

ADHD Q&A; for Schools

Teacher Guidance Pack

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What is ADHD?

ADHD, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is recognised in the DSM-5 as a neurodevelopmental condition. The DSM-5 provides a structured, clinical framework for identifying and measuring traits, but this framework can sometimes overlook the lived experience and the diversity of ways ADHD can present.

From a real-world perspective, informed by working alongside thousands of children, adults, and families, ADHD is best understood as a complex, lifelong neurotype. It shapes how a person thinks, feels, and responds to the world, influencing cognition, emotional regulation, and behaviour. Rather than a deficit, it reflects a different way of processing and engaging with life — one that brings both strengths and challenges, depending on the environment and support available.

Dr Hallowell uses a helpful analogy to explain ADHD to children: "ADHD has the power of a Ferrari engine but with bicycle-strength brakes. It is the mismatch of the engine power to braking capability that causes the problems. Strengthening the brakes is the name of the game."

ADHD and attention

ADHD isn't actually a deficit of attention — it's a difficulty with *regulating* attention. Children with ADHD can pay attention, but not always when they need to, for as long as they need to, or on the thing they need to focus on.

It's not laziness or wilful disrespect. ADHD is about the brain struggling to switch attention on, sustain it, or shift it when required. A child may appear unfocused, but in reality their attention is often scattered across many things at once, or locked into intense hyperfocus on something that interests them.

How might I spot ADHD in boys?

Boys often show the more typical signs of ADHD — hyperactivity, impulsivity, and difficulty sustaining attention. In the classroom, this can look like blurting out answers, tapping on the desk, or constantly moving. Sometimes boys are seen as the class clown because of their behaviour. They are more likely to be noticed for outward behavioural challenges, while girls may show ADHD through quieter signs. Because of this, boys are often identified and assessed earlier than girls.

Things you might see in both boys and girls with ADHD:

- Constant fidgeting or needing to move.
- Forgetfulness (homework, equipment, dates, instructions).
- Disorganisation.
- Calling out or disrupting class.
- Emotional outbursts.
- Leaving their seat frequently or struggling to sit still.

- Going off topic or getting easily side-tracked.
- Intense hyperfocus on something they enjoy.
- Difficulty settling back after break or transition times.
- Trouble waiting their turn.
- Difficulty starting or finishing tasks.
- Making careless mistakes.
- Losing things (PE kit, school tie).
- Easily distracted.
- Reluctance to engage in tasks that don't interest them.

How might I spot ADHD in girls?

ADHD in girls can look very different from the more obvious signs we tend to notice in boys. Many girls show less visible hyperactivity, especially if they have the inattentive type (previously called ADD). Instead, you might notice daydreaming, staring out of the window, or behaviours like hair twirling, skin picking, or nail biting. They may appear anxious, sad, or perfectionistic, and often have difficulties with friendships.

Teachers often feel a girl is coping well at school because her struggles are hidden — her work may look neat and she might not cause disruption. However, parents may report very differently: at home, she may show big emotional or angry outbursts after holding it all together during the school day.

While hyperactivity may not always be obvious outwardly, it can be happening internally as racing thoughts or thought loops. Some girls also freeze when starting tasks. Hyperactivity can sometimes show as constant chatting — often a way of self-regulating rather than trying to distract others.

Because many girls are socially aware and want to please, they often mask their difficulties. They may hand in polished work, take copious notes, or redo assignments until they feel perfect. On the surface this looks like conscientiousness, but underneath it can come with anxiety, exhaustion, burnout, and a harsh inner critic.

Things you might see in girls with ADHD:

- Daydreaming or zoning out in class.
- Hair twirling, skin picking, or similar repetitive behaviours.
- Appearing anxious, sad, or overly perfectionistic.
- Emotional outbursts at home after school.
- Difficulty starting tasks (freeze response).
- Talking excessively in class (to regulate, not to distract).
- High levels of self-criticism and pressure to get it right.
- Obsessive checking of school bag, homework, notes.
- Redoing work to perfection.
- Social awkwardness or trouble keeping up in conversations.
- Seeming shy, quiet, or fading into the background.

- Low self-esteem, anxiety, or signs of burnout.

What other conditions may present alongside ADHD?

Children with ADHD often live with a set of overlapping challenges, many of which arise from navigating environments that do not fully understand or support their neurobiology. These are not inherent flaws, but natural outcomes of a mismatch between the child's needs and the systems around them.

Low self-esteem

This can develop when a child is repeatedly labelled as lazy, disruptive, or a problem. Difficulties with organisation, remembering items, or initiating tasks may be misunderstood as a lack of effort. Repeated punishment for behaviours such as moving around, talking out of turn, or struggling to return from break — often forms of self-regulation — can compound feelings of inadequacy.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

An intense emotional response to perceived or actual rejection, criticism, or teasing — particularly from people who matter to the child. This can feel like a real threat and cause significant emotional pain.

Emotional regulation differences:

- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Heightened anger responses.
- Obsessive compulsive traits (OCD).
- Oppositional defiant patterns (ODD).

Cognitive and motor differences:

- Learning differences.
- Fine and gross motor coordination challenges.
- Executive function differences such as planning, prioritising, and time management.

Tic disorders:

In some cases, tics or related behaviours may be present.

Many of these co-occurring challenges are secondary. They are not caused by ADHD itself but by the ongoing effort of trying to cope with unmet needs in an environment that does not yet recognise or value the child's way of thinking, learning, and being.

What is a trauma-informed approach (PACE)?

PACE is a way of relating to children developed by Dan Hughes. It stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy. The aim is to help children feel safe through the way adults behave, listen, and respond — focusing on building trust and strengthening relationships rather than punishment or control.

Playfulness

Playfulness brings lightness into difficult moments. It doesn't mean telling jokes or being silly, but showing warmth and a gentle sense of humour. Playfulness helps children feel hopeful, break down their defences, and reconnect with positive feelings.

Acceptance

Acceptance means recognising and validating a child's feelings and intentions — even when their behaviour is not acceptable. It's about saying "your feelings are OK" while still guiding their actions. This helps children feel less criticised as a person, and instead understand that it's their behaviour that needs to change.

Curiosity

Curiosity means wondering aloud with a child about what might be happening for them. It's not about gathering facts or interrogating — it's about showing interest and trying to understand their world. For example:

- "I wonder what was going on for you then..."
- "I noticed that..."
- "Why do you think that happened?"

Curiosity helps children reflect on their experiences without shame, and shows them you want to understand.

Empathy

Empathy is letting a child know you are alongside them. It's showing compassion and tuning in to their feelings — whether sadness, worry, or frustration. Empathy tells the child: your inner world matters, and you don't have to go through this alone.

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

Focus on their individual profile — their strengths and differences — then look at their executive function (EF) abilities. When you can see where they excel and where they struggle, you can build supports and accommodations that fit the child, rather than expecting the child to change.

Map executive functions

Thinking (cognition):

- Working memory.
- Planning and prioritisation.
- Organisation.
- Time management.
- Metacognition.

Doing (behaviour):

- Response inhibition.
- Emotion control.
- Sustained attention.
- Task initiation.

- Goal-directed persistence.
- Flexibility.

Remember: many behaviours signal a skills challenge, not a lack of motivation. Our job is to teach and scaffold these skills.

Build the picture: child + family + school

- Talk to parents: they know their child best and often already use supports and accommodations at home.
- Find out where the challenges are and where the child thrives.
- Ask what helps at home and what they believe would help in school.
- Involve the child: give them a voice; ask what they need and what works.
- Take a whole-school approach: make sure all staff (including support staff, lunchtime staff, playground monitors, and anyone in contact with the child) understand the child's individual profile.
- Notice which lessons the child thrives in and what that teacher does that helps them feel safe and understood.
- Use All About Me Passports so every teacher has key information to hand.
- Read the child's diagnostic report to understand their profile, and include a sensory profile to understand how they experience the world.

Learn from patterns (before the meltdown)

If there's an incident in class or on the playground, look upstream:

- What happened right before the event?
- What happened before that?
- What was the child's morning like?

This helps you spot triggers and intervene earlier, before the child reaches full dysregulation.

Stay consistent

Be consistent with your actions. Schools sometimes remove accommodations when a child is doing well, then difficulties return. Keep supports in place; fade carefully (if at all), with the child and parents involved.

How can I support a child with ADHD in my school?

Core principle: connection heals

- The healing power of connection is transformative.
- Families affected by ADHD often experience higher ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) due to impacts like impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty keeping structure, which can increase family stress.
- Felitti's ACE study (1995–1997) highlights a simple truth: the antidote to adversity is connection. In practice, connection looks like consistent care — love in action. Encourage and model this foundation in school and in partnership with parents.

When we understand a child's neurobiology — and our own — we can teach in ways that foster healing, resilience, and growth.

Everyday practices that make the biggest difference

1. Safety and trust

- Children must feel safe and trust the adults teaching them. Find a way to connect every day — a warm greeting, eye level, name used kindly.
- Never embarrass a child. Help them feel seen and heard first, then teach.

2. Praise with impact (3:1)

- When children expect failure, they give up on themselves — and often feel adults have given up on them.
- Offer meaningful, specific praise that lifts and guides.
- Aim for three positives for every one corrective comment.
- Praise every day. Children do well if they can do well.

3. Reflective language that builds self-talk

- Use sentence starters: "When you..., I feel..."
- Invite reflection: "How do you think you did?" "What goal were you working on?" "Did you achieve it?" "How exactly did you do that?"

4. Strengths first

Children already notice their weaknesses. Name strengths and use them to buffer challenges.

5. Trauma-informed lens on context

Consider what's happening now, what's happened in the past, and what in the environment needs to change.

Transitions, attention and regulation

6. Transitions: a simple 3-step

- Stop the activity → Shift (cognitively or physically) → Start the next activity.
- Make importance explicit: "Write this down, it's very important."
- Task switching is hard — coach the move from one task to another.

7. Brain breaks (for everyone)

- Short breaks boost learning: key neurotransmitters for memory and attention can dip after as little as 10 minutes of the same activity.
- Build "learning energisers" into lessons; after a short break, brains are ready for new memory storage.
- Examples: Simon Says, wall push-ups, hand presses, stretching, acting out vocabulary words, singing, jumping, or simply changing the learning mode.
- Schedule whole-class movement breaks every ~20 minutes so no one is singled out.

8. Movement and sensory supports

- Offer classroom jobs (handing out books or pens) to allow purposeful movement.

- The teacher's stance helps: walk slowly back and forth rather than standing still at the front.
- Tools that can ground and regulate: weighted objects (e.g. heavy books on lap), resistance bands around chair legs, wobble cushions or chairs, foot wobble boards, fidgets, and white noise where appropriate.

9. Support attention and processing

- Mix modalities: video, audio, pictures, talk, doing.
- Break tasks into smaller chunks with clear, short steps.
- Collaborate: ask the child what helps them sustain attention; offer autonomy where possible.
- Expect that time management may need explicit support.
- Be mindful of processing speed — it is sensitive to pressure, anxiety, and stress, and is often slower in ADHD. Allow wait time.

Mindset, mindfulness, and scaffolding

10. Teach growth mindset

Normalise effort, iteration, and learning from mistakes.

11. Scaffold executive functions

Teach the child you have. Provide flexible, creative, patient scaffolds to build planning, working memory, and self-monitoring.

12. Mindfulness and regulation tools

- Short mindfulness breaks reduce stress.
- Use an emotions thermometer, basic yoga stretches for the whole class, and breathing exercises.

In summary

- Keep returning to connection — it's the anchor.
- Support transitions, movement, brain breaks, and clear strengths-based praise (3:1).
- Chunk tasks, mix modalities, collaborate on attention strategies, support time management, and allow processing time.
- Teach growth mindset, scaffold executive functions, and weave in mindfulness daily.

How do I make things easier for parents and carers?

Core principles

- **Believe families.** If parents report behaviours you don't see in school, assume those experiences are real.
- **Be partners.** Parents know their child best; school sees them in a different context. Put those pictures together.
- **One team, one plan.** Co-create supports so home and school feel consistent for the child.

Start with listening, then co-plan

- Listen first: what helps at home? What doesn't? When are the easiest and hardest times of day?

- Include the child (if comfortable) so their voice shapes the plan.
- Agree on a shared goal (e.g. smoother mornings, fewer after-school meltdowns).
- Make a simple written plan: who does what at school, and what might help at home. Review it regularly.

Communication that reduces stress

- Named point person (e.g. class teacher or SENCO).
- A predictable channel and rhythm: brief daily note or weekly check-in (paper diary, app, email, or 5-minute call).
- Strengths-first updates: 3 positives : 1 request.
- Common language: e.g. PACE, Stop–Shift–Start for transitions, first–then, brain break.
- No-surprises rule: families are told early if something is brewing; school is told if home routines change.

Practical tools to share with parents

- Visual checklists: morning routine, backpack packing, homework steps, PE kit list (laminated).
- First–then boards and timers (teach parents how you use them in class).
- Task-chunk cards: short, numbered steps with a tick box.
- Emotions thermometer and calm-down menu (matched to the classroom version).
- After-school decompression plan ideas (snack + movement + quiet time before homework).
- "What to pack" tag on the school bag; week-at-a-glance timetable with photos.
- Homework starter cues (sentence stems, worked examples).
- Sleep-friendly tips and a gentle evening wind-down routine.
- Self-advocacy scripts for the child (e.g. "I need a short break," "Please repeat the first step").

Equipment and accommodations

- Spare supplies at school (pencil case, PE kit) to reduce morning conflicts at home.
- Loanable sensory and movement items (lap weight, resistance band, wobble cushion, noise-dampening headphones) with simple how-to guides.
- Flexible homework options: reduced volume, choice of format (photo, voice note), short bursts with breaks, flexible deadlines, a 20-minute cap unless the child wants more.
- Soft starts: predictable greeting, safe space to land, gentle entry activity — share the routine so home can mirror it on tricky mornings.
- Transition previews: send heads-up about timetable changes, trips, or supply staff; offer a "what's new this week" note.
- Regulation plan (co-designed): break card, movement menu, calm corner steps — share the same plan for home.

Simple shared plan (one page)

Strengths | Needs | What helps at school | What we'll try at home | Early-warning signs | De-escalation steps | Review date. Keep copies with class staff and parents; update every 6–8 weeks or sooner if needed.

Sample weekly check-in

- Wins this week:
- What was hard:
- What helped at school:
- Home notes:
- One tweak we'll try next week (school/home):
- Anything to watch for:

Meeting flow (20–30 minutes)

- Quick wins and strengths.
- What's tricky (school and home).
- Patterns (before—during—after; any changes to sleep, medication, routines).
- Adjustments (school and home steps).
- Agree who does what, and date to review.

Concrete ideas to suggest for home

- Backpack routine (evening): child checks a 5-item laminated list; adult spot-checks.
- Homework in sprints (e.g. 10 minutes work / 3 minutes move / repeat once).
- Morning first—then (first dress, then breakfast video or song).
- Micro-jobs that regulate: wall push-ups, carrying laundry, a short walk after school.
- Prep for change: preview next day's "what's different."
- Celebrate effort: small, frequent praise tied to the child's goals.

Mindset that helps families feel held

- "I believe you, even if we don't see it here."
- "If they could do it, they would — let's build the skills and support."
- "Progress means the support is working; we won't remove it just because things look better."

Keep supports consistent; fade slowly and jointly. Keep feedback regular, brief, and kind. Keep the child's voice central.

How do I support a child with ADHD when facing exams?

1. Agree the focus (with the young person)

- Choose one area to work on together (e.g. task initiation, organisation, emotion control, time management).
- Name the specific challenge and how it shows up — for example: leaves coursework to the last minute, rushes, and hands in work they know could have been better.

2. Set a goal and a way to track progress

- Co-create a clear goal so the pupil feels supported going into exams.
- Decide how you'll show progress (simple, visible system): a daily rating scale (1–5) for the target skill; a quick weekly check-in with teacher or parent to notice gains.

3. Build the plan (on one sheet)

- Likely triggers (times, tasks, places, feelings).
- "Can't-dos" to protect study time (e.g. "I won't start gaming until I've completed 40 minutes of study").
- Coping strategies and replacement behaviours (e.g. 5-minute movement break, box breathing, first-then, asking for a prompt, switching to an easier step).
- Checklist and reminders: a cue card (for the pupil and family) summarising the goal, steps, and supports. One page only.

4. Put it into practice

- Agree a start date and a trial period (e.g. 2–3 weeks).
- Choose a trusted adult in school to check in with (class teacher, TA, mentor, SENCO). Look for: good listener, empathic, reliable, well-organised.
- A peer study buddy can help if an adult is also involved.

5. Keep the team around the child

- Regular two-way feedback (brief and specific) between school and home so everyone can adjust the plan quickly.
- Celebrate what works, tweak one thing at a time, and keep the wins visible to the pupil.

Optional extras that help during exam season

- Study cue card: Goal → First step → 3 coping strategies → "Can't-do" → Today's 1–5 rating → Who I'll tell if stuck.
- Environment tweaks: quiet space, timer, tasks broken into micro-steps, planned movement breaks.
- Reasonable adjustments (where appropriate and in line with policy): rest breaks, a smaller or low-distraction room, prompts to refocus, extra time, reader or scribe, use of overlays or noise-dampening.

How do I support a child with ADHD to build skills for secondary school?

Work as one team (child + family + primary + secondary)

- Meet early with the secondary SENCO or pastoral lead. Share a concise picture of the child's strengths, differences, and executive function profile (what helps, what to avoid, sensory information, regulation plan).
- Pass on scaffolds: list the accommodations that worked in primary (movement breaks, visuals, task-chunking, calm corner, break card, homework tweaks). Ask secondary to mirror these from day one.
- Name the feelings: with the child, talk through hopes and worries; normalise mixed feelings about leaving primary. Offer time with a school counsellor or key adult to help with closure and confidence.

Build the core skills (with the child)

- **Organisation:** practise bag-packing using a visual checklist; colour-code subjects; keep a spare kit at school if possible.
- **Planning and prioritising:** model backward planning from due dates; use first–then and short task chunks.
- **Time management:** rehearse reading a timetable, estimating how long things take, and using a timer for study sprints.
- **Goal-directed persistence:** set small, shared goals (e.g. "pack bag the night before, 4/5 nights this week"), and track with a simple 1–5 daily rating.
- **Emotion regulation:** co-create a calm plan (movement menu, breathing, safe adult to check in with) and practise it in low-stress moments.

Keep it neuro-affirming: these are skills to be taught and scaffolded, not willpower problems.

A. Before secondary (Spring–Summer)

- Extra visits: short, quiet tours at different times of day; photo or video tour of key spaces (entrance, lockers, canteen, toilets, tutor room, SEN base).
- Meet the people: quick meet-and-greet with form tutor, SENCO, pastoral staff; give photos and names on a one-pager.
- Travel rehearsal: practise the route; script what to do if plans change.
- Timetable practice: give a mock timetable; rehearse "What book? What kit? Which room?"
- Locker or kit run-through: try a lock; practise storing and retrieving within 2 minutes.
- Social story: co-write a short narrative of "My first week in secondary."
- Transition Passport (one page): strengths, interests, sensory needs, triggers, early-warning signs, what helps, what to avoid, regulation plan, communication plan. Share with all relevant staff.

B. First weeks of Year 7

- Soft start and safe base: predictable greeting; identified safe room and adult; optional early entry to avoid crowded corridors.
- Break and lunch plan: quiet table, lunch club, or supervised space; a buddy or peer mentor.
- Movement permissions: break card, movement routes, short brain breaks; discreet noise-dampening options if needed.
- Homework adjustments: reduced or priority tasks, multiple formats (photo, voice note), clear success criteria, 20-minute cap unless the pupil chooses to continue.
- No-surprises rule: weekly "What's different next week?" note (room changes, cover teachers, trips).
- Consistency first: do not remove supports because things look better — improvement usually means the support is working.

C. Systems and tools to give families

- Laminated bag-packing checklist and PE or kit list.
- Week-at-a-glance timetable with colours and icons; duplicate for locker and fridge.
- Cue card: My goal • First step • 3 coping strategies • Who I ask for help • Today's rating (1–5).

- Emotions thermometer and calm menu (same visuals as school).
- Short guide to the school's homework platform and how teachers set tasks (screenshots help).
- Reasonable adjustments information (rest breaks, smaller room, prompts, extra time) where appropriate.

Make the environment friendlier

- Offer alternative uniform options if fabrics or sensations are hard (within policy).
- Toilet and water pass to reduce stress.
- Seating with minimal visual or auditory load; allow head-down moments without penalty.
- Fire drill prep: explain signals, routes, and where their trusted adult will be.

What to pass on (snapshot checklist)

- Executive function snapshot (strengths and needs).
- Sensory profile (triggers, supports).
- Regulation plan (break card, movement, scripts).
- Effective classroom strategies (what worked in primary).
- Homework and home–school communication preferences.
- Key contacts and agreed review dates.

Sample one-page goals

- **Organisation:** "Pack bag the night before using a checklist, 4/5 nights."
- **Time:** "Use a 10-minute timer to start homework; take a 3-minute movement break; repeat once."
- **Transitions:** "When corridors feel loud, show a break card and move to a safe base for 5 minutes."
- **Persistence:** "Complete the first two steps of any long task before asking for help."

How do I support a child with ADHD and their emotions?

What ADHD can look like emotionally

Children with ADHD may find it harder to:

- Hold back an immediate reaction or response.
- Modulate or monitor anger or raw emotion.
- Be patient and tolerate frustration.
- Stay flexible or adaptable when things change.
- Regulate and shift attention.
- Refocus away from a triggering event or towards something that supports a better mood.
- Self-soothe or calm their body.
- Use self-talk to guide themselves.

They can appear highly sensitive or over-reactive. This is neurology, not naughtiness — so we coach skills and shape the environment.

1. Predictability and clear, light rules

- Be clear on the rules and keep the non-negotiables to the essentials.
- Give advance notice of changes (non-uniform days, supply teachers, trips) with specific details and early reminders.
- Use clear communication with visual timetables, first–then, countdowns ("in 5... 2... now"), and simple success criteria.

2. In-the-moment support (meltdown or rising distress)

- Regulation first, not correction. Meet them where they are.
- Reduce sensory load: dim lights, close blinds, lower noise, offer a safe space or calm corner.
- Use a few steady words: "You're safe. I'm here. Breathe with me."
- Allow movement or regulation: wall push-ups, carrying books, resistance band, slow walk with an adult.
- When they're regulated, reconnect (warm tone, attunement).
- Reflect later — often the next day, when their thinking brain is back online.

Script starters:

- "I can see this is big. Let's get your body settled first."
- "When your breathing slows, we'll solve it together."
- "We can press pause. Here's your break card."

3. Teach the skills over time (coaching)

- **Emotion literacy:** feelings chart or emotions thermometer; daily 30-second check-in.
- **Body cues:** "Where do you feel it?" (stomach, fists, jaw).
- **Self-soothing toolkit:** box breathing, 5-4-3-2-1 grounding, hand press, water break, sensory tools (putty, headphones).
- **Self-talk scripts:** "Stop–Name–Choose." e.g. "I'm frustrated → I can take 3 breaths → then ask for help."
- **Flexible thinking:** "What else could be true?"
- **Reset plans:** quick If–Then cards (If noise rises → Then headphones and move seat).
- **Attention shifts:** visual timer, task broken into micro-steps, short sprints with movement breaks.

4. Reduce triggers in the environment

- Seat away from peak noise and visual clutter; agree a break card.
- Keep corrections private, praise public (3 positives : 1 request).
- Offer choice where possible (which task first, where to sit within options).
- Build whole-class brain breaks so the child isn't singled out.

5. Align with home (one team)

- Share your visuals and scripts (timetable, emotions thermometer, first-then, break card language).
- Use a brief home-school check-in (weekly is fine): wins, what was hard, one tweak.
- Send heads-up about changes early so families can pre-teach.
- After a significant incident, debrief with the 3 R's: Regulate → Relate → Reflect (in that order).

A note for pupils

These supports are here to help your neurobiology — how your brain works. Mainstream school isn't designed for every kind of brain yet, so we adjust the environment to fit you. There's nothing wrong with you. These accommodations level the playing field so your strengths can shine.