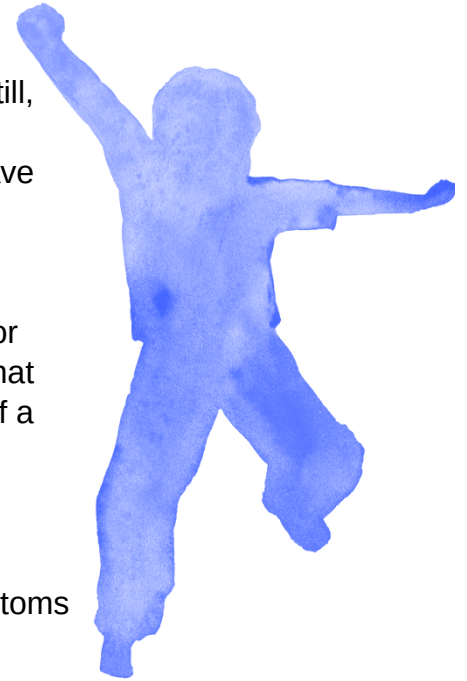


Supporting Children and Youth with ADHD: A Guide for Caregivers

What is ADHD?

All children may have times when they struggle to concentrate, to sit still, or to follow directions. However, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a neurodevelopmental condition, behave this way more frequently than their peers. Young people with ADHD often experience executive functioning challenges where memory, attention, motivation, and emotions are affected. Children with ADHD experience symptoms that make it hard for them to perform in school or to get along with caregivers, siblings, or peers. Research has shown that there is no single cause of ADHD, but rather that it is likely the result of a combination of genetic and environmental factors.



Symptoms of ADHD

There are two major categories of ADHD Symptoms: Inattentive Symptoms and Hyperactive/ Impulsive Symptoms

Inattentive Symptoms

- Making careless mistakes
- Appearing forgetful and losing things
- Struggling to stick with tasks that are boring, difficult, or time-consuming
- Difficulty organizing tasks and time
- Difficulty with instructions
- Frequently switching from one activity to another

Hyperactive/Impulsive Symptoms

- Struggling to sit still
- Appearing restless
- Frequently interrupting
- Having trouble staying quiet
- Struggling to be patient or wait turns
- 'Excessive' running and climbing,
- Always seeming 'on the go'
- Interfering with or disrupting others

Treatment

While no specific cure for ADHD exists, there are treatments that can help manage the symptoms. ADHD treatments include medication, behavioral therapy, or a combination of both approaches. No treatment for ADHD works overnight, and your family may need to navigate challenges related to treatment such as maintaining medication schedules, or adjusting to new systems and routines as a part of behavior therapies. Your support and investment are essential. On the following pages are tips on how you can best support youth and children with ADHD.



Create predictability and routine

Children and youth with ADHD can benefit from having a consistent and predictable routine. These help establish boundaries, reduce anxiety, and assist with executive functions such as planning, organizing, working memory, and making transitions. Involve your child in developing routines whenever possible and try to keep them simple. Many families find it helpful to develop routines around specific times like homework time, mealtime, or bedtime. Consider using visual reminders (e.g., checklists, charts, post-it notes, or drawings). These can help build working memory skills and reduce anxiety.



Be clear and consistent with expectations and consequences

Children and youth with ADHD may struggle in situations where they are unsure of what is expected of them. Ensure that expectations and consequences are reasonable, meaningful, and well-understood. Be proactive in communicating around expectations and consequences, and keep things simple and direct. When possible, try to coordinate with other adults in your child's life to be consistent across settings. And be sure to be consistent yourself, by following through on what you say you are going to do.



Be flexible and do what works

Some caregivers may find themselves stuck on how things "should" work, or what a child "should" do. Think through what is *actually* important to you, and where you might be more flexible or adjust expectations. For example, if getting out of the house on time is a struggle, consider doing certain "morning tasks" the night before, or doing breakfast on the go. Create systems that work *with* - rather than against - your child's (and your own) strengths and limitations. Try different approaches to find one that works for you and your family.



Reduce shame and stigma

For some children, a diagnosis of ADHD can elicit feelings of shame. You can support your child to manage these emotions and protect their self-esteem by talking with your child about their diagnosis. You can explain that ADHD is a way of understanding how their brain works. You can share that ADHD brains may have certain things that are challenging for them, like sustaining attention, focusing, regulating emotional reactions, organizing, or planning, while also emphasizing that ADHD brains have special strengths like creativity, enthusiasm, and curiosity. How we talk to young people about their ADHD can influence the self-image they develop and take with them into adulthood. Helping them to positively understand their own brain can help them feel empowered to manage their challenges and honor their strengths.



Encourage clear and open communication

Clear and open communication with your child can help manage expectations, reduce anxiety and maintain family harmony. Be sure to talk with them and not *at* them. Create space to talk and ensure that conversations don't feel rushed. Ask open-ended questions to show them that you are invested in getting to know their perspective.



Focus on strengths

Notice and praise your child's strengths and positive behaviors. When you do need to address challenging behaviors or to provide re-direction, try to focus your words on your child's behavior and not your child. It can also be helpful to make note of positive progress and effort. Doing this makes it more likely that they will persevere with tasks that they find challenging or boring. Identify areas in which your child excels and provide encouragement and opportunities for them to build on these strengths.



Support self-regulation (for both you and your child)

It is common for children with ADHD to have challenges regulating their emotions. You can help your child to recognize and identify emotions, and to develop strategies for managing feelings as they arise. Take time to talk to your child about their emotions and support them in finding words to describe their feelings. Support your child to learn self-soothing techniques such as breathing or mindfulness practices. Take steps to manage your own feelings of distress so you can better support your child to self-regulate.



Invest in your relationship

Parenting a child with ADHD can be stressful, and children are more attuned to stress in their caregivers than one might think. Children and youth with ADHD may feel they're letting their caregivers down, are always messing up, or are a "bad kid." Strengthen your bond with your child by increasing your positive and loving interactions with them. Schedule activities you both enjoy and can do together, or set aside time for check-ins where you can provide words of love and support. Manage the negative impact of challenging interactions by following up with your child afterward, and reassuring them of your love and support. Leaving feelings of frustration or anger unmanaged can reinforce a negative cycle of communication and undermine your relationship with your child.



Engage in self-care

Parenting a child with ADHD can be challenging for even the most confident and skilled caregivers. It is important that you take time to attend to your own well-being. Create a plan for how and when you will engage in self-care, and reach out to others for support. You also might consider seeking out your own professional mental health support.

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