADD/ADHD is hyperactivity. While many children are naturally quite active, kids with hyperactive symptoms of attention deficit disorder are always moving. They may try to do several things at once, bouncing around from one activity to the next.

Even when forced to sit still which can be very difficult for them their foot is tapping, their leg is shaking, or their fingers are drumming.

Symptoms of hyperactivity in children:

- Constantly fidgets and squirms
- Often leaves his or her seat in situations where sitting quietly is expected
- Moves around constantly often run or climb inappropriately
- Talks excessively
- Has difficulty playing quietly or relaxing
- Is always “on the go,” as if driven by a motor
- May have a quick temper or a “short fuse”

Impulsive signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD

The impulsivity of children with ADD/ADHD can cause problems with self-control. Because they censor themselves less than other kids do, they’ll interrupt conversations, invade other people’s space, ask irrelevant questions in class, make tactless observations, and ask overly personal questions. Instructions like “Be patient” and “Just wait a little while” is twice as hard for children with ADD/ADHD to follow as they are for other youngsters. Children with impulsive signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD also tend to be moody and to overreact emotionally. As a result, others may start to view the child as disrespectful, weird, or needy.

Symptoms of impulsivity in children:

- Acts without thinking
- Blurts out answers in class without waiting to be called on or hear the whole question
- Can’t wait for his or her turn in line or in games
- Says the wrong thing at the wrong time
- Often interrupts others
- Intrudes on other people’s conversations or games
- Inability to keep powerful emotions in check, resulting in angry outbursts or temper tantrums
- Guesses, rather than taking time to solve a problem

Is it really ADD / ADHD?

Just because a child has symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, or hyperactivity does not mean that he or she has ADD or ADHD. Certain medical conditions, psychological disorders, and stressful life events can cause symptoms that look like ADD / ADHD.

Before an accurate diagnosis of ADD / ADHD can be made, it is important that you see a mental health professional to explore and rule out the following possibilities:

- **Learning disabilities** or problems with reading, writing, motor skills, or language.
- **Major life events** or traumatic experiences (e.g. a recent move, the death of a loved one, bullying, divorce).
- **Psychological disorders** including anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder.
- **Behavioral disorders** such as conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder.
- **Medical conditions**, including thyroid problems, neurological conditions, epilepsy, and sleep disorders.

A learning disability may be mistaken for ADHD

Think your child has attention deficit disorder? Sometimes, kids who are having trouble in school are incorrectly diagnosed with ADD/ADHD, when what they really have is a learning disability. Furthermore, many kids struggle with both ADD/ADHD and a learning disability.

Positive effects of ADD / ADHD in children

In addition to the challenges, there are also positive traits associated with people who have attention deficit disorder:

- **Creativity** – Children who have ADD/ADHD can be marvelously creative and imaginative. The child who daydreams and has ten different thoughts at once can become a master problem-solver, a fountain of ideas, or an inventive artist. Children with ADD/ADHD may be easily distracted, but sometimes they notice what others don't see.
- **Flexibility** – Because children with ADD/ADHD consider a lot of options at once, they don't become set on one alternative early on and are more open to different ideas.

- **Enthusiasm and spontaneity** – Children with ADD/ADHD are rarely boring! They're interested in a lot of different things and have lively personalities. In short, if they're not exasperating you (and sometimes even when they are), they're a lot of fun to be with.
- **Energy and drive** – When kids with ADD/ADHD are motivated, they work or play hard and strive to succeed. It actually may be difficult to distract them from a task that interests them, especially if the activity is interactive or hands-on.

Keep in mind, too, that ADD/ADHD has nothing to do with intelligence or talent. Many children with ADD/ADHD are intellectually or artistically gifted.

Helping a child with ADD / ADHD

Whether or not your child's symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity are due to ADD/ADHD, they can cause many problems if left untreated. Children who can't focus and control themselves may struggle in school, get into frequent trouble, and find it hard to get along with others or make friends. These frustrations and difficulties can lead to low self-esteem as well as friction and stress for the whole family.

But treatment can make a dramatic difference in your child's symptoms. With the right support, your child can get on track for success in all areas of life.

Don't wait to get help for your child

If your child struggles with symptoms that look like ADD/ADHD, don't wait to seek professional help. **You can treat your child's symptoms of hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity without having a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder.**

Options to start with include getting your child into therapy, implementing a better diet and exercise plan, and modifying the home environment to minimize distractions.

If you do receive a diagnosis of ADD/ADHD, you can then work with your child's doctor, therapist, and school to make a personalized treatment plan that meets his or her specific needs. Effective treatment for childhood ADD/ADHD involves behavioral therapy, parent education and training, social support, and assistance at school. Medication may also be used, however, it should never be the sole attention deficit disorder treatment.

Parenting tips for children with ADD / ADHD

If your child is hyperactive, inattentive, or impulsive, it may take a lot of energy to get him or her to listen, finish a task, or sit still. The constant monitoring can be frustrating and exhausting. Sometimes you may feel like your child is running the show. But there are steps you can take to regain control of the situation, while simultaneously helping your child make the most of his or her abilities.

While attention deficit disorder is not caused by bad parenting, there are effective parenting strategies that can go a long way to correct problem behaviors.

Children with ADD/ADHD need structure, consistency, clear communication, and rewards and consequences for their behavior. They also need lots of love, support, and encouragement.

There are many things parents can do to reduce the signs and symptoms of ADD/ADHD without sacrificing the natural energy, playfulness, and sense of wonder unique in every child.

School tips for children with ADD / ADHD

ADD/ADHD, obviously, gets in the way of learning. You can't absorb information or get your work done if you're running around the classroom or zoning out on what you're supposed to be reading or listening to.

Think of what the school setting requires children to do: Sit still. Listen quietly. Pay attention. Follow instructions. Concentrate. These are the very things kids with ADD/ADHD have a hard time doing—not because they aren't willing, but because their brains won't let them.

But that doesn't mean kids with ADD/ADHD can't succeed at school. There are many things both parents and teachers can do to help children with ADD/ADHD thrive in the classroom. It starts with evaluating each child's individual weaknesses and strengths, then coming up with creative strategies for helping the child focus, stay on task, and learn to his or her full capability.