

# Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder explained

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of a number of behavioural and developmental disorders that can affect young children. Many children with ADHD say they do not understand why they sometimes feel out of control or very lonely. The condition is not the child's fault. The exact cause is still unknown.

## ADHD is not an illness

ADHD is a behavioural disorder, not an illness or a sign of low intelligence. With understanding, care and medical treatment, the ADHD child can live a normal life.

A child with ADHD has three main problems:

- **Inattention** – difficulty concentrating, forgetting instructions, moving from one task to another without completing anything
- **Impulsivity** – talking over the top of others, having a 'short fuse', being accident prone
- **Overactivity** – constant restlessness and fidgeting.

All young children have a limited attention span and sometimes do things without thinking. Only a few of these children have ADHD.

## Diagnosis of ADHD

A diagnosis can only be made after a complex assessment where a range of information is collected, especially from parents. The symptoms must be obvious in most areas of the child's life. There is no single test. A paediatrician, child psychologist or child psychiatrist can make the assessment or arrange a referral.

## Caring for a child with ADHD

Children with this condition can stretch the patience of all members of the family. Parents need to try a range of strategies to help their child learn and develop, and reduce stress in the family.

It's important for parents to be consistent and work as a team to support each other as much as possible. Try to have frequent breaks as it's valuable to get some respite from the demands of caring for a child with ADHD.

It will help to:

- Develop consistent routines at home and at school.
- Keep rules clear and simple, and give reminders calmly.
- Get physically close to the child and make sure you have the child's full attention when you talk.
- Give one or two instructions at a time.
- Praise the child and notice when they do something good.
- Supervise closely – the child may put themselves in dangerous situations.
- Try to ignore minor irritating behaviours.
- Be clear about discipline for behaviour you find unacceptable. For example, use 'time out' (between the ages of 18 months and six years) or logical consequences (for older children).

Remember the child does not intend to be difficult.

## Other helpful techniques to manage ADHD

There are various techniques to help the child develop concentration and social skills. Counselling for the child and other family members may also be helpful. Some children may require medication to enable them to make use of their natural abilities and other learning strategies.

## Where to get help

- Your family doctor
- Kids Health Info, RCH Tel. (03) 9345 6429

## Things to remember

- Children with ADHD need support and understanding from family and teachers.
- Not all children who are inattentive, impulsive and overactive have ADHD.
- Medication, positive parenting strategies, school support and counselling can help most children with ADHD and their families.
- No single test can diagnose ADHD. Assessment by a doctor or psychologist involves putting together lots of pieces of information to make a diagnosis.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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