



ADHD: A Guide for Parents

ADHD involves a delay in executive functioning skills and creates a disconnect between knowledge and performance, often impacting self-esteem—even in bright children—because success can feel elusive. Supporting your child effectively with understanding key principles, especially how your perspective shapes your interactions and responses.

Important Considerations:

- **Can't vs. Won't** – If your child isn't following through on a task, it's likely because they *can't*, not because they *won't*. ADHD affects executive functioning, which controls initiation, follow-through, and work completion.
- **Support at the Point of Performance** – Real-time cues and immediate feedback help kids integrate strategies into their daily routines. Use reminders like alarms, checklists, or visual cues to support planning and follow-through.
- **Transition Breaks Matter** – Jumping straight into homework after school can be overwhelming. A 10-minute movement break—running, pushups, or stretching—can help reset their brain. Pair this with a protein-rich snack to fuel focus and productivity.
- **Adjust Your Expectations** – Research shows kids with ADHD often have an executive functioning delay of about three years. When your child isn't doing what expected, subtract three years from their age to set a more attainable goal. Success builds confidence, making it easier to gradually increase expectations.

The Brain-Based Side of ADHD: Understanding that there are brain-based reasons behind your child's behavior can shift the focus from frustration to effective support. ADHD means there are structural differences in the brain and neurotransmitter levels that prevent them from easily doing anything. There is less dopamine for motivation and norepinephrine for alertness so this affects regulation and can cause delays in multiple areas:

- **Thinking & Reasoning** – Difficulty resisting distractions, forgetfulness, and missing verbal cues.
- **Flexibility** – Trouble shifting between tasks, rigid behaviors when asked to stop an activity, and sensitivity to change.
- **Working Memory** – Difficulty holding onto information while speaking or working, leading to frequent interruptions or blurting.
- **Language Processing** – Struggles with organizing thoughts, writing, and slowing down mental processes, sometimes accompanied by excessive verbal processing.
- **Social-Emotional Skills** – Intense emotions, difficulty regulating frustration, and trouble reading social cues, which can lead to difficulty with behavior regulation, conflicts or hurt feelings.
- **Motor Skills & Safety** – Sloppy handwriting, frequent careless mistakes, and risk-taking behaviors due to a high need for movement without fully developed gross motor skills.

The ADHD Brain: This brain thrives on specific input and support to navigate skill-based challenges that impact performance. To enhance success, consider incorporating these three key strategies:

1. **Engaging and Dynamic Input** – Incorporate novelty, fun, and variety within a structured routine, reinforced with visual cues to improve focus and attention.
2. **Organizational Support** – Provide assistance with planning and organization, as difficulties in these areas often manifest as behavioral challenges.
3. **Chunked Instructions with Rewards** – Break tasks into smaller, manageable steps with frequent reinforcement to sustain motivation and encourage follow-through.

Common Challenges: By understanding these challenges and providing the right support, we can help ADHD learners navigate their world with greater success.

- **Emotional, Motivational, and Arousal Regulation** – Difficulty managing emotions and motivation often leads to behavioral struggles.
- **Delayed Internal Language** – Trouble with self-talk affects rule-following, problem-solving, and self-regulation.
- **Limited Problem-Solving and Flexibility** – Struggles with adjusting plans and pursuing long-term goals; frequent frustration leads to giving up.
- **Rigid Thinking Patterns** – Difficulty adapting strategies, often repeating ineffective approaches. This is where we can help guide them in creating a more effective plan.

Ways to change the way we Communicate with Kids:

Goal: Praise effort and the process, NOT the performance.

Parent Tip	Example
State what you see instead of asking questions you know the answer to.	"I don't see your homework. How can I help?"
Validate feelings first.	"I'm sorry you're feeling frustrated. How can I help?"
Encourage your child to think through problems.	"I wonder what we can do next?"
Make praise specific.	"You remembered to feed the dog without being asked!"
Reduce the amount of verbal information.	Write directions on a sticky note or use pictures. Using a dry erase pen on the mirror is fun too!
Encourage independence before stepping in.	"Try first, then I'll help if you need me."
Notice effort, not just outcomes.	"I can see you're working hard."
Teach a growth mindset.	"You can't do it...yet."
Treat mistakes as learning opportunities.	"What could we do differently next time?"
Catch positive behaviors.	"How did you know that would work?"
Help your child reflect on their successes.	"How did you figure that out?"
Focus on choices they can control.	"What do you want to give your attention to right now?" or "How many problems will you do before a break?"
Teach positive self-talk.	"I can do this." "I'll keep trying."
Model the thinking process.	"What am I doing? What should I be doing next?"
Remember that effort is rarely the issue.	Children with ADHD often work harder than others realize.

Transitions: Anticipation is Key! Kids with ADHD and executive functioning weaknesses thrive on predictability because they often miss instruction or can't work through the steps. Help them transition smoothly with these strategies:

- **Visual Schedules** – Display a clear schedule of upcoming events. Discuss activities beforehand so they can express concerns and plan for success.
- **Role-Playing & Planning** – Have them talk through or act out how they will handle upcoming transitions.
- **Specific, Advance Instructions** – Use both oral and visual cues to clarify expectations.
- **Timers for Attention Shifts** – Use a timer to signal when it's time to transition (e.g., putting away the computer).
- **Reward Small Efforts** – Each step is an opportunity for positive reinforcement (tangible or attention-based rewards) so break transitions into manageable steps:
 1. Putting materials away.
 2. Getting what they need.
 3. Moving to the next task.

Self-Regulation Techniques

Research shows that 20 minutes of focused work followed by a 10-minute break improves learning. Here are effective break-time strategies:

- **Breathing Exercises** – Teach kids to sit or lie down with a hand on their belly. Breathe in for 5 seconds, out for 7. Aim for five sessions per day.
- **Progressive Relaxation** – Guide them to tense and relax muscles from head to toe.
- **Mindfulness** – Encourage awareness of the present moment. Have them:
 - Recognize intrusive thoughts, then imagine setting them aside.
 - Focus on what they can hear, feel, and smell.
 - Visualize putting unrelated thoughts into a "box" to revisit later.
 - Brain Breaks – Neurotransmitters deplete after 10-20 minutes of focus. Short movement breaks like Simon Says, Charades (e.g., acting out vocabulary words), spelling with body movements, or any heavy-work type activities like desk or wall pushups, stretching, or movement can boost norepinephrine for energy and focused attention.
- **Fidgets** – Allow quiet, non-distracting fidgets to keep hands engaged and minds focused.
- **Environmental Adjustments** – Adapt spaces to their needs:
 - *Calming areas* – Forts with pillows, darkness, or quiet spaces for breaks.
 - *Organized workspaces* – Color-coded folders and homework tools for structured support.