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ADHD: Tips to Try

ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is a medical condition. It affects how well people can sit still, focus, and pay attention.

If you have ADHD, you know it can make you feel misunderstood and frustrated at times. But it doesn't have to hold you back. Instead, learn as much as you can about it.

There's no quick fix for ADHD. But working with doctors and counselors can help you figure out how to reach your full potential — both in school and socially. It's important to treat ADHD, which might mean taking medicine or working with therapists or counselors — most people with ADHD do both.

And you can try these tips to help with school and relationships:

- **Sit in the front of class to limit distractions.**
- **Turn off email, instant messaging, and your phone when doing homework or other tasks that require focused attention.** This will help protect you against being distracted.
- **Talk with your teacher about your ADHD and work together to be sure you're learning in a way that works for you.** For example, some schools will allow extra time for students with ADHD to take tests. Some teens may benefit from smaller class sizes and tutoring help.
- **Use tools that help you stay organized.** For example, keep track of assignments in a homework notebook, including a list of books and readings you'll need to bring home to do. Write down classes and other appointments in a daily planner or on your smartphone so you don't forget.
- **Get plenty of exercise.** Studies are starting to show that exercise can help people who have ADHD. If you feel hyper during school, talk to a teacher about taking activity breaks so you can stay focused and concentrate better when in class. Take activity breaks often while studying or doing homework.
- **Practice relaxation and meditation techniques to relax and focus.**

- **Let friends know what's going on.** Sometimes we blurt things out and regret it later on. Or we do silly, impulsive things. If this happens to you, let your friends know that sometimes you say things without thinking them through. Apologize if you have hurt someone's feelings and try to be extra careful in new situations.
- **Take pride in the things you do well.** Having ADHD is just a different way of being, and people with ADHD have their own abilities and talents.

Reviewed by: Shirin Hasan, MD

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ADHD Special Needs Factsheet

What Teachers Should Know

Kids and teens with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may act without thinking and have trouble focusing. They may understand what's expected of them, but have trouble following through or completing tasks because they can't sit still, pay attention, or attend to details. The severity of ADHD symptoms can vary widely.

ADHD affects about 10% of school-age kids. Boys are about three times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with it, though it's not understood why.

About half of all kids with ADHD also have a specific learning disability. The most common learning problems are with reading (such as dyslexia) and handwriting. Although ADHD isn't categorized as a learning disability, its interference with concentration and attention can make it even more difficult for a child to perform well in school.

Because bullies often target students who seem "different," certain health conditions, including ADHD, can put kids and teens at higher risk of being bullied.

What Teachers Can Do

Reduce distractions by seating the student near you instead of a window.

Communicate with parents and ask for their help. Keep a daily journal of behavior and progress notes to share with parents.

Teach the student how to use a scheduling and assignment book. Teach good study skills, including underlining, note-taking, and reading aloud to help with focus and information retention.

Keep instructions clear and brief, breaking down larger tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces.

Stay on the lookout for positive behaviors to praise, such as staying seated, not calling out, taking turns, etc.

Pair the student with a buddy to do an end-of-day checklist so the right books, materials, and other important stuff go home.

Be sensitive to self-esteem issues. Provide feedback to the student in private, and avoid asking the student to perform difficult tasks in front of classmates.

Ask the school counselor, psychologist, or special-ed teacher to help design behavioral programs to address specific problems in the classroom.

Have brief, regularly scheduled exercise breaks and find opportunities for the student to be active, such as standing while working on assignments or delivering materials to the principal's office.

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Individualized Education Programs (IEPs): Tips for Teachers

Students with delayed skills or other disabilities might be eligible for special services that provide individualized education programs (IEPs) in public schools, free of charge to families. Understanding your role in educating a student with an IEP will benefit both you and the student.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) makes teachers of students with special needs responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring educational plans to help the students succeed in school. The IEP describes the goals set for the students for the school year, as well as any special support the students may need to help them achieve those goals.

Who Needs an IEP?

Students struggling in school may qualify for support services, allowing them to be taught in a special way, for reasons such as:

- learning disabilities
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- emotional disorders
- cognitive challenges
- autism
- hearing impairment
- visual impairment
- speech or language impairment
- developmental delay

Signs that a student may have a learning disability include:

- getting poor grades despite significant effort
- needing continual, step-by-step guidance for tasks
- not being able to remember problem-solving steps because he or she does not understand the tasks or the logic behind them
- having poor memory of spoken or written material
- having difficulty mastering tasks or transferring academic skills to other tasks
- not being able to remember skills and facts over time
- having strong general knowledge, but not being able to read (dyslexia), write (dysgraphia), or do math (dyscalculia) at that level

- having difficulty with communication and language processing, as well as expressive and receptive language
- being extremely frustrated with school and homework

How Are Services Delivered?

In most cases, the services outlined in an IEP can be provided in regular education classrooms. In other cases, IEP services might be delivered in separate resource classrooms or even separate schools, depending on the students' needs. Some students may have an IEP for one subject area only, while others may have one for all academic subjects in addition to social skills instruction.

The least restrictive setting for students with IEPs is a regular education classroom. Students with IEPs usually join regular education classes for special subject areas such as science, social studies, art, music, library, gym, and health. It is critical for regular classroom teachers to read students' IEPs and be familiar with the services and monitoring that are required in the plan.

The next least restrictive setting is a resource or learning support classroom. In this setting, groups of students with similar needs are brought together for small-group instruction. A certified special education teacher is the instructor and other school personnel (aides or support teachers) assist with teaching.

Students who need intense intervention, however, may be taught in a special school environment. These schools have fewer students per teacher, allowing for more individualized attention. Teachers in these schools usually have specific training in helping students with specific special educational needs.

Evaluation and Referral

The referral process generally begins when a teacher, parent, or doctor is concerned that a child may be having trouble in the classroom.

The first step is to gather specific data regarding the student's progress or academic problems. This may be done through:

- a conference with parents
- a conference with the student
- observations of the student
- analysis of the student's performance (attention, behavior, work completion, tests, classwork, homework, etc.)

This information helps teachers and school personnel determine the next step. At this point, strategies specific to the student could be used to help the child become more successful in school prior to any formal testing. If this doesn't work, the child would be tested for a specific learning disability or other impairment to help determine qualification for special services.

It's important to note, though, that the presence of a disability doesn't automatically guarantee a child will receive services. To be eligible, the disability must affect functioning at school.

To determine eligibility, a multidisciplinary team of professionals will evaluate the child based on their observations, the child's performance on standardized tests, and daily work such as tests, quizzes, classwork, and homework.

Who's On the Team?

The professionals on the evaluation team can include:

- classroom teachers
- a psychologist
- a physical therapist
- an occupational therapist
- a speech therapist
- a special educator
- a vision or hearing specialist
- others, depending on the child's specific needs

After it is determined that further testing is necessary, parents will be asked to sign a permission form that will detail who is involved in the process and the types of tests they use. These tests might include measures of specific school skills, such as reading or math, as well as more general developmental skills, such as speech and language. Testing does not necessarily mean that a child will receive services.

Once the team members complete their individual assessments, they develop a comprehensive evaluation report (CER) that compiles their findings, offers an educational classification, and outlines the skills and support the child will need.

The parents then have a chance to review the report before the IEP is developed. If parents disagree with the report, they will have the opportunity to work together with the school to come up with a plan that best meets the child's needs.

Developing an IEP

The next step is an IEP meeting at which the team and parents decide what will go into the plan. In addition to the evaluation team, a regular classroom teacher should be present to offer suggestions about how the plan can help the child's progress in the standard education curriculum and how it can be implemented in a regular classroom setting, if that's appropriate.

At the meeting, the team will discuss a student's educational needs — as described in the CER — and come up with specific, measurable short-term and annual goals for each of those needs.

The cover page of the IEP outlines the support services students will receive and how often they will be provided (for example, occupational therapy twice a week, pullout daily math classes). Support services might include special education, speech and language therapy, occupational or physical therapy, counseling, audiology, medical services, nursing, vision, hearing therapy, and many others.

If the team recommends several services, the amount of time they take in the child's school schedule can seem overwhelming. To ease that load, some services may be provided on a consultative basis. In these

cases, the professional consults with the teacher to come up with strategies to help the child but doesn't offer any hands-on instruction. For instance, an occupational therapist may suggest accommodations for a child with fine-motor problems that affect handwriting, and the classroom teacher would incorporate these suggestions into the handwriting lessons taught to the entire class.

Other services can be delivered right in the classroom, so the child's day isn't interrupted by therapy. The child who has difficulty with handwriting might work one on one with an occupational therapist while everyone else practices their handwriting skills. When deciding how and where services are offered, the child's comfort and dignity should be a top priority.

If a child has academic needs and is working below grade level, services may be offered outside the regular education classroom, with students getting small-group instruction in a particular subject area (usually language arts or math) by a special education teacher with other students who have similar needs.

The IEP should be reviewed annually to update the goals and make sure the levels of service meet the student's needs. However, during the school year progress monitoring will occur on a frequent basis to assure that the student is achieving goals set in the IEP. IEPs can be changed at any time on an as-needed basis.

Specific timelines ensure that the development of an IEP moves from referral to providing services as quickly as possible. Be sure to ask about this timeframe and stay informed.

If parents disagree with any part of the CER or the IEP, mediation and hearings are options.

It is important for teachers to understand the IEP process and the role they have in delivering instruction to students who have an IEP. Any questions related to an IEP can be directed to the team or the case manager assigned to a student.

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Homework Tips for Parents

- **Establish a routine and schedule for homework (a specific time and place)** and adhere to the schedule as closely as possible. Don't allow your child to wait until the evening to get started.
- **Limit distractions** in the home during homework hours (eg, reduce unnecessary noise, activity, and phone calls; turn off the TV).
- **Assist your child in dividing assignments into smaller parts** or segments that are more manageable and less overwhelming.
- **Assist your child in getting started on assignments** (eg, read the directions together, do the first items together, observe as your child does the next problem/item on his or her own). Then get up and leave.
- **Monitor and give feedback without doing all the work together.** You want your child to attempt as much as possible independently.
- **Praise and compliment your child when he or she puts forth good effort and completes tasks.** In a supportive, noncritical manner it is appropriate and helpful to assist in pointing out and making some corrections of errors on the homework.
- **It is not your responsibility to correct all of your child's errors on homework** or make him or her complete and turn in a perfect paper.
- **Remind your child to do homework and offer incentives:** "When you finish your homework, you can..."
- **A contract for a larger incentive/reinforcer may be worked out** as part of a plan to motivate your child to persist and follow through with homework. ("If you have no missing or late homework assignments this next week, you will earn. . .").
- **Let the teacher know your child's frustration and tolerance level in the evening.** The teacher needs to be aware of the amount of time it takes your child to complete tasks and what efforts you are making to help at home.
- **Help your child study for tests.** Study together. Quiz your child in a variety of formats.
- **If your child struggles with reading, help by reading the material together** or reading it to your son or daughter.
- **Work a certain amount of time and then stop working on homework.** Don't force your child to spend an excessive and inappropriate amount of time on homework. If you feel your child worked enough for one night, write a note to the teacher attached to the homework.
- It is very common for students with ADHD to fail to turn in their finished work. It is very frustrating to know your child struggled to do the work, but then never gets credit for having done it. Papers seem to mysteriously vanish off the face of the earth! **Supervise to make sure that completed work leaves the home and is in the notebook/backpack.** You may want to arrange with the teacher a system for collecting the work immediately on arrival at school.
- Many parents find it very difficult to help their own child with schoolwork. Find someone who can. **Consider hiring a tutor!** Often a junior or senior high school student is ideal, depending on the needs and age of your child.
- **Make sure your child has the phone number of a study buddy**—at least one responsible classmate to call for clarification of homework assignments.
- Parents, **the biggest struggle is keeping on top of those dreaded long-range homework assignments** (eg, reports, projects). This is something you will need to be vigilant about. Ask for a copy of the project requirements. Post the list at home and go over it together with your child. Write the due date on a master calendar. Then plan how to break down the project into manageable parts, scheduling steps along the way. Get started AT ONCE with going to the library, gathering resources, beginning the reading, and so forth.

Adapted from Rief S. *The ADD/ADHD Book of Lists*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers; 2002

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