

ADHD: Exams and the Transition to Secondary School

Guidance for teachers and school staff

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Supporting a child with ADHD through 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): 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.

Supporting the transition to 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.
- 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."

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.