

Keeping Scattered Kids on Track: Supporting Children & Youth with ADHD

What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by a consistent pattern of inattention and / or hyperactivity and impulsivity. It is commonly diagnosed within childhood and is thought to be caused by a combination of genetic and environmental influences.

It's important to remember that ADHD is related to problems with growth and development in the brain; a child with ADHD is *not* trying to be disobedient, defiant or 'bad'. They are simply doing the best that they can with what resources they have in that moment. Fortunately, with your support and that of other knowledgeable adults, symptoms of ADHD can improve as your child matures.

Like any medical condition, if left untreated, ADHD can have significant impacts on a person's life. It is important to implement treatment as early as possible to mitigate some of the potential social, emotional, behaviour and academic problems that may result from the condition. Such treatment will also serve to enhance the positive qualities that tend to accompany ADHD – creativity, ingenuity, charisma, spontaneity and enthusiasm are often seen in persons with ADHD.

Treatment: Where to Start?

The best approach to treatment is using a combination of methods tailored to fit the unique needs of the child/youth. Treatment can include supportive activities, school-based strategies, behavioural strategies, psychotherapy / counselling, and medications. Here we will focus on the first three; while the need for formal assessment, psychotherapy and/or medication should be discussed with your child's pediatrician or family doctor. Whether seeking to solidify a diagnosis or deciding on treatment, please refer to one or more of the many resources listed in our resources section (pg 2).

Caregiver Strategies

Provide a supportive environment

- Create a comfortable home where your child can be themselves
- Reduce distractions (excess noise, visual and sensory stimuli)
- Consider homework or study locations – ensure your child's work space allows them to focus
- Provide organizational tools such as bins, labels, colored folders

Provide a supportive schedule

- Work with your child to establish a realistic schedule and daily routine. Predictable routines allow kids to feel safe and to develop a sense of mastery over

their daily lives. Like all of us, kids handle change best if it is expected and occurs in the context of a familiar routine.

- Establish consistent routines around daily transitions – getting up for school, returning home from school, settling for bedtime
- Give calm, encouraging prompts to remind your child of what's happening next
- Use visuals – such as routine charts/checklists, calendars, notes and day-timers to help your child understand the sequence of events and increase predictability
- Time can escape children with ADHD so help them to gain a better concept of time by using visual clocks/timers, applying due dates and breaking down complex tasks into simple, sequential steps

Provide a supportive relationship

- Be intentional about building positive interactions in your child's day through 'special time' – just 10 minutes of quality time with your child or teen will increase positive behaviours and their self-esteem.
- Note: This time is *not* for teaching a skill or instructing but rather for the play to be directed by your child/teen – so long as it's safe and can be done in ~10 min, they get to choose the play activity. Focus more on being a warm, curious and encouraging presence for your child and less on the outcomes of their play.
- Remember: any rules or limits you apply are only as good as your relationship with your child. Limit rules and consequences to what is important or essential. Choose battles and ignore smaller issues in favor of what they did well or 'right'.
- Make rules simple, achievable, and consistent with clearly understood consequences.
- Where appropriate, involve your child/teen in developing rules and their associated consequences. If they are involved in the development of the rule, they are more apt to follow through.
- Uphold some non-negotiable rules that concern safety, while collaborate on rules that involve chores and scheduling.
- Renegotiate and modify rules in response to your child's changing abilities.

Provide behavioural supports

Self- Regulation

- Allow your child to take a time out or breaks as needed
- Ensure they get movement breaks and enough physical activity throughout the day
- Provide appropriate fidget tools that are quiet and non-distracting e.g. squeeze/stress balls and wiggle cushions

- Some benefit from listening to music while doing a task
- Engage a bored or restless child with a job or a task, especially one that involves heavy work such as pushing, pulling, lifting, or carrying

Praise and Reward

Unfortunately, kids with ADHD are reprimanded or scolded far more often than the average child, which can lower their self-esteem and instill a sense of being 'crazy, lazy or stupid'. To prevent this from happening, focus on praise and reward more than punishment:

- Catch kids being good – praise every little 'success'
- Build motivation through verbal praise & tangible rewards
- Praise, rewards & incentives will increase likelihood they will repeat behaviour or try again
- Label the specific behaviour you are praising and praise as close in time to the behaviour as possible
- Offer rewards that are meaningful (e.g. special play date or outing with parent)and change rewards often
- Use reward charts: list the chores or task, and assign a point value to each. Kids can then 'see' the goal they are aiming for

Get Involved in School: Strategies for Home

Teaching skills is not enough. A child with ADHD is suffering from an inability to perform – *not* a lack of skill or knowledge. Therefore, it's essential to create a prosthetic environment, using strategies that support their unique learning needs.

- Children with ADHD benefit when adults work together. Remain connected with the main educator/teacher overseeing your child's learning. Share the strengths of your child, as well as helpful strategies to promote consistency between home and school. Share concerns and ask for help
- Have a firm, organized, yet flexible instructional style
- Make eye contact when giving directions & simplify directives to 2-3 word sentences (e.g. "Snack, then bedtime story")
- Have child repeat instructions to ensure their understanding
- Make learning interactive, physical or hands on, using real life examples whenever possible
- Regularly review key concepts & reward remembering
- Consider that not all strategies will work for your child, at all times, across all situations. Find the ones that work best for your child and family, while remain open to new methods.

Support your own self-care

- Appreciate that caring for and raising a child with ADHD is not without its challenges, so remain kind to yourself and other caregivers, as well as to your child.
- To ensure your own energetic, mental and emotional

reserves remain full, give attention to your own wellness. Prioritize sleep, exercise and healthy eating into your own daily routine.

- Choose your battles: focus on what's important & let the rest go
- Take time to reflect and connect with positive, supportive others who appreciate the realities of growing through ADHD (e.g. consider connecting with a local support group for caregivers of children with ADHD)
- To *give* support, we must *get* support. Receive advice or guidance from educators, clinicians & other parents. Build a supportive team around you and your child.
- Stay positive, non-judgemental; be patient and forgiving.

Resources

Websites:

- ADHD Association of Great Edmonton www.adhdedmonton.com
- Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder www.chadd.org
- Kely Mental Health Resource Centre <https://kelymentalhealth.ca/adhd>
- Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada www.caddac.ca
- Triple P Parenting www.triplep-parenting.ca/alb-en/triple-p/
- Teen Mental Health <http://teenmentalhealth.org/learn/mental-disorders/adhd/>
- Canadian ADHD resource Alliance www.caddra.ca/public-information/parents/
- Child Mind Institute <http://childmind.org>
- Collaborative Mental Health Care www.shared-care.ca
- Collaborative Problem Solving www.thinkkids.org
- Lives in the Balance, by Ross Greene, www.livesinthebalance.org/
- Incredible Years www.incredibleyears.com
- Russel Barkley www.russellbarkley.org

Books:

- ADHD: What Every Parent Needs to Know by American Academy of Pediatrics
- Taking Charge of ADHD: The Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents by Russell Barkley
- Smart but Scattered by Peg Dawson
- Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents, 2nd Edition by Peg Dawson
- Lost at School by Ross Greene
- The Explosive Child by Ross Greene