

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Children

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Having a short attention span, being inattentive, easily distracted, being impulsive and being hyperactive are all normal parts of child development.

But, if you think your child behaves this way too much, you may wonder when these behaviors are no longer “normal.”

Usually, these behaviors should not be creating problems for your child by age 6 or 7. A note from school saying your child “won’t listen to the teacher,” “is often off task” or “causes trouble in class” may be a warning sign. Your child could have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) if these behaviors occur daily and interfere with school work and friendships.

Even though a child with ADHD wants to be a good student, they can be impulsive and unable to pay attention in class. Parents, teachers and friends view the child as much more active and challenging to redirect.

Hyperactivity can go along with ADHD. Behaviors common in hyperactivity include:

- being very restless, fidgety and impatient
- a very high energy level
- running or climbing (in young children).

Inattention may appear as

- being easily distracted
- having poor focus
- poor listening and organizational skills
- being forgetful.

All of these behaviors typically create problems for your child and others.

Children may not grow out of ADHD but hyperactivity tends to lessen with age. However, the problem of attention may continue.

Cause

The exact cause of ADHD is not known. It’s possible that the condition runs in families.

The makeup of the brain may be physically different in children with ADHD. They may have more or less active parts of their brain than children without the condition.

Symptoms

There are 3 main types of ADHD. Your child may have:

- **problems paying attention.** Your child:
 - is easily distracted or bored
 - often fails to finish things he or she starts
 - has problems concentrating on schoolwork or other tasks that need focus
 - often doesn’t seem to listen
 - has problems sticking to a play activity
 - has problems remembering things or getting homework done on time
 - has problems organizing work (when there is not another reason for problems with memory, speaking, thinking or talking).

(over)

■ **problems sitting still and thinking things through.** Your child:

- has problems sitting still or fidgets a lot
- is easily distracted or bored
- often acts before thinking
- interrupts others when they talk
- shifts a lot from one activity to another
- has problems waiting for their turn in games or group activities
- needs a lot of supervision
- runs around or climbs on things a lot
- is always “on the go” (has a lot of energy).

■ **a combination of both types.**

Diagnosis

A qualified mental health care provider who has training and experience in treating ADHD can assess your child for ADHD. To assess your child, the provider may:

- do a health history and physical exam
- rule out other medical problems that could be causing the behavior
- contact your child’s teacher(s) to ask questions about the behavior
- order tests to diagnose or rule out ADHD.

If you are an adult who has never been diagnosed with ADHD, but think you may have it, speak with a qualified mental health care provider.

Treatment

Studies show that if left untreated, children are at a risk of school failure, mood problems, delinquency and substance abuse.

Treatment may include 1 or more of the following:

- **medicine.** You may wish to contact your child’s mental health care provider to discuss medicines that may help with symptoms.

- Medicine will not make your child pick up clothes, stop fighting or change their mood. Instead, your child may pick up clothes because they “heard” you say to do it, or because they “remembered” to do it.
- Your child may improve how they act after pausing to think before reacting.
- Your child’s moods should be better because they may feel more successful.

- **school intervention.** Most children who have been diagnosed with ADHD need special help in school. Children with learning challenges may need more intense special help earlier. Children who do not have learning problems may only need help in organizing their time and schoolwork.

The typical child who has ADHD does not finish work during class time, does not remember assignments or does the assignment and forgets to turn it in.

- **cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).** CBT teaches the connection between thinking, feelings and behavior. Through CBT, you and your child can learn how their thoughts, feelings and behaviors:

- interact with each other
- may be preventing your child from staying on task and getting things done.

Together, you can learn how changing your child’s thought patterns can help treat symptoms of ADHD.

- **integrative therapies.** Your child may benefit from learning relaxation techniques and deep breathing exercises to help improve focus and manage stress.

Ask your mental health care provider how your child can learn more about integrative therapies.