



# ADHD Field Guide

Simple steps to help your teen/child succeed

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The diagnosis of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is a common concern for parents. If your child has difficulty paying attention in school or completing homework or has a lot of energy, there is a good chance you have wondered or been asked if they have ADHD.

This resource outlines information for parents to help you navigate how to respond to your child's behaviors or struggles. First, understanding what ADHD actually is and what symptoms are part of this diagnosis will help you determine if your child's behaviors might be in the ball park of ADHD. Since it can be very difficult to know what is "normal" for kids and if ADHD is actually the cause of the problem, professional help such as psychological assessment may be needed.

Whether or not your child meets criteria for ADHD, there are some tools that you can use to help them learn new skills and manage their behavior. There are a lot of practical strategies for home and support that can be provided at school to help kids pay attention and stay organized. If a criteria for ADHD has been met, you may want to consider additional professional help through therapy and/or medication. All of these topics will be covered so that you feel more confident in how you choose to help your child.

## **What is ADHD?**

As the name implies, ADHD refers broadly to problems with attention and hyperactivity but other behaviors are associated with ADHD including impulsivity, procrastination, disorganization, and forgetfulness (Getz, 2014). Low frustration tolerance, irritability and moodiness can also be common problems related to ADHD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).



Genetics play a major role in ADHD and similar symptoms are often observed in other family members. ADHD is the result of a number of structural and chemical differences in the brain, including dysregulation in neurotransmitters and less activation in parts of the brain, including the prefrontal cortex (Getz, 2014). The prefrontal cortex is the "command center" for attention and behavior. It largely controls our ability to plan ahead, problems solve, stay organized, focus on a task, and control our impulses.

## Diagnosing ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is diagnosed when an individual experiences a number of symptoms that indicate inattention, hyperactivity or both. In order to meet criteria for ADHD, these symptoms must not only be present but also causing significant problems in the individual's life. Keep in mind that ADHD is usually not able to be diagnosed in toddlers before the age of 4 because at this age these behaviors are considered normal and it is difficult to differentiate what challenges will continue as the child gets older.

There are 3 types of ADHD: predominantly inattentive presentation, predominantly hyperactive/impulsive presentation or combined presentation. In other words, ADHD can refer to kids who mostly struggle with inattention but have no hyperactivity, or kids who are only hyper, or kids who have both inattention and hyperactivity.

The symptoms of inattention according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) are summarized here:

- Difficulty paying attention to details or making frequent needless mistakes
- Difficulty sustaining focus in either play or school
- Not listening when being spoken to (i.e. mind seems to wander)
- Struggling to follow through with directions or to finish school work
- Difficulty staying organized
- Avoids, dislikes or is reluctant to complete tasks that require sustained mental energy or effort
- Loses things frequently
- Easily distracted from tasks by surroundings
- Forgetful in daily activities

A summary of symptoms for hyperactivity, per the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), is as follows:



- Fidgets, squirms in seat or generally has a hard time sitting still
- Difficulty staying in their seat in situations where they are expected to remain seated
- Running and climbing in areas that those behaviors are not appropriate
- Difficulty playing or engaging in activities quietly
- Is constantly “on the go” so that it is difficult to keep up with them regularly
- Talks excessively
- Blurts out answers before a question is completed and has a hard time waiting their turn to talk
- Difficulty waiting their turn in general
- Invades others space or interrupts what they are doing without asking first

**Please note:** *In order for a child to meet criteria for ADHD, they have to be experiencing multiple of these symptoms for most of the time over the course of multiple months. If your child is experiencing a number of these symptoms and they are making it difficult to do school work, complete tasks at home or do well in social settings, then you may want to consider an evaluation by a mental health professional to determine if your child is struggling with ADHD.*

## Psychological Assessment for ADHD

Though the symptoms of ADHD may seem pretty straight forward, it turns out that a lot of things other than ADHD can cause some of these symptoms. For example, lack of sleep in small children can lead to hyperactivity and anxiety or depression in children and teenagers can result in concentration difficulties and forgetfulness. Trauma or difficulty adjusting to a life change can also cause symptoms similar to ADHD. Getting an accurate diagnosis is a necessary step for knowing how to best help your child or teenager.

Here’s what to expect from the assessment process:

1. **Free Initial Consultation.** This brief phone conversation will help psychologist understand the reason and goal for the referral and determine if testing will be beneficial.
2. **Clinical Interview.** Interview will include gathering information regarding history of symptoms and medical, trauma, family and academic history. Please have academic documents, such as recent grade reports and any IEP or 504 documents available, if applicable.

3. **Testing** Tests may vary, based on the referral question, but often include cognitive (IQ) testing, behavioral questionnaires and measures of executive functioning. Expect several hours of testing that may be spread out between a couple of visits if needed. Behavioral checklists will be sent home for a teacher or coach to fill out.
4. **Report/Feedback.** A report will be provided with a summary of diagnosis and individualized recommendations. Reports may be used to request educational or employment accommodations or provide clarification for another mental health provider, such as a therapist or psychiatrist. If you know who you want a copy of the report to go to, let your psychologist know so that the report best meets your needs. You will have opportunity to ask questions and discuss results in a feedback session once report is completed.

## Strategies for ADHD and Related Symptoms

Whether a child has ADHD or not, there are some general strategies that may be helpful for home and school. If ADHD is accurately identified, these strategies will be essential since your child's brain is functioning differently and will need additional support to learn skills that lead to academic and social success. Additional support can be received through mental health therapy and medication.



General behavioral strategies can help children be more successful at school and home. Having clear and consistent expectations/goals as well as a lot of opportunity for praise and rewards is essential for changing behavior. This is helpful for all children, but becomes even more important for kids with ADHD. Here are some steps to ensuring a strong behavioral plan for home:

- Start with goals that are small and obtainable (ex. Only choose only 1-3 tasks to work on at a time)
- Communicate very clear expectations and limits to your child

- Create rewards or consequences to help incentivize tasks (If a task is connected with a reward, it makes it more interesting and therefore easier to remember.)
- Commit to being consistent with those expectations. A lot of repetition is going to be needed for kids with ADHD to learn additional skills and create habits.
- Create physical reminders (ex. Behavioral charts, alarms on phone)
- Allow that it may take more time for a child with ADHD to remember tasks, especially without reminders

Additional strategies may be needed to help your child at school. Schools are often able to provide accommodations for students with ADHD but may require testing either through the school district or from a psychologist in the community.

Academic accommodations that may be helpful include:

- Preferential classroom seating to help avoid distractions
- Extended time allowed for tests
- Physical reminders on desk or a list of important information
- Providing a squishy ball or another device to help manage fidgetiness
- Allowing tests to be taken in settings with less distractions (ex. Library or school counseling center)
- Important information or instructions written on board for reference
- Shortening repetitive tasks

Homework strategies include:

- Making sure environment is as free from distraction as possible (ex. Removing devices, working at a desk designated for school)
- Breaking down homework tasks into small sections
- Make sure your child is paying attention before giving instructions
- Have consistent homework time with breaks if needed

## **Therapy for ADHD**

Mental health therapy is a valuable resource for helping your child or teenager with ADHD. Therapy can help improve children's ability to think before acting, take the perspective of others, learn to stay organized and articulate what they need to be successful. Since ADHD can often lead to emotional dysregulation and irritability, a

therapist can help your child practice coping and communication skills. Family therapy sessions may also be helpful to improve communication with siblings and parents.

Parenting support is often a big part of therapy, especially for younger children. A therapist can help you think through strategies and overcome barriers that arise with your child's unique needs. Please remember that parenting feedback from your child's therapist does not mean that you are not doing a good job as a parent! It just means that your child may need something different than what you expected. What worked for you growing up or for your other children may not work for a child who is struggling with ADHD.

## **Medication**

Due to the neurobiological differences in ADHD, medication has been proven to be effective for reducing symptoms. Understandably, parents may feel reluctant to have their children on medication due to possible side effects and fear of future impact. It is recommended that if your child has ADHD, that you consult with a psychiatrist to determine if there is a medication that would benefit your child and to discuss concerns that you may have.

## **You can get the clarity you need today.**

Melissa Winfield, PsyD provides both psychological assessment for ADHD and therapy for individuals and families at her office at Here Counseling in Pasadena and Downtown Los Angeles. Please contact Dr. Winfield for a free consultation regarding services. Together we'll create a strategy to help your child succeed.



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## Recommended Resources for ADHD

This guide is just the start of helping your child. There are additional resources (listed below) that may help with understanding this diagnosis further and helping with communication.

Taking Charge of ADHD: A Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents, Fourth Edition  
by Russell A. Barkley PhD

Raising Human Beings: Creating a Collaborative Partnership with Your Child by Ross W. Greene PhD

National Institute of Mental Health website: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/>

CHADD- <https://chadd.org/for-parents/overview/>

## Reference List

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Neurodevelopmental Disorders. In *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.

Getz, G. E. (2014). *Applied biological psychology*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, LLC.