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, but that clinical lens does not always capture the whole lived experience or the many ways ADHD can show up.

In everyday life, it helps 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 — it 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 — sounds, movement, ideas.
- Hyperfocus: intense sustained focus on something 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.

How might I spot ADHD in boys?

Many boys show the more visible signs — lots of movement, quick impulses, and shorter stretches of focus. At home this can look like interrupting, bouncing or climbing on furniture, or talking a mile a minute. 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, bouncing.
- Forgetfulness: homework left at school, packed lunch forgotten, instructions lost mid-way.
- Disorganisation: messy bedroom or school bag, difficulty planning steps for getting ready, chores started but not finished.
- Interrupting or blurting: talking over others, answering before a question is finished.
- 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, wriggling through films, restless in restaurants.
- Going off topic: conversations that zigzag, starting three ideas at once.
- Intense hyperfocus on what they love — and real difficulty shifting to something else.
- Struggle with transitions: hard to settle after screen time or when switching from play to homework.
- Trouble waiting their turn: in games, conversations, and queues.
- Difficulty starting or finishing tasks: stalling on getting dressed, starting homework then losing steam.
- Careless mistakes: skipping steps, rushing, simple errors in work they can do.
- Losing things: school tie, PE kit, keys, permission slips.
- Easily distracted by sounds, movement, or thoughts.
- Reluctance with low-interest tasks: delays, bargaining, sudden hunger or toilet trips when faced with boring jobs.

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 the child. Alongside the challenges, many boys with ADHD bring creativity, courage, humour, curiosity, and deep focus for what matters to them.

How might I spot ADHD in girls?

In many girls ADHD shows up more quietly. You might not see 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. At home it can be a different story — after holding it together all day, she may come home exhausted, irritable, or tearful. Many girls learn to mask their difficulties by working extra hard and polishing everything. Underneath, this can lead to anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout.

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.
- 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 as a way to self-regulate rather than to distract.
- High self-criticism and a strong drive to get things 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.
- Low self-esteem, anxiety, or signs of burnout.
- Losing things and being disorganised despite great effort to stay on top of it.
- Strong reluctance with low-interest or high-effort tasks.
- Intense hyperfocus on something they love, then real difficulty switching away.

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.

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

- Educate yourself — read as much as you can and learn about ADHD.
- Be curious: 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.
- Work with a neuro-affirming therapist. If your child does not engage in therapy, ask whether the therapist can work with you directly through parent coaching.
- Understand your child's sensory profile — if this was not part of their diagnosis, it can be obtained independently and relatively affordably.

How can I support my child at home?

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.
- 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 things hard and what might help.
- Consistency — simple, predictable routines lower stress. Same order, same cues, same language.
- Celebration — each week ask what went well. Name wins, however small.

Routines that reduce friction:

- Create a daily schedule your child can see — use pictures, photos, or one-line checklists.
- Set clear expectations for homework. Short blocks, clear start and end, planned breaks.
- 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 — timers, "beat the buzzer," or "first, then" cards.
- Hold a short weekly family meeting: share wins, worries, and one small change.

Scaffolding executive function skills:

- 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" language: "First teeth, then story."
- Offer a warm start — sit nearby for two minutes while they begin. Body doubling helps.
- Make time visible: 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.

Regulation, energy, and the nervous system:

- Slow things down. Learn a few co-regulation tools: long exhale 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 — is that hunger, worry, or excitement?"
- Expect after-school crash. Offer decompress time before homework or chores.

Health foundations:

- Regular meals and snacks with protein, fibre, and water.

- 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?"
- 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."
- After a blow-up, repair and review: "What helped a little? What will we change next time?"

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. Share effective strategies with school, and ask what is working there so you can echo it at home.

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.

- 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 work.
- Request a clear agenda in advance, a quiet room, and short focused meetings. Ask for written notes and agreed actions afterwards.
- Before any meeting, write the key points you want to cover. Include your child's views in their own words if possible.
- Agree the goal, the strategy, who does what, and how you will know it is working — put it in writing.
- When strategies start to work, keep them in place. Removing support too soon often leads to a slide back.
- Ask school which skills they are practising so you can continue them at home.
- Thank teachers for what is going well and name it specifically.

Useful scripts for meetings:

- "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?"

One-page pupil profile — prompts to complete with your child:

- 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.

Supporting a child with ADHD during exams

- Practice over reading — focus on active methods: past papers, practice questions, or listening to audio while moving around.
- Study in chunks: shorter sessions spread across days. Study for around 40 minutes, then take at least 10 minutes doing something completely different.
- Break big tasks down into smaller, manageable steps. If starting is the hardest part, sit alongside them until they get going.
- Watch hyperfocus — deep dives take a huge amount of energy and exhaustion often follows, even the next day.
- Background sound: some children focus better with quiet music in the background.
- Sensory supports: weighted objects, crunchy snacks, or sipping cold water through a straw can help regulate the nervous system.
- Change the setting — a café, library, or simply a different room can boost focus.
- Try body doubling: having someone else in the room can make a big difference to task initiation.
- Keep moving: a short walk, stretching, or sport can refresh focus and boost concentration.
- Use power naps: short naps of up to 30 minutes during long study days can restore energy and attention.

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

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, shouting, slamming doors.
- 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, difficulty starting, everyday steps feeling huge.
- Overwhelm: long crying spells, angry explosions, fast mood swings.
- Masking and burnout: holding it together at school, then crashing at home with exhaustion, tears, or shutdown.
- Self-harm or suicidal talk: treat this as a safety issue, not misbehaviour.

In the moment — the Three Rs:

- Regulate the body first: lower stimulation, softer voice, fewer words, step to a quieter spot. Breathe together.
- Relate with safety and validation: "You are not in trouble. Your feelings are big and I am here." Name the feeling: "Looks like anger with some hurt underneath."
- Reflect later, briefly: when calm, ask what happened, what helped, and what to try next time.

Everyday habits that lower the likelihood of explosions:

- Predictable routines for mornings, after school, and bedtime.
- After-school decompression: snack, water, quiet time or movement before homework.
- Movement and play, daily.
- Mindfulness and breathing, little and often — two or three short practices across the day.
- Sleep care: consistent wind-down, low light, screens away before bed.
- Regular meals and protein-rich snacks. Blood sugar swings mean bigger feelings.
- A clear screen plan: decide when, where, and what, with predictable handovers.

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. Speak to your GP or school about creating a simple safety plan at home.