

What is ADHD? **ADHD** is a common disorder that impacts focus, self-control and other skills important in daily life. It's caused by differences in brain anatomy and wiring, and often runs in families.

ADHD is one of the most common conditions in childhood. It impacts how kids function in school and in everyday life. Suspecting or hearing that your child has ADHD (also known as ADD) can raise many questions, even basic questions like “what is ADHD?” You may wonder about symptoms and how to help your child.

Understanding the challenges of ADHD allows you to find the best help possible for your child. This overview can answer many of your questions about ADHD, no matter where you are on your journey. It provides basic information to get you started. But you'll also find more in-depth information, tips and expert insight.

If you're concerned your child might have ADHD, here are [steps you can take](#). And if your child was just diagnosed with ADHD, find out [what to do next](#).

Snapshot: What ADHD Is

ADHD is a disorder involving a group of [key skills known as executive function](#). Executive function impacts the ability to focus, organize, use [working memory](#), and other executive skills.

ADHD is caused by differences in the development of brain anatomy and wiring. It often runs in families. Everyone has symptoms of ADHD at one time or another. But to be diagnosed with ADHD, kids must have far more difficulty with these problems than their peers. Kids with ADHD also have challenges in more than one area—for example, at school, at home and in friendships.

Estimates of how many children in the U.S. have ADHD range from 5 percent to 11 percent. For a long time, people thought ADHD was something only kids—boys, in particular—had. But research has shown that ADHD symptoms can persist into adulthood in some people, and that [women and girls have it as often as men and boys](#).

Kids with ADHD struggle with key areas of executive function that are responsible for focus, impulse control and other skills.

Some of the skills kids with ADHD often struggle with include:

- [Working memory](#)
- [Flexible thinking](#)
- [Managing emotions](#)
- [Self-regulation](#)
- [Organization and planning](#)

Most kids don't totally outgrow ADHD, although [some symptoms can lessen or disappear](#) as they get older. Even so, there are treatments for ADHD that can help reduce symptoms. And there are [supports at school](#) that can make learning easier.

ADHD Signs and Symptoms

The main symptoms of ADHD are [inattention](#), [impulsivity](#) and [hyperactivity](#). They can look different in different kids, however. And some symptoms may change or even disappear as kids get older.

The stereotype of kids with ADHD is that they're always in motion, they're impulsive and hyperactive, and they often have behavior problems at home and at school.

But some kids with ADHD never have those symptoms. They may have only problems with inattention. These kids might be identified as having [ADHD Inattentive Type](#). (It may also be [referred to as ADD](#), or ADHD Without Hyperactivity.)

ADHD is essentially an issue with executive function. Because of that, kids with ADHD often have trouble:

- Managing time
- Getting and staying organized
- Managing emotions
- Paying attention and remembering things
- Shifting focus from one thing to another
- Getting started on tasks
- Thinking before saying or doing things

There's one very confusing sign of ADHD. Kids who lack focus most of the time often can ["hyperfocus" or focus very well](#) on tasks or activities they find really interesting.

For instance, a child might be able to focus for hours while playing a sport or doing a craft project. Or kids may hyperfocus on video games or a TV show, to the point that they don't hear their name being called.

Focusing on schoolwork can be very hard, however, even when kids know it's important. This can make it look like ADHD is a "willpower problem," when in reality it isn't. There's a big difference between "won't" (willpower) and "can't." A child's brain with ADHD has a harder time shifting focus.

Some kids show symptoms of [ADHD in preschool](#). But for many, there are no clear signs of ADHD until third or fourth grade. Some kids won't show signs of ADHD until they face the challenges of middle school or high school. This might be because demands on executive function—organizing, planning, managing time—get more intense as kids progress in school.

Here are some signs you or [your child's teacher might see](#) at different grade levels:

Preschool–Grade 2

- Ignores directions or doesn't follow them

- Grabs things without permission
- Gets easily and extremely frustrated
- Needs to be frequently reminded to stop and listen
- Has trouble getting started on tasks
- Gets up, fidgets or talks when expected to be quiet

Grades 3–7

- [Seems daydreamy](#) and distracted, and easily loses focus
- Frequently loses or forgets things
- Is often restless
- Tends to forget to bring home assignments or turn them in
- Doesn't consider consequences before doing things
- Doesn't finish tasks in a reasonable amount of time

Teens

- Has trouble getting organized and prioritizing things
- Often acts impulsively
- Frequently fidgets and talks too much
- Has trouble meeting deadlines and finishing tasks
- Often needs to re-read things or have directions repeated
- Often [rushes through assignments](#), making errors

While many kids with ADHD rush through assignments, others actually work more slowly than other kids. Slow processing speed is common in kids with ADHD. It can make it harder to complete tasks or explain things as quickly as their peers. Also, kids with ADHD can be more likely to have learning differences, as you'll read about below.

Other Issues That Can Co-Occur With ADHD

[ADHD isn't a learning disability](#), even though it can affect learning. But ADHD often co-occurs with common learning issues like [dyslexia](#), [dyscalculia](#) and [dysgraphia](#). Many kids with ADHD also struggle with mental health issues like anxiety and depression at some point.

Here are some issues that often co-occur with, or are mistaken for, ADHD:

Executive functioning issues and ADHD are closely related. In fact, the symptoms and difficulties of ADHD *are* [problems of executive function](#). Trouble with attention, self-control, memory and organization are often due to weak executive skills.

Learn about the [difference between ADHD and executive functioning issues](#).

Dyslexia occurs in roughly 20 to 40 percent of kids with ADHD. This common learning issue impacts the ability to read. [Dyslexia](#) can also interfere with other learning skills like math, spelling and writing. **Dyscalculia and dysgraphia** are also common in kids with ADHD (and vice versa). Dyscalculia is a learning disorder that impacts math, while dysgraphia impacts writing.

Learn more about [dyscalculia](#) and [dysgraphia](#).

Slow processing speed isn't part of ADHD, but it can add to the challenges. Processing speed is like the engine that drives how well kids can use executive functioning skills. So kids with slow processing speed may have a harder time starting tasks, staying focused and monitoring how they're doing.

Learn more about [slow processing speed](#).

Sensory processing issues can occur in some kids with ADHD. These kids have [trouble handling input that comes through the senses](#). They can get overwhelmed by things like smell, noise, taste and textures.

Learn about the [difference between ADHD and sensory processing issues](#).

Auditory processing disorder can look like ADHD. That's because trouble following directions or talking with people can be signs of both. But while their symptoms may appear to be similar, these two issues are very different.

Learn about the [difference between auditory processing disorder and ADHD](#).

Nonverbal learning disabilities are [learning issues that impact social skills](#). Kids with ADHD often struggle with social skills, too, and these two issues can co-occur.

Learn about the [difference between nonverbal learning disabilities and ADHD](#).

Anxiety and depression both commonly occur with ADHD. Kids with ADHD have a [greater risk of mental health issues](#) than kids who don't have ADHD.

Read about the connection between [anxiety and ADHD](#) and [depression and ADHD](#).

Possible Causes of ADHD

There's been a lot of research in the last few years that has pointed to possible causes of ADHD. Brain-imaging studies have looked at brain anatomy and wiring in people who have ADHD and those who don't.

Studies have shown that brain development is very similar. But kids with ADHD have a delay in development of about three years in some specific parts of the brain. These are the areas involved in executive functions. That's why [kids with ADHD may act one to three years younger than other kids their age](#).

Research also shows some differences in the networks that help parts of the brain communicate with each other. And there are differences in how brain chemicals act when they're involved in that communication.

It's important to know that these differences have nothing to do with intelligence or IQ. Kids with ADHD are just as smart as kids without ADHD.

Genetics also appear to play a role. Research has shown that ADHD tends to run in families. A child with ADHD has a one in four chance of having at least one parent who also has it. And there's a strong likelihood that another close family member also has ADHD.

How ADHD Is Diagnosed

There are no blood or imaging tests that can diagnose ADHD. Instead, evaluators use a variety of tools to determine if a child has ADHD. One is a questionnaire about the child's behavior (normed rating scales). Another is a clinical interview with both the child and the parents.

Parents will be asked for a detailed history of the child's health, past and present. The clinician will also want to discuss how the child functions at school, at home, and in social situations.

It's best if the evaluation is done by a specialist who understands ADHD and other disorders kids might have. (Find out [what to look for in a proper ADHD evaluation](#).)

The types of [professionals who may diagnose ADHD](#) in children include the following:

- Pediatricians
- Child and adolescent psychiatrists
- [Developmental pediatricians](#)
- [Pediatric neuropsychologists](#)
- Psychiatric nurse practitioners
- Clinical psychologists
- Licensed clinical social workers
- Licensed mental health counselors
- Licensed marriage and family therapists

Many can also evaluate for issues that often co-occur with ADHD. That includes learning and mental health issues.

How Professionals Can Help With ADHD

There's a wide range of professionals who work with kids who have ADHD. How they help depends on their specialty and the setting they work in. Here are some of the specialists who commonly help kids with ADHD.

Psychologists, licensed mental health counselors, licensed clinical social workers and licensed marriage and family therapists can help children and parents understand ADHD and develop strategies to improve symptoms. This might include using [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) or play therapy to help kids improve attitudes and behavior. They might also do [behavior therapy](#) to help kids turn negative behaviors and habits into positive ones.

Health-care professionals can prescribe and monitor [ADHD drugs](#). They also [fine-tune the medication](#) until they find the right type, dosage and timing for your child. Doing that can reduce or eliminate any [side effects](#). Medications don't cure ADHD. But they can significantly improve symptoms for about 80 percent of people with ADHD. **School psychologists** can help plan supports and interventions at school. They may also work directly with kids on academics, social skills and behavior management.

Special education teachers may help develop [behavior intervention plans](#). They may also work with kids to build academic and social skills and manage behavior. These teachers sometimes offer private tutoring services and teach organization skills.

Educational therapists help kids work on a variety of skills. They can focus on specific subject areas being taught. They may also teach organizational skills and help kids build basic learning skills. Read more about [skills educational therapists work on](#).

Organizational coaches are consultants you can hire to help your child. They work with kids on building organizational and time management skills. They can also work on study skills. Learn more about [organizational coaches](#).

Key Takeaways

- ADHD is a common condition that impacts focus, self-control and other skills.
- There's a wide range of professionals who can help kids with ADHD.
- Raising a child with ADHD can be challenging, but there are many ways to help your child succeed in school and in life.

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