

ADHD: Tips for Teachers

Supporting pupils with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in the classroom

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What is ADHD?

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting attention, behavioural regulation, and self-control. Around 5% of the population would meet the threshold for a diagnosis. Children with ADHD struggle to focus and stay on task, and sitting still and being quiet in class can take a monumental effort — reducing their capacity to process information. Pupils may act on impulse and seem unable to learn from past mistakes. Anxiety and depression are more common in children with ADHD, and many have co-existing learning difficulties.

There is no cure for ADHD, but treatment can reduce symptoms. Behavioural support can improve self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and strengthen peer relationships. Stimulant medication can help with impulse control and attention in class.

Arrange seating with sensory needs in mind

Pupils with ADHD vary in what works best for them. Some are distracted by corridor or playground noise and do better in the middle of the room. Others benefit from sitting at the front near the teacher, within reach of a teaching assistant. Some do better at a separate workstation. Consider each pupil individually.

Build in regular movement breaks

Permission to move can improve learning outcomes for pupils with ADHD. Short movement breaks between writing tasks benefit the whole class. Giving a pupil with ADHD a classroom job that involves movement — collecting books or handing out resources — provides a necessary break and boosts self-esteem. Fidget toys can help, but should be kept out of sight (in a pocket, for example) and used only with staff permission, as they can distract others.

Break information into smaller steps

Pupils with ADHD struggle to follow multi-step instructions. Break tasks into discrete steps so pupils are not overwhelmed and can monitor their own progress. Visual timetables, timers, charts, and now-and-next boards all help pupils stay on track and process information more effectively.

Work with learning strengths and limitations

Many pupils with ADHD have undiagnosed learning difficulties. If a pupil struggles to read or write, explore reasonable adjustments — for example, use of a scribe, voice recognition software, or laptop access. Remote access to lesson content can also improve understanding and retention.

Offer organisational support

Organising belongings and navigating the school day can be genuinely difficult for pupils with ADHD. An online homework recording system improves communication between school and home. Where this is not available, help ensure homework is recorded accurately each day and the right books are packed. A visual timetable at home helps with preparation. A buddy system can help pupils arrive at lessons on time and with the correct equipment.

Notice and praise positive behaviour

Pupils with ADHD often attract negative attention for low-level disruptive behaviour. Over time this erodes self-esteem, reduces motivation, and can contribute to a cycle of challenging behaviour. They are also more vulnerable to peer rejection and bullying.

Staff can make a significant difference by noticing triggers and early warning signs and stepping in before situations escalate. Regularly and specifically naming the positive behaviours and skills a pupil has demonstrated increases the likelihood of those behaviours being repeated — and changes the pupil's experience of school.