

Understanding ADHD in the School Setting

Information for parents and carers

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) can affect how a young person concentrates, manages their emotions, organises tasks and responds to the demands of a classroom. Every young person experiences ADHD differently.

ADHD is not a reflection of a young person's intelligence, ability or willingness to learn.

With the right adjustments, understanding and support, young people with ADHD can achieve academic success.

1 What ADHD can look like at school

ADHD presents differently in every young person. It can show up in a variety of ways, including:

Attention and concentration

- Becoming distracted by noise, movement or their own thoughts.
- Difficulty listening to instructions or staying focused on tasks.
- Starting work but struggling to finish it.
- Missing important information, even when they appear to be listening.

Hyperactivity and impulsivity

- Fidgeting, moving around or finding it difficult to sit still.
- Calling out, interrupting or answering before a question is finished.
- Acting quickly without considering consequences.
- Finding it difficult to wait, take turns or regulate responses.

Organisation and executive functioning

- Forgetting homework, equipment, deadlines or instructions.
- Struggling to plan assignments, prioritise tasks or manage time.
- Feeling overwhelmed by tasks with multiple steps.
- Knowing what to do but struggling to get started.

Emotional regulation and confidence

- Becoming frustrated when work feels difficult or overwhelming.
- Reacting strongly to perceived criticism, mistakes or setbacks.
- Avoiding tasks due to fear of failure or repeated negative experiences.
- Developing low confidence after being told they are not trying hard enough.

These behaviours are not necessarily deliberate. A young person may understand the work but struggle with the attention, organisation or emotional regulation needed to demonstrate what they know.

2 Strategies to support academic success

The goal is not to expect a young person to simply try harder. It is to reduce unnecessary barriers and teach practical skills that help them learn more effectively.

Create structure and routine

- Establish consistent routines for homework, study and preparing for school.
- Use visual timetables, checklists, calendars and reminders.
- Break larger assignments into small, achievable steps.
- Help them prioritise rather than manage everything independently straight away.

Make learning manageable

- Break work into shorter chunks with planned breaks.
- Give clear, concise instructions, one or two steps at a time.
- Check understanding by asking them to explain what they need to do.
- Use timers, worked examples and visual prompts to help them get started.

Work in partnership with the school

- Communicate regularly with teachers about what is working at home and school.
- Discuss reasonable adjustments (e.g. additional time, reduced distractions, movement breaks, alternative ways to demonstrate learning).
- Ask for help early if they are falling behind or disengaged.
- Agree on consistent expectations and strategies between home and school.

Protect confidence and motivation

- Recognise effort, progress and persistence, not just grades.
- Give specific praise (e.g. "You broke that assignment into steps and completed the first one.").
- Avoid comparing with siblings or classmates.
- Respond to mistakes as opportunities to learn, not evidence of laziness or lack of ability.

Support wellbeing and self-management

- Encourage adequate sleep, regular meals, physical activity and downtime.
- Allow appropriate movement and practical ways to release excess energy.
- Teach self-advocacy, including how to ask for clarification, a break or help.
- Where needed, work with health professionals to review treatment and other learning or wellbeing needs.

3 What parents and carers can remember

Connection before correction
A calm, supportive relationship makes it easier for a young person to accept guidance.

Focus on strengths
Young people with ADHD may bring creativity, curiosity, enthusiasm, problem-solving skills and intense focus on areas of interest.

Consistency matters more than perfection
A few strategies used regularly are often more effective than an overwhelming list of expectations.

Independence develops over time
Provide scaffolding now and gradually reduce support as the young person develops skills and confidence.

Look beyond the behaviour
Disengagement, incomplete work or refusal may indicate overwhelm, difficulty understanding the task, anxiety or a lack of confidence.

The key message for families

A young person with ADHD does not need lower expectations for their future; they may need a different pathway to reach those expectations.

When families and schools work together to understand the young person's needs, provide appropriate adjustments and celebrate progress, they can help them build the skills, confidence and resilience needed to achieve their academic potential.

Different pathways. Same bright futures.

UNDERSTAND / SUPPORT / EMPOWER