

Parenting a child with ADD/ADHD

If you have a child with ADHD, you know how frustrating it can be when your kid doesn't listen, do what you asked, or finish what was started. With the constant monitoring your child requires, it may feel as if he or she is the one running the home. This added stress can breed resentment, causing you to focus on your child's deficits while overlooking successes and positive traits. On top of that, you may also feel guilt over your frustration.

But despite the difficulties ADD/ADHD can cause both for you and your child, it doesn't mean that family life has to be chaotic and frustrating. There are many things you can do to lessen the impact of your child's condition. Living in a home that provides both love and structure is the best thing for a child or teenager who is learning to manage ADD/ADHD. With patience, compassion, and plenty of support, you can deal with childhood ADHD while enjoying a stable, happy home.

Tips for family life

It's important to remember that the child with ADD/ADHD who is ignoring you, annoying you, or embarrassing you is not acting willfully. Having ADD/ADHD can be just as frustrating as dealing with someone who has it. Kids with ADD/ADHD want to sit quietly; they want to make their rooms tidy and organized; they want to do everything Mom says to do, but they don't know how to make it happen. If you keep this in mind, it will be a lot easier to respond to you child in positive, supportive ways.

Believe in and support your child.

- Recognize everything that is positive, valuable, and unique about your child.
- Trust that your child can learn, change, mature, and succeed. Nurture your child's talents and channel those aspects of ADD/ADHD that can be channeled positively. Today's dreamer may be the next J.K. Rowling.
- Let your child make mistakes and learn from them, but be there for comfort when mistakes cause pain.
- Promote a healthy self-esteem by nurturing the skills your child needs and communicating your unwavering love, approval, and support.

Keep things in perspective.

- Remember, your child's behavior is related to a disorder. Most of the time it is not intentional.
- Hold on to your sense of humor. What's embarrassing today may be a funny family story ten years from now.
- Don't sweat the small stuff. One chore left undone isn't a big deal when your child has completed two others plus the day's homework.
- Be willing to make some compromises. If you're a perfectionist or someone who prizes order and decorum, your child is not the only one who needs to change.

Pay attention to the siblings.

- Educate siblings about ADD/ADHD.
- Establish a clear set of rules that everyone in the home must follow.
- Spend quality time with *all* your kids. Plan activities that are enjoyable for the whole family.
- Don't take the successes of your unaffected kids for granted. Praise their unique qualities, abilities, and achievements.

Let your unaffected children be kids. Don't enlist them as assistant parents — or blame them if the sibling with ADD/ADHD misbehaves under their supervision.

Take care of yourself.

- Look after your own health, and find ways to reduce stress.
- Find the support you need and take advantage of it.
- Cut yourself some slack if your child with ADD/ADHD doesn't become a model child overnight: you're a parent, not a magician.

Managing your child's ADD/ADHD

Children with ADD/ADHD generally have deficits in *executive function*: the ability to think and plan ahead, organize, control impulses, follow through, and complete tasks. That means you need to take over as the executive, providing extra guidance while your child slowly acquires executive skills of his or her own.

Your most important attributes in this process are common sense and a positive attitude. Common sense will tell you which behaviors to work on the most, when to negotiate and when to stand firm, and how to head off problems before they start. A positive attitude will help you see the small, praiseworthy successes that can add up to permanent improvement in your child's behavior.

Tips for managing your child's ADHD:

- **Communicate.** Be clear and concise when communicating with your child. Give instructions one step at a time; make requests one at a time.
- **Be consistent.** What you expect one day should be what you expect every day. Don't give in just because you're tired or the child is nagging.
- **Set a good example.** Show your child the behaviors you'd like to see. Be a model of patience, healthy habits, and good manners. Be at least as organized as you want your child to be.
- **Anticipate and avoid problems.** Know your child's triggers and what situations lead to problems. Become adept at heading off trouble before it starts.
- **Praise good behavior.** Praise is a powerful reinforcer, so make every effort to "catch your child being good".

- **Negotiate and consult with your child.** You're a parent, not a drill sergeant, so try to avoid barking orders at your child. Start a dialogue, and be open to what your kid has to say.
- **Pick your battles.** Not every situation requires intervention. Keep the big picture in mind and let the little things slide. If you don't, your home will be one of constant conflict and criticism.

Behavioral strategies for parents

There are many strategies you can use at home to increase your child's appropriate behaviors and decrease the inappropriate, disruptive ones.

Strategies for improving communication

- Go up to your child and make direct eye contact before giving an instruction.
- Check for understanding: "Tell me what I want you to do."
- Give verbal directions one at a time, not in a long list.
- Physical contact can help the child focus.
- Encourage your child to talk through a situation rather than just plunging in.
- Go over steps in a procedure before and during activities, including those you and your child do together.
- Express expectations in written or visual form as well as verbal, such as a chore chart or a checklist.

Strategies for maintaining structure

- Establish predictable routines for morning and evening.
- Keep your child busy with scheduled, supervised activities, but don't pile on so many that the child is overwhelmed.
- Insufficient sleep makes attention problems worse, so insist that your child have a regular bedtime and enough rest.
- Make sure your child has a quiet, private space of his or her own, even if it's just a table with a blanket thrown over it.
- Plan ahead to make sure your child doesn't become overtired or hungry during outings; review rules on behavior beforehand.
- Make sure other caregivers are familiar with daily routines and behavioral goals and adhere to them.

Strategies for improving organization and time management

- Set up your home in an organized way: a place for everything and everything in its place.
- Your child should have a specific, regular place for doing homework, away from distractions.
- Have your child lay out clothes for the next morning before going to bed; make sure what the child needs to take to school is in a special place, ready to grab.

- Give your child a special notebook for writing down assignments.
- Put clocks throughout the house, with a big one in your child’s bedroom.
- Allow enough time for what your child needs to do, such as homework or getting ready in the morning.
- Build lots of regular breaks into homework time.

Using Rewards and Consequences to Promote Good Behavior

Rewards

- Make a chart with points or stars awarded for good behavior, so your child has a visual reminder of his or her successes.
- Reward your child with privileges or activities, rather than with food or toys.
- Change rewards frequently. Kids with ADD/ADHD get bored if the reward is always the same.
- Immediate rewards work better than the promise of a reward in the future, but a system where small rewards lead to a big one can also be effective.
- Reward your child for small achievements that you might take for granted in another child.
- Remember, hugs, smiles, and praise are rewards, too.

Consequences

- Spell out rules and the consequences of inappropriate behavior in advance.
- Use time-outs and the removal of privileges as consequences for misbehavior.
- Take or keep your child away from situations and environments that trigger inappropriate behavior.
- Let your child know how you feel when he or she misbehaves.
- Have your child come up with alternatives to his or her disruptive behavior, then have your child demonstrate this appropriate behavior.
- Always follow through. Do what you say you’re going to do, whether in reward or punishment.

Using the mind-body connection

Although ADD/ADHD is a condition that affects the mind, studies show that exercise, physical surroundings, and diet can make a difference in symptoms.

Exercise and physical awareness

Strenuous exercise can be a huge benefit for children with ADD/ADHD. They have energy to burn, and organized sports and other physical activities can help them focus their attention on specific movements and skills. Exercise also improves concentration, decreases depression and anxiety, and promotes brain growth.

Find a sport that your child will enjoy and that suits his or her strengths. For example, sports such as softball that involve a lot of down time are not the best fit for children with attention problems. Individual sports or team sports like basketball and hockey that require constant motion are better options. Children with ADD/ADHD may also benefit from martial arts training, tae kwon do, and yoga, which enhance mental control as they work out the body.

“Green time”

Researchers have found that children with ADD/ADHD benefit from spending time in nature. Kids experience a greater reduction of ADHD symptoms when they play in a park full of grass and trees than on a concrete playground.

Parents may want to take note of this promising approach to managing ADHD. Even in cities, most families have access to parks and other natural settings. And when parents join their children in “green time,” they also get a much-needed breath of fresh air for themselves.

Diet and nutrition

All children benefit from fresh foods and regular meal times; it’s best for *all* kids to stay away from junk food and soda. These tenets are especially true for children with ADD/ADHD, whose impulsiveness and distractedness can easily lead to missed meals, disordered eating, overeating and obesity.

Specific foods probably don’t cause ADD/ADHD, but some researchers have claimed there’s a connection between chemicals found in many foods, including artificial colors and other additives, and the severity of ADD/ADHD symptoms. However, common sense and discipline, rather than special foods or restrictive diets, are what’s most important.

Relationship help for kids with ADD/ADHD

Children with ADD/ADHD often have difficulty with simple social interactions and with reading social cues. Their relative emotional immaturity can make them stand out among children their own age and make them targets for other children’s unethical behavior. They may talk too much, interrupt frequently, and come off as aggressive or “too intense.” Accordingly, parents often worry that their child with ADD/ADHD will attract undesirable people as friends or will be unable to make friends and to sustain important relationships as teens and adults.

Don’t forget, though, that many kids with ADHD are quite intelligent and creative and eventually will figure out for themselves how to get along with others and how to spot people who aren’t appropriate as friends. Moreover, personality traits that might exasperate parents, teachers, and other authority figures may come across to other people as quirky, funny, and charming. Your job is to help your child with ADD/ADHD become a better listener, learn to read people’s faces and body language, and interact smoothly in groups.

Finding support for childhood ADD/ADHD

One of the most important things to remember in rearing a child with ADD/ADHD is that you don’t have to do it all by yourself. Be willing to ask for support and coordinate services from your child’s doctors, therapists, and teachers. Also, take advantage of support groups for yourself and for your child.

Support groups for parents of children with ADHD:

- connect parents with others dealing with the same issues.
- offer a forum for giving and receiving advice.
- provide a safe place to vent feelings and share experiences.

Support groups for children with ADD/ADHD:

- give kids a place to share helpful strategies.
- show children that they aren't alone; they're not the only kids with these problems.
- teach children how to transfer the skills they've learned to the larger world.

There are also social skills groups geared toward children with ADD/ADHD that can teach them the nuances of social interaction and help them try out learned social skills in the real world. Ask your school psychologist or a mental health clinic for a referral to a local social skills group.

Helpguide's Series on ADD / ADHD

- [ADD & ADHD in Children](#): Signs, Symptoms, and How to Get Help
- [Parenting a child with ADHD](#): Strategies for Family and Home Life
- [ADD & ADHD in the Classroom](#): Tips for Parents and Teachers
- [Diagnosing ADD & ADHD](#): Making the Diagnosis in Children and Adults
- [Adult ADD & ADHD](#): Recognizing the Signs, Symptoms, and Effects
- [Self Help for Adult ADD](#): Tips for Managing Symptoms and Getting Focused
- [ADD & ADHD Treatment](#): Professional Help for Children and Adults
- [ADD / ADHD Medications](#): Are Meds Right for You or Your Child?

Related links for parenting a child with ADD/ADHD

ADD/ADHD parenting advice

[Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#) – This booklet in PDF format covers most aspects of ADD / ADHD. See pages 10-14 for behavioral modification strategies that involve parents. (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities)

[Parenting a Child with AD/HD](#) – Succinct but comprehensive article followed by a long reading list. (National Resource Center on AD/HD)

[ADHD – A Guide for Families](#) – Family-friendly and supportive overview of ADHD, with accompanying video. (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

[Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#) – Click on “The Family and the ADHD Child” for information about family-oriented therapies, skills training, and behavioral interventions. (National Institute of Mental Health)

[ADHD: What Parents Need to Know](#) – Detailed, helpful article with lots of embedded links to more specific topics and support organizations. (University of Michigan Health Systems)

[What Is ADHD?](#) – A clear and concise article for parents that includes a discussion on behavioral therapy and strategies. (Kids Health)

Behavioral strategies for dealing with ADD/ADHD

[AD/HD and the Child](#) – One of a series of fact sheets on ADD/ADHD, this one focuses on how parents can explain ADD/ADHD to their children as well as modify their behavior. (The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada)

[Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Behavioral Management](#) – Excellent article that discusses not only establishing rules and rewards and improving concentration but also strategies for dealing with aggression and where to set priorities. (University of Maryland Medical Center)

[Non-Medical Interventions for ADHD](#) – Written by a physician, this down-to-earth article provides a lot of practical advice for parents, with a refreshing recognition that yes, doing everything you need to do to help a child with ADD/ADHD is *tough*. (Attention Deficit Disorder Resources)

[How to Parent Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#) and [Parenting 101](#) – Although this commercial site is selling its own program and books, it offers an enormous amount of clear, well-described guidelines and strategies for parents of children with ADD/ADHD. Pull down the Parenting menu for advice on everything from sibling rivalry to choosing a babysitter. (Child Development Institute)

[Helping Children Learn to Pay Attention](#) – Scroll down to "Practical Steps for Building Attention Skills" and "In a Nutshell: Helping the Attention Regulator" for practical, well-presented advice on helping children with ADD/ADHD focus and achieve. (Parents League of New York)

Diet and childhood ADD/ADHD

[ADHD and Diet – Part I](#) and [ADHD and Diet - Part II](#) – Personal recommendations for feeding a child with ADHD, especially valuable because they are detailed, specific, and give insight into the process of trial and error that parents need to use to discover what's best for their own children. (4ADHD)

[Parents Guide to Diet, ADHD & Behavior](#) (PDF) – Introduces a detailed plan for creating a diet that may lessen a child's ADHD symptoms. (Center for Science in the Public Interest)

More strategies for dealing with childhood ADD/ADHD

[Helping Your Teen with ADD \(ADHD\) Prepare for Independence](#) – Excellent, age-specific tips for helping your teenager handle money, chores, driving, and schoolwork; manage their time; and take responsibility for their health. (ADDvance.com)

[ADHD and Homework Time](#) – Terrific tips for helping children get homework done and get organized; encourages experimentation to find what works and finding ways to channel ADD-related habits. (4ADHD)

[Children with ADHD benefit from time outdoors enjoying nature](#) – News of a study in which researchers have found that children showed diminished symptoms of ADHD during time spent outdoors in a green environment. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) See also [Putting “Green Time” to the Test](#), in which a dad describes how he tested the “green time” theory. (4ADHD)

[ADHD and Social Interactions](#) – Describes how parents can help their children with ADD/ADHD recognize emotional facial expressions and social cues more easily. (4ADHD)

Delving Deeper into ADD/ADHD

[ADHD Reading Materials](#) – This nonprofit offers articles on every aspect of ADD/ADHD. (Attention Deficit Disorder Resources)

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http://helpguide.org/mental/adhd_add_parenting_strategies.htm