Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Symptoms of ADHD

The symptoms of [ADHD](http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/default.htm) include inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. These are traits that most children display at some point or another. But to establish a diagnosis of ADHD, sometimes referred to as ADD, the symptoms should be inappropriate for the child's age.

Adults also can have ADHD; in fact, up to half of adults diagnosed with the disorder had it as children.  When ADHD persists into adulthood, symptoms may vary. For instance, an adult may experience restlessness instead of hyperactivity. In addition, adults with ADHD often have problems with interpersonal relationships and employment.

Types of ADHD

There are three different subtypes of ADHD, including:

* Combined ADHD (the most common subtype), which involves symptoms of of both inattentiveness and hyperactivity/impulsivity
* Inattentive ADHD (previously known as ADD), which is marked by impaired attention and concentration
* Hyperactive-impulsive ADHD, which is marked by hyperactivity without inattentiveness

For a diagnosis of ADHD, some symptoms that cause impairment must be present before age seven. Also, some impairment from the symptoms must be present in more than one setting. For instance, the person may be impaired at home and school or home and work. Also, there must be clear evidence the symptoms interfere with the person's ability to function at home, in social environments, or at work.

Symptoms of ADHD

There are three different categories of ADHD symptoms: inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity.

**Inattention** may not become apparent until a child enters the challenging environment of school. In adults, symptoms of inattention may manifest in work or in social situations.

A person with ADHD may have some or all of the following symptoms:

* Difficulty paying attention to details and tendency to make careless mistakes in school or other activities; producing work that is often messy and careless
* Easily distracted by irrelevant stimuli and frequently interrupting ongoing tasks to attend to trivial noises or events that are usually ignored by others
* Inability to sustain attention on tasks or activities
* Difficulty finishing schoolwork or paperwork or performing tasks that require concentration
* Frequent shifts from one uncompleted activity to another
* Procrastination
* Disorganized work habits
* Forgetfulness in daily activities (for example, missing appointments, forgetting to bring lunch)
* Failure to complete tasks such as homework or chores
* Frequent shifts in conversation, not listening to others, not keeping one's mind on conversations, and not following details or rules of activities in social situations

**Hyperactivity** symptoms may be apparent in very young preschoolers and are nearly always present before the age of seven. Symptoms include:

* Fidgeting, squirming when seated
* Getting up frequently to walk or run around
* Running or climbing excessively when it's inappropriate (in teens this may appear as restlessness)
* Having difficulty playing quietly or engaging in quiet leisure activities
* Always being 'on the go'
* Often talking excessively

## 6 Parenting Tips for Raising Kids With ADHD

What to do, and not to do, if your child has ADHD.

By [Katherine Kam](http://www.webmd.com/katherine-kam)  
WebMD Feature

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When Hal Meyer learned that his son, 5, had [ADHD](http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/default.htm), he couldn’t believe it. When his child was at school, “He was rambunctious, he couldn’t stay in his seat, he was going around, helping everybody,” Meyer recalls. But to him and his wife, these were signs of brightness and curiosity, not symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.

But experts told them, “You don’t understand. These are not typical of a 5-year-old.”

After they explained the disorder, the couple took a long time to accept the news. “We went through a year or two of denial,” Meyer says.

That was 20 years ago. Since then, Meyer has learned a lot about raising a [child with ADHD](http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/childhood-adhd/adhd-children). He shares those lessons with other parents who are dealing with the power struggles, tantrums, low self-esteem, and school problems that often come with the disorder.

Shortly after his son’s diagnosis, Meyer co-founded the New York City chapter of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), a nonprofit education and advocacy group. He also founded the ADD Resource Center in New York City, which provides [parenting](http://www.webmd.com/parenting/old-toc) classes and support groups, among other services.

In New Jersey, Eva O’Malley also knows the challenges first-hand. She has ADHD and so do her daughter, 22, and son, 17. O’Malley founded the Monmouth County CHADD chapter.

When O’Malley’s son was diagnosed at age 12, her husband worried about his son being “labeled.” Would people see the ADHD and not the boy?

The children have grappled with school problems, forgetfulness and disorganization, O’Malley says. Sometimes, ADHD makes both offspring live only in the moment. “You don’t learn from your past, and you don’t have a vision to the future,” O’Malley says. But there have been bright spots, too, including her son’s improved grades.

WebMD asked these parents, as well as a developmental pediatrician, to share insights on raising a child with ADHD.

### 1. Be honest with your child about ADHD.

Meyer never thought about keeping the news from his son. “I told him exactly what was going on,” he says.

In contrast, some parents hide the disorder by telling their child, for example, that their ADHD drug is a “magic vitamin,” he says. But Meyer has done ADHD coaching with kids who have confided that they aren’t fooled: they know that it’s [medication](http://www.webmd.com/drugs/index-drugs.aspx).

ADHD isn’t a child’s fault. It’s a brain disorder that causes youngsters to have trouble with concentration, ability to complete tasks, or plan for the future. By being open, Meyer lessened the stigma for his son.

Once, he took his son, who was 7 or 8 at the time, to a restaurant where they spotted a youngster in perpetual motion -- so much, in fact, that one parent had to hold him down. “My mouth must have dropped,” Meyer says. “And my son said to me, ‘Don’t look at him as hyperactive. Look at him as being in a hurry to see the world.”

“We can reframe things,” Meyer says. “We don’t have to always look at the most negative.”

Patricia O. Quinn, MD, a developmental pediatrician in Washington, D.C., agrees that it’s best to tell the truth. “It’s really important to be honest and upfront,” she says. The child really needs to understand that it’s just part of who he or she is and it’s really something they can control.”

Quinn specializes in treating children and adults with ADHD. She has the disorder, as do three of her four children. She has consulted for pharmaceutical companies and has written numerous books about ADHD

### 2. Don’t turn ADHD-related problems into a character issue.

Children with ADHD may not perform as consistently as peers who have no problems with focus and concentration.

“I don’t expect consistency from a child with ADD,” Meyer says. “One day, a child may come in with a 90 on a test. The next day, it may be 60. The next day, 70. The next day, it might be 95.”

When grades bounce around, “It’s typical for any [parent] to say, ‘Well, you did so well yesterday. Why aren’t you doing it today?’” he says.

“Often, kids with ADHD are very bright," Quinn says. "They know what to do, but they simply don’t know how to get started, they don’t stick with it, and people may misinterpret that.”

### 3. Don’t let ADHD become a convenient excuse

Yes, ADHD makes many tasks harder, but children should learn to take responsibility, Meyer says.

“Don’t let them make ADHD an excuse for something.," Meyer says.

"For example, many young children quickly learn to say things, such as, “I don’t need to do my homework because I have an attention deficit disorder,” Meyer says. “That’s not going to cut it."

The reality? “It may be harder for me to do my homework because I have an attention deficit disorder.”

### 4. Enforce rules and consequences calmly.

For a child with ADHD, it helps to have verbal and written expectations. For example, parents could post a chart that lists the child’s responsibilities and the house rules.

Rewards are fine, Meyer says, but make them immediate, such as TV time or gold stars that can be redeemed for prizes. Since children with ADHD have trouble with planning for the future, it may not work to offer a new bike for a year’s worth of good grades.

Parents must be clear about consequences and enforce them right away, calmly and clearly. While parents may often feel frustrated, avoid punishing in the heat of disappointment or anger, Meyer says.

That can be hard when a parent has ADHD, too, Quinn says. The disorder can run in families.

Parents with ADHD might yell because they have trouble with impulsivity, according to Quinn. “We really do try to help the parent remain in control in these situations," she says. "Often, I say that the child doesn’t need a time out -- sometimes the parent needs a time-out before they discuss the situation.”

Parents need to get their own ADHD under control so that they can model appropriate behavior, Quinn says.

### 5. Help your child discover his strengths.

Children with ADHD are often compared unfavorably to others. Hence, some develop low self-esteem and [depression](http://www.webmd.com/depression/old-toc1), Meyer says.

Problems with self-esteem occur as early as age 8, says Quinn. Many[teens](http://www.webmd.com/children/tc/growth-and-development-ages-15-to-18-years-promoting-healthy-growth-and-development) with ADHD, especially if undiagnosed, develop a learned helplessness. “They say, ‘Nothing ever goes right for me. Why should I even bother to try?’ There’s a lot of demoralization and depression that goes along with it," Quinn says.

Meyer wanted his son to discover his own best abilities -- “islands of competency,” he says. “I would say to him, ‘Look, you have weak spots and you have strong spots.”

When his son found subjects dull, “He couldn’t care about it, period,” Meyer says.

“But when he was interested in something, he would master things five years above his age [level],” he says. For example, his son knew how to wire electrical outlets and replace computer parts well ahead of peers. “That stuff stuck with him and he knew that was one of his islands of competency. So he had things to look at other than negative things.”

Meyer would offer a favorable comparison: he told his son that few people his age could master such tasks. “High expectations in the proper areas, I think, is very important,” he says.

### 6. Don't overprotect your child.

As children with ADHD grow, they’ll need to learn independence.

“We tend to try to solve everything for kids with issues,” Meyer says. “I’m adamantly against that. I want them to learn how to be on their own, to be successful. I don’t want them to feel, ‘I have a disability and Mommy and Daddy are going to be there to solve all my problems, to make everything good.’"

### 6. Don't overprotect your child. continued...

With his son, that involved “not telling him what to do, but having him telling me what he should do,” Meyer says. “He had to learn to be able to do it by himself, which is very hard for kids with ADHD.”

For parents, that might mean allowing children to deal with their own traffic fines instead of paying on their behalf. Or letting them solve their own roommate problems when they leave home.

O’Malley, the mother of a college student with ADHD, learned that lesson in hindsight. When her daughter had dorm-mate troubles, O’Malley and her husband asked the president of the college to intervene. The couple “went to bat for her,” O’Malley says. After they gave her some solutions, the young woman ultimately rejected the ideas.

Don’t rush in and present solutions for a child with ADHD to select, O’Malley says. “This is a lesson you learn when you have teenagers and you’re always giving them choices. You’re never really teaching them how to solve problems.”

**Common Questions About ADHD**

**General Information**

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) occurs when a difference in the brain makes it difficult to control behavior. The disorder has three characteristics: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Eight to 12 percent of children have ADHD (according to the University of Michigan health system). ADHD can range from mild to severe and in severe cases can significantly impact both behavior and learning and interfere with many dimensions of a person's life. About half those who have ADHD also have a learning disorder and/or a behavior disorder (such as oppositional defiant disorder).

**How are ADD and ADHD diagnosed?**

The symptoms are inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.To fit the official diagnosis, these symptoms:

* Must appear by age 7
* Must have lasted at least six months
* Must be present in at least two settings, such as home, school, social gatherings
* Must negatively impact a person's school, family and/or social life
* Must not be a result of the child's normal developmental level

Also, ADHD or ADD cannot have other causes, such as:

* Behavioral disorders (oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder)
* Learning disabilities
* Major life events trauma (such as death of a loved one, bullying, illness, divorce or a recent move)
* Medical conditions (thyroid problem, epilepsy, sleep disorder, neurological disorder)
* Psychological problems (such as  anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder)

**Do all children with ADHD and ADD behave the same way?**

No, there are three patterns in which the disorder may appear:

* A child may be consistently inattentive, disorganized, and daydream a lot, but not very active or impulsive.
* A child may be much more active and impulsive than others his age, but not very inattentive.
* A child may be all three: inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive.

**Are ADD or ADHD learning disabilities?**

No, a learning disability occurs when a difference in brain structure or function in a person with normal intelligence creates a problem with learning. Some people with learning disabilities also have ADHD, but ADHD refers to a problem controlling behavior or attention.

**Are ADD and ADHD linked to low self-esteem?**

Yes, they are linked to low self-esteem. Here are some examples of how they can lead to low self-esteem:

* Even though he tries his hardest, a child may find it impossible to be still or pay attention. When he realizes he can't meet expectations, both at home and at school, he loses self-esteem.
* A child may get in trouble with peers for not following directions or playing games by the rules, causing a loss of self-esteem.
* Teachers may object that a child skips necessary steps in assignments, doesn't complete tasks, and doesn't organize time or assignments. Realizing he can't follow the teacher's instructions can cause a loss of self-esteem.
* A child may blurt out answers in class, interrupt others, have temper tantrums, overreact, and be moody, which makes it difficult to maintain friendships, causing a loss of self-esteem.

**How can I foster self-esteem in my child with ADHD/ADD?**

* Try to focus on your child's strengths rather than his weaknesses.
* Help him develop areas of strength.
* Notice his positive habits and behaviors and mention them.
* When he has a problem, work with your child to figure out the cause and come up with solutions. Then, next time a problem arises, remind him in a calm voice of the agreed-upon solution.
* Listen to your child and validate his experience.

**What can parents and caregivers do to help children with attention-deficit disorders?**

Children with ADD or ADHD usually do best with:

* Structure
* Consistency
* Clear communication
* Rewards and consequences for behavior
* Love and support as they try to meet expectations in all areas of his life
* Encouragement to pursue whatever interests they have
* Both parents reacting similarly to positive and negative behavior
* Both parents rewarding positive behavior more than punishing negative
* Daily feedback on behavior. (Have teachers email you feedback each day about how your child did in school. Then offer rewards or time-outs as is appropriate based on this information.)
* An uncluttered, calm, and soothing atmosphere in the home, with TV screens covered up so that they don't tempt
* A good night's sleep (symptoms get worse with inadequate sleep)
* Avoidance of situations that are difficult to handle
* Time-outs that help them regain control
* A quiet place to study
* Receiving one direction at a time, with eye contact made while giving it
* Ample warning before they must change what they are doing or where
* Small goals
* Change of only one or two things at a time

**What reinforcements work best for kids with ADD or ADHD?**

* Immediate positive feedback is best. Kids with ADHD succeed most if quick praise is given when they complete a boring task.
* If they don't complete a task, giving immediate**,**mild negative consequences (such as timeouts) is most helpful. Delayed consequences are ineffective.
* Frequent feedback, both positive and negative, helps.
* Clear and unambiguous consequences, both negative and positive, work best.
* Frequent reminders that you believe your child will eventually overcome difficulties and succeed in life can be a strong motivator.
* Paying attention to your child's strengths, and helping to build on them, can be powerful.

**How does having a child with ADHD or ADD affect family life?**

The child's problems can cause friction and stress for the whole family:

* The need to constantly monitor the child can be exhausting.
* Siblings may resent the extra attention the child receives, the constant disruption the sibling causes, and the sibling's demands or aggression.
* When one parent has ADHD or ADD and has child is born with the disorder, the other parent may be resentful.
* Family outings may be unpleasant as a result of the child's behavior.
* Parents may be overwhelmed by frequent doctor and school appointments to deal with the child's problems, as well as the extra expense involved.

**Are there special safety concerns when caring for chidren with ADHD or ADD?**

Yes, people with ADD and ADHD have many more accidents than others. They receive more head injuries, injure more parts of their body, are hospitalized more for accidental poisoning, and are more likely to get hurt while riding a bike or walking. Therefore, they must be more closely monitored than other kids.

* Make sure your child wears a bike helmet when biking.
* Take extra care with household chemicals or tools that could harm a child.
* Be especially careful if your child is climbing or near water
* Tell your child to avoid listening to the radio, speaking on the cell phone, or giving rides to passengers while driving, as distractions increase the chanceof an accident.

**Who treats ADD or ADHD?**

Specially trained clinical social workers, child psychiatrists, psychologists, developmental/behavioral pediatricians, or behavioral neurologists treat ADD and ADHD.

**How are ADD and ADHD treated?**

ADHD is usually treated with a combination of medication, behavior modification, changes in lifestyle, and counseling. Exercise and nutrition may be important components of treatment, along with classroom modifications. Interventions in which teachers, parents, therapists and physicians collaborate often work best, and a supportive family can make an enormous difference. Ongoing assessment of interventions is critical. Parents and therapists must set goals and measure progress to see if interventions are actually helping the child.

Some therapeutic interventions that often help include:

* Psychotherapy, in which older children and adults look at negative behavior patterns and learn how to avoid them.
* Behavior therapy, in which parents and teachers learn how to help the child behave differently. This usually involves using rewards and time-outs.
* Family therapy, which helps parents and siblings cope.
* Social skills training, in which the person with ADHD learns appropriate social behavior.
* Support groups, whether for the person with ADHD or for their families, in which people share coping strategies, information, and support.

**What about dietary interventions for ADD/ADHD?**

Although no scientific studies as yet have shown a definitive link between diet and changes in behavior, many parents feel that their children are less disruptive when they eliminate processed food, additives, sugar, and caffeine.

**Are there treatments for ADD and ADHD that don't involve medication?**

Some people are experimenting with brain wave biofeedback to see if learning to control brain wave patterns can make the brain waves more normal.

**What are some activities where children with attention-deficit disorders may succeed?**

Every child is unique, but often kids with ADD and ADHD do well with:

* Martial arts
* Art
* Dance
* Chess (helps teach problem-solving techniques and patience and has been successful with many kids who have ADHD)

**Do relaxation techiniques help children with attention-deficit disorders?**

Many children with ADD or ADHD do find that using relaxation techniques, in combination with other interventions, helps them manage their behavior.

**How do I help my teenager with ADHD or ADD follow rules and avoid behavior problems?**

* Recognize that your child will need extra supervision and more time than others to learn new responsible behaviors.
* Break desired behaviors into small parts and let your teen learn each in sequence. For example, if he wants to stay out till midnight, begin by letting him stay out until 10. If that goes well and he gets home on time, he can then stay out until 11. But if it doesn't go well, move his curfew back to 10 until he can responsibly stay out later.
* Monitor your teen's behavior outside the home, such as who he is with, where he is, what he is doing, and when he will be home. Establish clear rules for behavior -- what is and is not permissible.
* Anticipate problems. Develop behavior contracts for potentially difficult situations, such as doing homework or being home on time. You and your child should both know the consequences of not following the rules. Consequences must be applied with fairness and consistency, with everyone knowing in advance what they will be.
* Certain things should be negotiable and others inflexible. Teens are often more compliant with rules they have helped create, but there should also be some non-negotiable rules, too. To help teens develop independence, gradually give them more of a say in decision making once they have done well in previous attempts.

**Am I a bad parent or caregiver if I lose my temper or don't enforce rules?**

Many parents of kids with ADHD feel this way, as it is difficult to be consistent and to not give in to your child's arguments.  Recognize that you are dealing with a difficult situation and forgive both yourself and your child for imperfections. Also, consider joining a support group where you can meet other parents and share strategies for coping.

**What can schools do to help children with ADHD or ADD succeed?**

* Let your child sit near the teacher and away from windows and doors.
* Let your child tape-record verbal assignments (which kids with ADD and ADHD often forget).
* Assign your child a buddy who will take notes for him.
* Reduce the amount of homework he has.
* Let your child take longer on tests.
* Let your child run errands for the teacher as a way of using up some extra energy.
* Let your child use a computer in the classroom instead of writing by hand.
* Make sure the school's plan for dealing with your child's needs really works for your child and isn't a generic solution that won't help.

**How can I advocate for my child with ADHD or ADD in the public school system?**

* Remember not to be hostile or alienate the people you will need to work with.
* Speak in a firm but cooperative manner.
* Before the school year begins, write a letter to your child's teacher explaining his strengths and weaknesses, what techniques you've found to deal with him most effectively, and restate the main points of your child's IEP or 504 plan.
* Establish frequent and regular communication with your child's teachers. The goal is for them to let you know as soon as a problem begins to arise so you can work together to prevent it from escalating. Always thank the teacher for taking the time to communicate with you.
* Before the end of the school year speak with your child's current teacher about your child's needs and which teacher would work best with him for the coming year. Getting placed with the teacher with whom he will work best will be very important.

**How can I help a child with ADD or ADHD with homework and school?**

Here are several suggestions:

* Some kids prefer to have time after school to run around freely before settling down with homework. If this describes your child, let him burn off some energy before focusing on more work.
* Some kids may need the help of medication to focus on homework. Speak with your child's physician to see if it is possible to get a small amount of medication that will let him do the work but won't keep him up at night. It may take several adjustments to get the right dosage.
* Let your child take a five-minute break after every twenty minutes of homework.

You can alsodevise a plan for tracking assignments:

* Some schools post homework assignments on the school's website. That way parents can make sure their child does his homework. If your school doesn't yet do this, perhaps you can request that they do so.
* Other options are to check with someone else in each class to find out what the assignments are.
* Or, ask the teacher to write the assignments on the board and to set aside time each day for kids to copy them down. Having a specific assignment book to write them in may help your child.
* If your child frequently loses textbooks, perhaps you can arrange to get an extra one that you keep at home. That way your child won't have to keep track of it outside of the classroom.

**What is oppositional defiant disorder?**

Oppositional defiant disorder is a behavior problem in which a child:

* Frequently loses his temper, becomes resentful or vindictive
* Frequently argues with adults or refuses to comply with their rules
* Intentionally annoys others and easily becomes annoyed
* Frequently blames others for his one faults

The behavior problem causes difficulties both at school, home, and/or with friends.

**How will ADHD and ADD affect my child's future?**

* ADHD can range from mild to severe. For some adults with ADHD, problems with concentration, organization, prioritization, and focus get worse. They may miss deadlines and important events.
* On the positive side, hyperactivity itself improves and most adults are able to sit still, although they may feel restless and unable to relax.
* The most damaging symptom for adults is impulsivity, which can result in angry diatribes, impatience, mood swings, and troubled relationships.

Adults with significant ADHD may want to be proactive about employment. It may help to:

* Avoid dull and detail-oriented jobs
* Structure work environments to minimize distractions (arriving before others do, etc.)
* Work on boring assignments when one is most alert
* Make sure assignments are clearly understood before starting to work on them

**How can I meet the needs of my child with ADD or ADHD without being overwhelmed?**

It's important to care for yourself, as well as your child. Find a respite caregiver -- whether a friend, relative, or [special needs](http://www.care.com/special-needs-p1162.html) caregiver -- and be sure to inform that person of:

* The specific needs of your child.
* The extra demands that will be made on the caregiver's patience.
* How to handle different situations that may arise.

**How can I find someone to care for a child with ADD or ADHD?**

Care.com is a website that lists caregivers throughout the United States who provide assistance to people with special needs. You can search for caregivers near you and review caregiver profiles including photos, references, background checks, and work history. For specific listings of [special needs](http://www.care.com/special-needs-p1162.html) caregivers, go to Care.com.