



Supporting children with ADHD

What is ADHD?

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is a neurodevelopmental difference, a way a brain can be wired. It is recognised in clinical manuals like the DSM 5, the guide professionals use to assess and describe patterns. That clinical lens is useful, but it does not always capture the whole lived experience or the many ways ADHD can show up.

In everyday life, it can help to think of ADHD as a lifelong neurotype. It shapes how someone thinks, feels, and responds to the world, affecting focus, energy, emotions, and behaviour. It is not a flaw. It is a different processing style that brings both strengths and challenges, depending on the environment and the support around the child.

A helpful picture: many children with ADHD feel like they have a powerful engine with lighter brakes. The goal is not to change the engine. The aim is to strengthen the brakes, the skills and supports that help them start, pause, switch, and stop.

ADHD and Attention

ADHD is not a lack of attention. It is difficulty regulating attention.

Children with ADHD can pay attention, just not always:

- when they need to,
- for as long as they need to,
- or on the thing they need to.

This is not laziness or disrespect. Their brain may struggle to switch attention on, keep it going, or shift it when required.

What you might see:

Scattered attention: they notice many things at once such as sounds, movement, and ideas.

- **Hyperfocus:** intense sustained focus on something that is interesting or meaningful, which can make switching tasks hard.
- **Stop and start difficulty:** getting going or stopping can take more support, especially with low interest or high effort tasks.

Key takeaways for parents:

- Your child's brain is interest powered. Curiosity, novelty, movement, and meaning help attention click on.
- Support beats pressure. Clear steps, short bursts of effort, and built in breaks work better than pushing through.
- Environment matters. When the world fits the child with routines, visuals, and fewer competing demands, strengths shine.

Bottom line: keep the engine, build better brakes. With understanding and the right supports, children with ADHD can thrive.

ADHD and Attention

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental difference. Many boys show the more visible signs such as lots of movement, quick impulses, and shorter stretches of focus. At home this can look like interrupting, bouncing or climbing on furniture, drumming on the table, or talking a mile a minute. They may also be the family joker because humour helps them connect and keep energy moving.

Girls can have ADHD too, and some boys show it more quietly through daydreaming, mood dips, or anxiety. Because the louder behaviours get noticed first, boys are often identified earlier. Every child is different.

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How might I spot ADHD in boys?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental difference. Many boys show the more visible signs such as lots of movement, quick impulses, and shorter stretches of focus. At home this can look like interrupting, bouncing or climbing on furniture, drumming on the table, or talking a mile a minute. They may also be the family joker because humour helps them connect and keep energy moving.

Girls can have ADHD too, and some boys show it more quietly through daydreaming, mood dips, or anxiety. Because the louder behaviours get noticed first, boys are often identified earlier. Every child is different.

What you might notice at home:

- Constant fidgeting or needing to move
- Toe tapping, chair tilting, pacing, spinning on a swivel chair, bouncing on the sofa.
- Forgetfulness: homework left at school, packed lunch or water bottle forgotten, birthdays and dates missed, instructions lost mid way.
- Disorganisation: a messy bedroom or school bag, difficulty planning the steps for getting ready, chores started but not finished.

- Interrupting or blurting: talking over others, answering before a question is finished, jokes popping out at the wrong moment.
- Emotional outbursts: big feelings that rise fast, especially after school or when plans change.
- Finding it hard to sit still: getting up from the table during meals, wriggling through films, restless in restaurants.
- Going off topic or getting sidetracked: conversations that zigzag, starting three ideas at once, forgetting what they came into the room for.
- Intense hyperfocus on what they love: deep dives into Lego, gaming, drawing, sport or building, and real difficulty shifting to something else.
- Struggle with transitions: hard to settle after screen time, after football practice, or when switching from play to homework.
- Trouble waiting their turn: in games, in conversations, and in queues.
- Difficulty starting or finishing tasks: stalling on getting dressed or brushing teeth, starting homework then losing steam.
- Careless mistakes: skipping steps, rushing, simple errors in work they can do.
- Losing things: school tie, PE kit, keys, favourite toy, permission slips.
- Easily distracted: sounds, movement, thoughts, and ideas pull attention away, so chores and homework stretch out.
- Reluctance with low interest tasks: delays, bargaining, sudden hunger or toilet trips when faced with boring or effortful jobs.

A gentle note:

Seeing some of these behaviours now and then is part of childhood. ADHD is about patterns that show up across places and over time, and about how much stress it causes for the child. Alongside the challenges, many boys with ADHD bring creativity, courage, humour, curiosity, and deep focus for what matters to them.

If you are wondering about ADHD, keep a few notes of what you see and when. Share them with school and speak to your GP or the school SENCO. With the right understanding and supports, children with ADHD can thrive at home and in school.

How might I spot ADHD in girls?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental difference. In many girls it shows up more quietly. You might not see the classic bouncing or running about. Instead you may notice daydreaming, getting lost in thought, or small repetitive behaviours like hair twirling, skin picking, or nail biting. Some girls look anxious, sad, or very perfectionistic. Friendship ups and downs are common.

Teachers may feel a girl is coping because she is not disruptive and her work looks neat. At home it can be a different story. After holding it together all day, she may come home exhausted, irritable, or tearful, with frequent outbursts or total shutdowns. This split can be confusing for families.

Inside, hyperactivity can be mental not physical. Think racing thoughts, getting stuck in thought loops, or talking a lot to self regulate. Starting can also be hard. Some girls freeze at the first step and then feel worse for not getting going. Many girls are socially aware and want to please. They learn to mask their difficulties by working extra hard, double checking, and polishing everything. On the surface this looks like dedication. Underneath it can lead to anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout from masking.

What you might notice at home or school:

- Daydreaming or zoning out
- Hair twirling, skin picking, nail biting, or similar repetitive behaviours
- Appearing anxious, sad, or overly perfectionistic
- Emotional outbursts after school or when plans change
- Frequent outbursts that seem out of proportion to the trigger
- Irritability, especially when tired or overwhelmed
- Exhaustion after school, needing quiet time to decompress
- Shutting down or going silent, hiding in a bedroom, or curling up under a blanket
- Difficulty starting tasks, a freeze response at the first step
- Talking a lot in class or at home as a way to self regulate rather than to distract
- High self criticism and a strong drive to get it right

- Checking and rechecking the school bag, homework, and notes
- Redoing work to perfection and staying up late to finish it
- Social awkwardness or finding it hard to keep up in fast conversations
- Seeming shy, quiet, or fading into the background
- Low self esteem, anxiety, or signs of burnout
- Losing things and being disorganised despite great effort to stay on top of it
- Easily distracted by sounds, movement, or thoughts
- Strong reluctance with low interest or high effort tasks, lots of delaying tactics
- Intense hyperfocus on something they love, then real difficulty switching away

A gentle note:

All children show some of these now and then. ADHD is about patterns that show up across places and over time, and about how much stress they cause. Alongside the challenges, many girls with ADHD bring creativity, sensitivity, courage, humour, and deep focus for what matters to them.

If you are wondering about ADHD, keep a few notes of what you see and when. Share them with school and speak to your GP or the school SENCO. Understanding, reduced masking, and the right supports can lower exhaustion and irritability, and help your child thrive.

How do I get to know my child's individual profile?

- Educate yourself - read as much as you can and learn about ADHD. (Add links - Young Minds, ADHD Foundation UK, Nip in Bud)
- Be curious and find out what your child is struggling with, talk to them, observe them. What accommodations are you already providing?
- Read through their diagnosis report to gain a full understanding of their strengths and differences and think about how this shows up in their world.
- Work with a neuro affirming therapist. If your child doesn't engage in therapy, see if the therapist can work with you (Neurodivergent parent coaching) to help support you and your child.

- Understand your child’s sensory profile, if this wasn’t part of your diagnosis, you can get one done independently and relatively cheaply.

How can I support my child at home?

First, hold this truth: your child wants to do well. When things go off track, it is usually a gap in skills or support, not a lack of effort. Your calm presence plus the right scaffolding makes a real difference.

The 5 Cs at home

- Self control – Start with you. Pause, breathe, and steady yourself so your child can borrow your calm. A simple script: “I am going to take two slow breaths, then we will figure this out together.”
- Compassion – For your child and for yourself. Swap “won’t” for “can’t yet.” Notice effort, not just outcomes.
- Collaboration – Plan with your child, not for them. Ask, “What makes this hard, and what might help” Then try one small change as an experiment.
- Consistency – Simple, predictable routines lower stress. Same order, same cues, same language.
- Celebration – Each week ask, “What went well” Name wins, however small. This shifts attention away from the brain’s negative bias.

Routines that reduce friction

- Create a daily schedule your child can see. Use pictures, photos, or one line checklists.
- Set clear expectations for homework and online learning. Short blocks, clear start and end, planned breaks.
- Choose realistic goals. Agree the support that goes with each goal.
- Manage screens on purpose: decide when, where, and what. Use timers and a calm, predictable handover routine.
- Build in exercise and play every day. Movement first often makes thinking easier.
- Gamify chores and low interest tasks. Use timers, “beat the buzzer,” treasure hunts, or “first, then” cards.

- Hold a short weekly family meeting. Share wins, worries, and one small change. Update a simple family checklist together.

Scaffolding executive function skills

- Executive function skills do not appear by magic, they are taught and practised.
- Break tasks into two or three steps. Point to the step they are on.
- Externalise everything: visual lists, timers, calendars, sticky notes.
- Use “first, then” and “when, then” language. “First teeth, then story.”
- Offer a warm start. Sit nearby for two minutes while they begin. Body doubling helps.
- Make time visible. Use analogue clocks, timers, and gentle countdowns.
- Plan transitions. Five minute warning, one minute warning, then a clear first step.
- Keep supports when they work. Removing help too soon often causes a dip and looks like failure. Allow them to stay in their window of tolerance for a while before trying to increase it.

Regulation, energy, and the nervous system

- Slow things down. Learn a few co-regulation tools: long exhale breathing, alternate nostril breathing, hand on heart, a sip of water, ten wall push ups.
- Create a reset plan for tough moments: a quiet space, noise reduction headphones, a weighted cushion, a favourite fidget.
- Help your child read body signals. “Tummy tight could be hunger, worry, or excitement. Which fits right now?” Live your life out loud, you are modelling to your child.
- Expect after school crash. Offer decompress time before homework or chores.

Health foundations

- Regular meals and snacks with protein, fibre, and water. Pack a snack for the journey home.
- Daily movement. Mix calm movement (stretching, yoga) with big movement (running, cycling, trampolining).

- Sleep routines that are kind and repeatable. Same wind down order, low light, screens away before bed

Working with motivation

- Interest powers attention. Add novelty, choice, movement, and meaning.
- Offer choices with limits. “Maths at the table or on the floor?” “Read to me or read to the dog?”
- Use brief, specific praise. “You started when it was hard. That is persistence.”

When feelings run high

- Expect pushback, especially in adolescence. Stay steady, keep your humour, try again later.
- Name the feeling, not the behaviour. “You are frustrated. Let’s find the first step.” Name it to tame it - Dan Siegal
- After a blow up, repair and review. “What helped a little? What will we change next time?”

Keep it experimental

- Some things will help and some will not. Treat each strategy as a short trial. Keep what works, tweak what almost works, drop what does not.
- Look for small wins and write them down.
- Notice wins for you and wins for your child.
- Share effective strategies with school, and ask what is working there so you can echo it at home.
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Teaching your child about their brain

- Introduce executive function in simple terms. “These are the brain’s planning and switching skills.” You might want to include you tube links to Dan Siegal here
- Map strengths and challenges together. Build on strengths first.
- Practice self advocacy. Scripts to try:
 - “I focus best when I can move a little. Can I stand while I work?”
 - “I need the steps one at a time please.”
 - “A five minute warning helps me switch tasks.”

You do not have to do all of this at once. Choose one tiny change, try it for a week, and celebrate any progress. Steady, kind, and consistent beats perfect every time.

How can I work with school?

You know your child best. School knows the setting. The goal is a calm, practical partnership that plays to strengths and reduces stress for everyone.

Set up the basics

- Arrange regular check-ins with school. Invite your child if they are willing.
- Share what helps at home and what does not. Be specific about routines, sensory needs, and supports that actually work.
- Be clear about what you are finding hard and what support your child needs in class.
- If your child has a therapist, ask them to join meetings or send a short summary of insights and strategies. Choose a neuro affirming therapist who understands ADHD and works with strengths.

Ask for adjustments that help you too

- Request a clear agenda in advance, a quiet room, and short focused meetings.
- Ask for written notes and agreed actions after each meeting.
- Choose a communication method that works for you such as email over phone, weekly summary rather than ad hoc messages.

Prepare well and keep it simple

- Before any meeting, write the key points you want to cover. Include your child's views in their own words if possible.
- Bring short examples from home. What you see, what helped, what did not.
- Go in with a problem solving mindset. Name what school has already tried that has helped.

Turn ideas into a plan

- Agree the goal, the strategy, who does what, and how you will know it is working. Put it in writing.

- When strategies or accommodations start to work, keep them in place. You are building executive functioning skills. Removing support too soon often leads to a slide back, which can be mistaken for the strategy not working.
- If you are building skills at home, tell school so they can mirror them. Let your child know all of this is an experiment to see what helps.

Share both ways

- Ask school which skills they are practising so you can continue them at home.
- Decide together how and when you will update each other. For example, a short weekly email with wins, worries, and next steps.

Use respectful scripts

- “What I notice at home is... The support that helps is...”
- “What will this look like in the classroom on a busy day?”
- “How will we track progress, and when will we review?”
- “Could we try a small change first and build from there?”

Keep the relationship steady

- Thank teachers for what is going well and name it.
- Reflect back what you hear. Then suggest any tweaks you think would help.
- Look for small improvements even if the week felt tough.
- Ask teachers what they think you could try differently at home.

Set short term goals together

- With school and your child, agree what is realistic for the next week.
- Create a simple tool box of strategies for school and for home. For example movement breaks, quiet start routine, visual steps, a check in after lunch.

Practical organisation that lowers stress

- Make visual timetables with your child. Draw, use photos, or cut pictures from magazines.
- If forgetfulness is a theme, keep a spare set of items at school.
- Use compassion instead of shame. Change takes time. Choose goals that are achievable so your child can experience success.

Quick templates you can use

Email to request a meeting

Hello, I would like a short meeting to plan support for [Child's name]. I can do [days and times]. It helps me to have an agenda in advance and written notes afterwards. I would like to cover: [three bullet points]. If possible, please include [SENCO or staff]. Thank you.

After meeting summary

Thank you for today. My understanding is: Goal, Strategies, Who will do what, How we will track it, Review date. Please let me know if I missed anything.

One page pupil profile prompts

- What helps me
- What does not help
- My sensory needs
- How to get my attention
- How to help me start
- How to help me switch
- How to help when I am overwhelmed
- My strengths and interests

If things stall, return to the plan, reduce the size of the step, and agree the next review date. Consistency and kindness build skills over time.

Supporting a Child with ADHD During Exams

Practice over reading

Reading can be tough for many ADHD children, so focus on active methods: past papers, practice questions, or listening to audio while moving around.

Study in chunks

Break revision into shorter sessions spread across days. The Pomodoro method works well: study for about 40 minutes, then take at least 10 minutes doing something completely different to reset the brain.

Break big tasks down

Larger assignments can feel overwhelming. Help your child by dividing them into smaller, manageable steps. If starting is the hardest part, sit alongside them until they get going.

Watch hyperfocus

Your child may dive deep into a subject they love and achieve a lot in one go. Remember, this takes a huge amount of energy and exhaustion often follows, even the next day.

Background sound

Some children focus better with quiet music or even a familiar TV show in the background. If it isn't their main focus, it may actually help concentration.

Sensory supports

Weighted objects on their lap, crunchy snacks, or sipping cold water through a straw can help regulate their nervous system.

Change the setting

A new environment such as a café, library, or simply a different room can boost focus. Sometimes just having people around makes it easier to study.

Try body doubling

Having someone else in the room, whether it's a peer studying too or you sitting nearby, can make a big difference to task initiation and focus.

Keep moving

Movement and exercise aren't distractions, they're essential. A short walk, stretching, or sports can refresh focus and boost concentration.

Build a sensory study space

Small touches like music, essential oils, textured items such as Velcro to fidget with, or healthy snacks can make studying more grounding and manageable.

Use power naps

Short naps of up to 30 minutes during long study days can restore energy and attention.

How do I support a child with ADHD developing skills that might serve them well as they move into secondary school?

This will be the same as the schools document alongside, lots of emotion regulation. You may see frequent outbursts at home, so use the skills mentioned above in how to help your child with emotion regulation. You might want to reduce demands at home and allow extra down time. Increase your self care routine and support network so you can manage the pressure and stress on yourself.

How can I support my child with ADHD and their emotions?

Start here: your child wants to do well. Big feelings usually mean their brain and body are overwhelmed, not that they are choosing to be difficult. Safety and connection come first, skills come next.

What you might notice

- Emotional outbursts
 - Aggression, irritability, pushing, kicking, hitting, shouting, slamming doors, going defensive.
- Rejection sensitivity
 - Strong reactions when they feel left out or told off, even if the “rejection” is small or only perceived.
- Extreme irritability
 - When things feel too slow or not how they imagined.
- Rigid thinking or getting stuck
 - Thought loops, “can’t start,” everyday steps feel huge: dinner, teeth, getting dressed, bedtime.
- Overwhelm
 - Long crying spells, angry explosions, fast mood swings, feeling like you are walking on eggshells.
- Masking and burnout
 - Holding it together at school, then crashing at home with exhaustion, tears, or shutdown.

- Self harm or suicidal talk
 - Sometimes big feelings spill into scary words or actions. Treat this as a safety issue, not misbehaviour.

Why this happens (the short version)

ADHD brains process fast and intensely. The “emotional accelerator” can kick in before the “brakes.” Stress, hunger, noise, transitions, and perceived rejection all add fuel. When the body is dysregulated, thinking skills go offline until the nervous system settles.

In the moment: the Three Rs

- Regulate the body first
 - Lower stimulation: softer voice, fewer words, step to a quieter spot.
 - Breathe together: long exhales, or alternate-nostril breathing if that helps.
 - Offer simple sensory resets: cold water, a snack, wall push ups, a stretch, weighted cushion, movement break.
- Relate with safety and validation
 - “You are not in trouble. Your feelings are big and I am here.”
 - Name it to tame it: “Looks like anger with some hurt underneath.”
 - Choices with limits: “We can talk on the sofa or take five minutes and then talk.”
- Reflect later, briefly
 - When calm: “What happened? What helped? What could we try next time?”
 - Keep it short, focus on one tiny change.

Everyday habits that lower explosions

- Predictable routines – same order for mornings, after school, and bedtime. Use a visual plan your child helps design.
- After-school decompression – snack, water, quiet time or movement before homework or chores.
- Movement and play, daily – mix big movement with calming movement (yoga, stretching).
- Mindfulness and breathing, little and often – two or three short practices across the day to keep the “stress bucket” from overflowing.

- Sleep care – consistent wind-down, low light, screens away before bed. Deep pressure or calming sounds if your child is comfortable with them.
- Nutrition – regular meals and protein-rich snacks, plus hydration. Blood sugar swings = bigger feelings.
- Screen plan – decide when, where, and what. Use predictable handovers and timers.

Building self-esteem and resilience

- Lead with strengths. Notice effort: “You started even though it was hard.”
- Celebrate small wins every week to nudge the brain away from its negative bias.
- Teach about their brain and body: “These are your planning and switching skills. When your body is calm, they work better.”
- Help them read signals: “Tummy tight... is that hunger, worry, or excitement? Which fits?”

Scaffolding skills (they are taught, not “caught”)

- Break tasks into two or three steps and point to the step they are on.
- Externalise help: visual lists, timers, checklists, a “when-then” script: “When teeth are done, then story.”
- Offer a warm start or body-doubling for the first two minutes.
- Keep supports that work. Removing them too soon often causes a dip.

Looking after you

- Your steady nervous system is the anchor.
- Have your own quick resets: a glass of water, step outside, three long exhales.
- Ask for support from friends, family, or a therapist who is neuro-affirming.
- Repair beats perfect: “I was sharp earlier. I am sorry. Let’s try again.”

Safety first

- If your child talks about wanting to die, harms themselves, or you are worried about immediate risk, seek help now.
- In the UK: call 999 in an emergency, contact NHS 111, or ring Samaritans on 116 123 for support.

- Speak to your GP or school about creating a simple safety plan at home: warning signs, who to tell, safe spaces, calming actions, removing access to dangerous items.
- Quick tools you can try this week
- Feelings thermometer your child colours in, with a matching “what helps” menu.
- Calm kit ready to grab: fidget, chewy, headphones, snack, water, favourite picture.
- Two-column debrief after an incident: “What happened / What helped a little.”
- One tiny goal for the week (for them and for you) and celebrate progress, not perfection.
- You do not have to fix everything. Protect connection, teach one small skill at a time, and keep what works. Over time, steady and kind wins.