

# Identifying and supporting children with ADHD

**Colin Foley**, national trainer for the ADHD Foundation, offers some guidelines for school staff

**Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental spectrum condition that can persist into adulthood. Symptoms include difficulty staying focused and paying attention, difficulty controlling behaviour, and hyperactivity.**

ADHD has three subtypes:

- predominantly inattentive
- predominantly hyperactive-impulsive
- combined inattention and hyperactive impulsive.

Early identification is key. Time lost has a significant impact on attainment and future life outcomes.

## Things to look out for

**Avoiding eye contact.** The child might appear to be ignoring you, but some children with ADHD find making eye contact really difficult.

**Fidgeting.** Not standing or sitting still, or fiddling with something while you are talking to them. This does not necessarily mean the child is not listening. If unsure, ask them to repeat back what you have just said to check and reinforce their understanding.

**Avoiding work.** When children with ADHD do not understand what they have to do, rather than risk getting it wrong, they may opt out altogether on the grounds that a telling-off is preferable to being perceived as stupid. Failure to get started or complete a task can also be due to their inability to direct focus, rather than laziness or because they just can't be bothered.

**Inappropriate behaviour.** Children with ADHD have difficulty understanding what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. They might, for example, think making rude noises in class is funny and socially acceptable, or they might interrupt the teacher's explanation of a key concept

with a comment about their personal appearance. They say what they see; they have difficulty reading social cues.

### Disregard for consequences.

Children with ADHD make no connection between behaviour and consequences. If you point out a behaviour issue, they may acknowledge it and apologise, then five minutes later do the very same thing again. Lack of executive functioning (analysing, problem-solving and understanding sequence of actions and consequences) results in impulsive and unconsidered behaviours.

**Daydreaming.** Being distracted by what is going on elsewhere in the room or outside is a characteristic of ADHD. This doesn't mean that the child is not paying attention: it is more likely they are paying too much attention to everything and not focusing on just one thing.

**Negative self-esteem.** Children with ADHD can easily become frustrated at their inability to understand or remember instructions and communicate with others. This results in feelings of isolation and exclusion from recognition, praise, reward and affection from adults and peers. This in turn creates anxiety, which exacerbates ADHD characteristics. Inevitably this causes behavioural problems as the child feels impelled to act out, unable to articulate what they feel.

**Being the class clown.** Trying to make people laugh and cause disruption, possibly due to work avoidance: 'I can't do it, so the class won't be able to do it either.' Or: 'I will gain the esteem and friendship of my peers by making them laugh. As I will not be able to gain the esteem of my teacher, I will behave in a way that meets my instinctive need for relationship and a sense of belonging.'

**Impulsivity.** Children with ADHD have difficulty waiting their turn in queues or in group work. They act and speak without thinking. They may be

clumsy or accident prone; they may break things and accidentally hurt others.

**Rule breaking.** Children with ADHD struggle to understand boundaries as they have poor social observations. They need to have the rules explicitly spelt out and they need to know how far they can go.

## A complex picture

Two thirds of children with ADHD have another condition and a third have two or more. Common comorbidities include autism spectrum disorder, specific learning difficulties, Tourette syndrome, anxiety disorders, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder and depression.

Some comorbidities stem from the impact of ADHD upon a person's life (e.g. poor academic performance leading to anxiety) while others (e.g. autism and dyslexia) occur simultaneously. Their presence can affect the presentation of ADHD symptoms, or they can mask the condition, making it hard for teachers to get a true picture of what might be going on.

## QbCheck

QbCheck is a new online screening tool from Swedish health technology company Qbtech that can help teachers to make sense of the confusion. Easy to administer, the test lasts 15-20 minutes and generates an instant visual report comparing the individual's levels of activity, impulsivity and inattention with the performance of groups of people of the same age and gender, with and without ADHD.

This provides schools with objective evidence to confirm or rule out ADHD, which they can present to families and use to support the referral process. Some schools also use it to monitor the effectiveness of medication.

See [www.qbtech.com](http://www.qbtech.com) or email [tony.doyle@qbtech.com](mailto:tony.doyle@qbtech.com)

## Key principles of an ADHD-friendly classroom

**If you think that a child is demonstrating ADHD characteristics, act immediately by introducing ADHD strategies into teaching, the curriculum and support, both academic and pastoral. Clinicians will not diagnose children under the age of six years. For older children, the process of obtaining a diagnosis can be very long and drawn-out.**

### *Be positive*

- Understand and accept that when the child shouts out or struggles to conform, their behaviour is not prompted by naughtiness; they literally cannot help themselves.
- Make sure they know the boundaries. Avoid long discussions about what is right and wrong in their behaviour. Tell them what you want, focusing on the positives.
- Have positive expectations. When the child fails to fulfil these, deal with the issue there and then, and move on. Don't bring it up again the following day. Start each new day with a clean slate.

### *Alleviate anxiety*

- Allow 'time out' if the child needs to move or practise breathing/relaxation techniques to de-stress.
- Allow de-stress/tactile/fiddle toys.
- Facilitate a quiet space the child can retreat to in times of need. In a primary classroom, that might be a chill-out tent in a corner of the room; in a secondary school, chill-out zones could be strategically placed within faculty areas to make them readily accessible.

### *Minimise potential distractions*

- Sit the child near you, near the whiteboard, at the front of the room, away from windows and away from colourful displays.
- In primary classrooms in particular, which are often a riot of colour, have one 'calm wall' to reduce sensory or distractibility overload.
- Use large type on handouts and make these as uncluttered as possible.

### *Be clear and specific*

- Display classroom rules prominently;

ensure these are unambiguous and written in a positive way.

- Give directions clearly and, and wherever possible, visually (e.g. notes, a timetable, lists). Provide clear instructions to settle the ADHD learner and ensure they have a full understanding of the requirements of the task.
- Repeat directions more than once, write them on the board, and check that the child understands.
- Provide the child with a checklist of their own – these children need reminders they can access themselves.

### *Gain the child's attention*

- Use deliberate eye contact when speaking to the child (almost 'staring').
- Break down each task into its smaller component parts.
- Make learning fun – all children hate being bored, but boredom sets in very quickly for children with ADHD.
- Allow the child to doodle, make notes or create mind maps if that helps them to focus when they are expected to listen.

### *Sustain the child's attention*

- Monitor progress regularly throughout the lesson.
- Be consistent, firm, fair and patient and give constant feedback and rewards.
- Seat the child next to a good role model or learning buddy to help them to engage and stay on task.

### *Provide predictable structure and support organisation*

#### **In primary schools**

- Establish a daily classroom routine with regular times for stories, desk work, creative activities etc.
- Display the day's lessons on the wall or board.
- Provide lists, timetables, timescales and regular reminders.
- Share changes to the timetable or activities with the learner in advance to avoid confusion and anxiety.

#### **In secondary schools**

- Write down homework in the child's planner or use pre-prepared stickers.

- Get the child to create visual reminders of what they need to bring to every lesson, keeping one copy in their bag, and another at home.

### *Support self-management*

- Adopt 'stop, think, do' approaches.
- Encourage all pupils to stop and think before talking – this will help a child with ADHD to learn to slow down before talking. You can do this by waiting 10 seconds before you accept answers from the class.
- Remind the whole class to put their hand up if they want to talk, not just the child with ADHD.
- Likewise, remind the whole class about the rules for interrupting – if someone persists, talk to them on their own, not in front of the class.

### *Help children with a poor sense of time*

- Adopt 'when... then' approaches.
- When children are taking turns in a group, use a timer to set limits.
- Use visual prompts to assist with time on task and organisation of learner time.

### *Make transitions less stressful*

- Count down to transitions within lessons.
- Develop movement systems, such as traffic lights or key phrases, to manage movement between tasks and classrooms.
- In secondary schools, support smooth transitions between lessons by allowing the ADHD learner to set off a few minutes early with a reliable buddy.

### *Make assessments meaningful*

- Avoid timed tests; they will not tell you what the child knows.
- Do not set lengthy homework tasks: go for quality.
- Allow the child to use a laptop for coursework or in place of written work.
- Consider access arrangements for tests/assessments/exams – minimise stress, distractions and anxiety, use laptops for assignments, use a separate room, allow rest breaks and allow the child to move around if necessary.

### **Thinking about reward**

Thinking about reward is one of the keys to unlocking good classroom practice for pupils with ADHD.

Children who have an impaired sense of time, an impaired sense of working towards long-term goals and deferred gratification are not going to respond to a conventional reward system where points build up to something at the end of the week or even longer. These are children who live in the moment. So what is going to keep them going lesson by lesson during the school day? What is going to keep them going minute by minute within each lesson?

Some schools use time very effectively as a reward. If the child works for the specified period deemed appropriate for them, they clock up a minute. At the end of the morning, or the end of the day, the accumulated time is used creatively for targeted support, such as fun activities to aid concentration.

Homework is another good way to use that time. That might not sound like a reward, but homework is a huge problem for children with ADHD and very difficult for their families. It comes down to the relationship you build with the child, and the conversations you have to find out what they might buy into. If you get the parent involved too and can persuade them both that you are not fighting them over homework, you are freeing the child up to do something they would much rather be doing, you are on to a winner.

I had a case recently where a mother was keeping her son away from his karate lessons, which he loved, because she had to sit with him every night, battling with him over his maths and English. That has to be wrong!

### **Supporting self-management**

For most children, clear and consistent expectations regarding good classroom behaviour are enough to keep them on track. For example, they know that shouting out is not acceptable and they don't need constant reminders to comply. Imagine you are a highly distractible child and your targets for the lesson include waiting your turn and not shouting out. What is going to keep you remembering to do that all the way through to the end?

You need to externalise what is not happening internally. Give the child



Seating the pupil next to a good role model or learning buddy helps them to engage and stay on task

a visual representation to keep on the desk, where they tick off or highlight their targets every time they meet them, so they can immediately see where they are up to in the lesson and how well they are doing in terms of self-management. How often they do this will depend on where they are on the spectrum. For some, it could be every five minutes; for others, every 20 minutes might be appropriate.

Don't be tempted to throw these sheets away; keep them so you and the child have a record. Then when things are not going well, you can pull out a good one and say: 'OK. You have had a bad day today but let's look back – you did really well last Wednesday.'

### **Getting lessons off to a good start**

A typical lesson in a secondary school begins with the teacher outlining the aims and objectives or providing an explanation of some kind. Even if this doesn't last for long, a child with ADHD, who has an impaired sense of time, has no way knowing that, no idea how long they are going to be expected to sit still and listen.

The solution is to give them something practical to do as soon as they walk through the door, something to physically touch and manipulate, such as a pairs game where they match up cards that are related in some way.

If this is done as a whole-class activity, it has the added advantage of getting everyone straight down to work, rather than letting things drift as you wait for latecomers to arrive.

### **Incorporating movement**

Children often spend a lot of time in class sitting down. Ask yourself how many of the activities you have planned could be done equally well standing up, so that a hyperactive child has the chance to move and to fidget. For example, next time you ask pupils to talk about something in pairs or small groups, if you get them to their feet it will change the dynamic completely and can help children with ADHD to engage.

One teacher I know, whose SEN class of eight boys includes five with ADHD, gets them to stand up whenever they want to speak instead of putting up their hand. Every lesson, you have the comical spectacle of children bobbing up and down, but it is working because they are moving.

Movement also helps to embed information and knowledge in the brain. If you combine revision and review activities with movement, so pupils mime, act out, or have different physical symbols and signs for different key pieces of information, that will really help a child with ADHD to remember – and other children too.

### Group work

Positioning and structure are the two key things to consider when planning group work and talk-based activities.

- Position the child within the group to minimise distractions.
- Pay particular attention to giving the activity an explicit, clearly defined end. Children with ADHD have trouble completing tasks. If the activity is allowed to drift, with some groups finishing before others, the child with ADHD will lose focus very quickly.
- Structure in some kind of feedback, follow-on or collation activities where the child with ADHD is taking the lead, so they have to listen to their peers and record what they say as the task proceeds. If they have to report back to the class afterwards, they will have to persist until the end. Plan activities with persistence in mind.

### Memory and concentration

**Quiz Quiz Trade** by Spencer Kagan is a fantastic activity for memory. It also involves waiting your turn, being on your feet and moving, and supporting each other, three more good reasons for using it for with children who have ADHD.

- Prepare a set of cards with a question on one side and the answer on the other. Give each student one card.
- Get the students to stand up, put their hand up and pair up with someone else who has their hand up.
- Partner A shows Partner B the question. Partner B answers. Partner A praises if correct or coaches if incorrect.
- They switch roles and repeat the process.
- After thanking each other and exchanging cards, they put their hand up to find a new partner and start again with their new card.
- The activity ends after specified period of time.

This is an excellent activity for revision and review, but since the answers are provided, depending on the complexity of the subject matter, it can also be used for introducing new material. You don't always have to teach from the front. Give pupils the information in their hands and get them to teach each other. Peer



Structure group work carefully and give the child with ADHD tasks that will help them to stay focused

tutoring is an excellent strategy for ADHD.

### Programs to aid memory and concentration

**Captain's Log Personal Trainer** from BrainTrain offers 50 programs with more than 2,000 games targeting 20 different cognitive skills, including visual and auditory processing speed, conceptual reasoning, working memory and response inhibition. [www.braintrain.com](http://www.braintrain.com)

**Brain Fitness Pro Jr** for children aged 6-11 from MindSparke is a set of video games designed to boost focus and train memory, leading to improvements in academic performance and test-taking. <http://bit.ly/sc240-19>

**Fit Brains** comprises 40 brain-training games played on a mobile device to promote skills such as memory, processing speed, and visual-spatial recognition. The software tailors each exercise to a child's needs. [www.fitbrains.com](http://www.fitbrains.com)

**MyBrainSolutions** is an online suite of games and exercises which give individualised assessments and strategies to improve cognitive and emotional skills, including memory, focus, stress reduction, and positivity. [www.mybrainsolutions.com](http://www.mybrainsolutions.com)

**ACTIVATE™** from C8 Sciences enhances memory skills, improves the ability to pay attention, and boosts other cognitive skills through tasks like memorising sequences, completing patterns, task-switching, and sorting objects into categories. The version for home use comes with an additional physical exercise programme to be

followed three to five times a week. [www.c8sciences.com](http://www.c8sciences.com)

**Play Attention** teaches children to improve focus, ignore distractions, develop memory skills, and finish tasks. When the child is engaged, the brain emits a signal, which is monitored by an armband and transmitted to the computer. In this way, the child's mind controls the action as they play games and complete interactive activities. [www.playattention.com](http://www.playattention.com)

**BrainBeat** uses a metronome-like tool, along with a headset and hand gear. As children engage in the activities, they listen to beats, clap hands, and receive instant feedback through scoring, sounds and light cues. The activities are designed to improve focus, working memory and language processing skills. <https://brainbeat.com>

**ATENTIVmynd™** has a headband that measures attention levels. Children play a video game on a computer or mobile device, using their attention levels to make their moves. The idea is that playing the game helps them identify their 'attention muscle' and strengthen it. <http://atentiv.com>

**Myndlift** is a mobile neurofeedback app which uses brainwave measurements and visual/auditory feedback to improve attention and focus. As children play the games, the characters run faster or slower depending on the child's level of attention, giving them an incentive to pull back their mind when it starts wandering. It is designed to be supervised remotely by certified clinicians. Watch it in action on <http://bit.ly/sc240-20> or contact inquiries@myndlift.com to find out more. [www.myndlift.com](http://www.myndlift.com)