

THE IMPACT OF ADHD ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH



STRIVE 

Foreword

For many years, children and young people with ADHD have been seen as restless trouble makers, the student who is disruptive and unpleasant to have in the classroom, the anti-social, disorganised and lazy kid who *just needs to try harder*. It is our mission to change that.

As a society, we have the responsibility to look nurture all of our children. The next generation of adults need to grow up with appropriate support in place, and people who recognise and attend to their needs. Children cannot raise themselves. To do this, the picture of the typical ADHD child needs to be redrawn.

This short article will touch on just a few of the impacts that ADHD has on young people, and how we as adults can ensure that they feel understood and looked after. It will touch on difficult topics, such as eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, but we feel this is information that cannot be omitted.

From a personal perspective, growing up with ADHD is incredibly difficult. To live in world that doesn't have space for the way your brain works is incredibly isolating. Often, young adult ADHD lives are marred with employment troubles, friendship difficulties and challenges with self-esteem. If not given support early on, these struggles can last for one's entire adult life, or in some cases, can lead to a premature end. The stigma that surrounds ADHD is still evident. Through our work we regularly hear of teachers and healthcare professionals still dismissing experiences and denying its existence.

Embracing and catering for neurodivergent people is everybody's responsibility. Let's continue talking about it.



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ADHD snapshot: The numbers

AROUND **5%** OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 5-18 ARE ESTIMATED TO HAVE ADHD¹

DATA SUGGESTS THAT APPROXIMATELY HALF OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD IN THE UK DO NOT FEEL ADEQUATELY SUPPORTED BY THEIR SCHOOL²

CHILDREN WITH ADHD HAVE A **5X INCREASED RISK OF DEPRESSION** WITH THE MOST INFLUENTIAL FACTORS BEING PEER RELATIONAL DIFFICULTIES & LOW ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT³

ADULTS WITH ADHD HAVE A HIGHER **MORTALITY RATE** THAN THOSE WITHOUT ADHD⁴

ABOUT **30%** OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ADHD STRUGGLE WITH AN **ANXIETY DISORDER**⁵

39% OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD HAVE RECEIVED **FIXED TERM EXCLUSIONS** FROM SCHOOL⁶

THE YOUTH CRIME ACTION PLAN IDENTIFIED ADHD AS ONE OF THE MAIN RISK FACTORS OF **CRIMINAL OFFENDING** DURING CHILDHOOD⁷

CACI ET AL., (2015) FOUND THAT CHILDREN WITH POORLY MANAGED OR UNTREATED ADHD ARE:

MORE THAN **2X** AS LIKELY TO FEEL **FRUSTRATED AT SCHOOL**

MORE THAN **5X** MORE LIKELY TO TAKE PART IN **PHYSICAL FIGHTING** AT SCHOOL⁸

ADHD IS UNDERDIAGNOSED IN GIRLS. THE CURRENT RATIO FOR MALE VS FEMALE DIAGNOSIS IS APPROXIMATELY **3:1**, LIKELY DUE TO DIFFERENCES **3:1** IN HOW SYMPTOMS PRESENT BETWEEN SEXES⁹

AT LEAST ONE CHILD IN EVERY UK CLASSROOM HAS ADHD¹⁰

What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), is a neurodevelopmental condition which can affect behaviour, impulsivity and concentration.¹ It is often characterised by symptoms of restlessness, poor concentration, low motivation and difficult behaviour.

Diagnoses of ADHD are divided into three categories:

Predominantly inattentive presentation

Individuals experience more symptoms such as difficulties sustaining attention, daydreaming and trouble beginning tasks.

Predominantly hyperactive presentation

Individuals experience more symptoms such as being fidgety and restless, often shouting out and being impulsive, as well as appearing unaware of danger.

Combined presentation

Individuals experience similar levels of both inattentive and hyperactive symptoms.

Contrary to the unfortunate, but popular belief, ADHD is not caused by bad parenting. Instead, structural and functional differences in the brain are responsible. Studies have shown that an area of the brain called the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC), often has reduced volume size in children with ADHD.¹² This reduction has been suggested to impact on developmental skills in the brain known as executive functions.

At its core, ADHD is an executive functioning disorder. Humans are born with the blueprint for these skills, but develop them as they grow and learn from others around them. Children and young people with ADHD can struggle to build these skills on their own, and often experience executive dysfunction.

Executive dysfunction can look different for everybody, but can be broken down into impairments in the cognitive processes of:

1. Emotional regulation
2. Flexible thinking
3. Planning and prioritising
4. Organisation
5. Working memory
6. Impulse control
7. Self-monitoring
8. Task initiation

People with ADHD often have impairments in most, if not all categories of executive functioning.¹³

Children with ADHD tend to be around 40% behind their peers in terms of executive function development,¹⁴ which can mean that they require additional support throughout their time in education and beyond.

To understand ADHD fully, it is important to recognise that *it is more than bad behaviour*. Often, the behaviour displayed by young people with the condition is their way of communicating that their needs are not being adequately met.²

In addition, the Royal College of Psychiatrists indicate a very strong genetic link to ADHD. An estimated 90% of cases are caused by a genetic factor, with around 1 in 3 people with ADHD having a parent who displays symptoms.¹⁵

ADHD impacts all areas of life, from schooling, to family and peer relationships, work life and increased risk of criminality in adolescence and adulthood.⁷

What are the impacts of ADHD?

Like all things in life, everybody's experience of ADHD will be different. For some, it brings out creativity and the ability to "think outside of the box". Whilst for others, it is completely debilitating and a burden on their day to day life.

For everybody with ADHD however, it is something they need to learn to manage and control as they grow up. Quite often, **this is not something they can do by themselves**. So, what happens if a child's ADHD is left untreated and uncontrolled?

The impact of ADHD at home

For many young people with ADHD, their behaviour can show differently at home, in comparison to at school. Various studies have found that children with ADHD:

- Struggle with falling or staying asleep. Experiencing insomnia, broken sleep patterns and bad dreams¹⁶
- Tend to have poorer relationships with their siblings, particularly if there are multiple children in the home with ADHD¹⁶
- Can have issues surrounding food, including texture sensitivities and restrictive eating¹⁷

PEOPLE WITH ADHD ARE ALMOST **4X** MORE LIKELY TO HAVE AN EATING DISORDER THAN THEIR PEERS¹⁷

The impact of ADHD on peer relationships

CHADD estimate that 50-60% of children with ADHD have difficulty with peer relationships. Researchers have found that the main social difficulties in children under the age of 18 with ADHD, tend to be related to making and keeping friends, as well as deficiencies in appropriate social behaviour.¹⁸

Difficulties with managing impulse control can often mean that young people with ADHD are often ostracised from friendship groups for appearing as though they lack regard for other's feelings.

In addition, the hyperactive nature of some children with ADHD can cause others to be wary in their presence - and unsure of how to play with the child in a cooperative way.¹⁸

Stigma surrounding ADHD also has a role to play in the isolation of children with the condition. Many parents look past the child, and only at the challenging behaviour - meaning that often, children are told to stay away from their "troublemaking" peers with ADHD. It is not uncommon for this stigma to turn into bullying, and various studies have found a clear link between ADHD and an increased risk of being bullied by peers both in and out of school settings. Social isolation, along with bullying and stigmatisation can also lead to increased risk for depression among young people with ADHD.¹⁹

Children with ADHD tend to require additional support when it comes to developing social skills. As with plenty of other ADHD symptoms, executive dysfunction plays a large role in a child's ability to form and maintain friendships.

The impact of ADHD in education

An estimated 1 child in every classroom throughout the UK has ADHD, though accounting for undiagnosed students, it is likely that this number is closer to 2 or 3 per classroom.²⁰ ADHD can display in many different and complex ways at school:

Well known ADHD presentation in students

- Difficulty sustaining attention during lessons, assemblies, parents evenings
- Issues with regulating emotional responses, resulting in outbursts and disruptive behaviour
- Inability to focus on low-reward tasks and trouble following instructions

Lesser known ADHD presentation in students

- Struggles with peer socialisation
- Sensory seeking behaviour, such as sitting awkwardly on furniture or finding school uniform uncomfortable
- Heightened anxiety, particularly around uncertain situations or changes to the school day

Contrary to popular belief, ADHD has no bearing on person's intelligence. However, the academic success of someone with the condition is often down to the support they receive during their time in education. Unfortunately, the education system is not always well suited to neurodiverse young people, and 39% of children with ADHD have received fixed term exclusions from school, with a further 11% being permanently excluded before the age of 16.⁶

2017 surveys showed that 49% of students with ADHD did not feel adequately supported by their school or college.²

" I went through school with the idea that I was a 'problem child'. I was treated in a way which made me feel like a burden, but in my eyes I was clearly asking for some structure and direction.

I ended up leaving school with much lower grades than I was capable of achieving. I wasn't able to get the support I needed because everyone looked past me and straight at my behaviour.

If I had any advice for people who work in schools it would be to give the kids with ADHD a chance. If you look closely, we are actually really creative and caring, we just need someone to notice our strengths and advocate for us"

Strive client (adult) reflecting on his time in secondary school

Transitions and uncertainty

A particular challenge for children and young people with ADHD are transition periods. Executive dysfunction and anxiety make uncertainty incredibly difficult, and can often exacerbate difficult or challenging behaviour.

"Big transitions" such as moving from primary to secondary school, school to college and college to university can often make ADHD symptoms worse. Changes in routine and structure can impede a young person's ability to plan, organise, manage emotions, finances and impulsive behaviour. Transition support is crucial for those with ADHD.

ADHD and common cooccurring conditions

It is extremely common for people with ADHD to have another condition or mental health difficulty alongside their primary diagnosis. Studies have shown that around 70-80% of children with ADHD have at least one cooccurring condition.²¹

Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD)

40%

- Easily losing temper
- Refusing to follow rules
- Blaming others
- Using physical force

30%

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

- Consistent worrying
- Feeling stressed
- Difficulty sleeping
- Physical and mental restlessness

Dyslexia

18-45%

- Struggling to follow instructions
- Difficulty with spelling and grammar
- Poor comprehension skills
- Forgetfulness with words

30%

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

- Compulsive behaviours
- Increased anxiety and subsequent 'safety behaviours'
- Reassurance seeking

Why is support important and what might it look like?

Without the support of adults and peers around them, young people with ADHD can struggle with anxiety, depression and isolation.³ It has been suggested that the most influential factors for depression in this demographic are:

Social difficulties

The stigma and rejection faced by young people with ADHD can often isolate them from their peers.¹⁹ In addition to the isolation imposed on them by others, young people with a neurodiversity can perceive themselves as different from others their age, and may withdraw themselves from social situations.

Low academic attainment

Despite no evidence that points towards lower intelligence in young people with ADHD, struggles with attention, concentration and work-related executive functions regularly lead to children with ADHD achieving below-expected grades.

As a result, self-esteem and confidence is often lower in this particular group, which can affect the future academic attainment of a child.³ This can also limit the choices available to them when they leave school. It is not uncommon for young adults with ADHD to struggle with employment, particularly if their condition is unmanaged by the time they leave school.

The effects of low support levels for these children often snowballs into a lifetime of difficulty. Early support is crucial for managing the mental health of our young people with ADHD.

Without adequate support during their education, young people with ADHD can go on to have issues with employment:²²

- Adults with ADHD are around 60% more likely to be fired
- 30% more likely to have ongoing chronic employment issues
- 3x more likely to quit on impulse

Self-harm and suicide risk

Studies have showed that ADHD is a risk factor for suicidal and self injurious behaviour for children between the ages of 9 and 18.²³

Self-harm was reported to be most common among girls with ADHD, with up to half of girls who are diagnosed attempting self inflicted injury.³

The link between ADHD and self harm appears to fade after adolescence, with some researchers suggesting that the propensity to carry out these behaviours changes with brain development.²³ However, more research is needed in this area. It is clear however, that young people with ADHD need appropriate and adequate support from all adults around them.

“My child was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 10. Straight away we were offered medication, and then sent out of the door. From then on, we had no contact with support services at all. We struggled day in and day out with challenging behaviour and our son’s depression.

We even had to move his school because of a lack of understanding and empathy from his teachers. The fundamental lack of knowledge surrounding ADHD from professionals is really scary to us as parents. We don’t know what the future holds for our child”.

Parents of a teenager with ADHD

Executive Function Coaching

The root cause of all ADHD struggles is executive dysfunction. Executive Function Coaching (EFC) is a specialised interventions which aims to target less developed areas of executive functions.

EFC is carried out by trained coaches, who work collaboratively with the young person to set goals, improve emotional wellbeing, educate them on their ADHD and understand how executive dysfunction is affecting them. In turn, young people receiving EFC often find a marked improvement in academic performance, as well as their all-round wellbeing. Importantly, coaching helps the child to understand the mechanisms of the ADHD brain. Empowering them with knowledge of their condition is vital for ensuring success.

EFC works well for individual children, sibling groups and families.

Counselling or psychotherapy

Counselling or therapy can be helpful for young people with ADHD to work through any cooccurring anxiety or depression. Growing up with ADHD in a world that isn’t designed for you can be traumatising in itself, and working through these feelings with a therapist can often be a useful step in a child’s journey.

It is important to choose a counsellor who understands ADHD and neurodiversity.

ADHD training for education staff

in a 2017 survey, 89% of teachers said they either teach or had previously taught students with ADHD. However, 42% of teachers went on to say they received no training on teaching or supporting students with the condition.²⁴

7 years later, the picture isn’t much different. Through our work with education providers, we know that teachers can be overworked and this often leaves them with little to no time for individualised support for neurodiverse students. One-off INSET training days don’t tend to lead to long term interventions for supporting children with ADHD.

Comprehensive support programmes that include coaching, therapy and family involvement are providing promising results for the management of childhood and adolescent ADHD. Outcomes appear to be improved for both the students involved, school and family members. More research is required in this area.

In addition to the support for students, the stigma surrounding ADHD is often reduced, and knowledge improved when staff participate in specific ADHD training.²⁵

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