

Understanding ADHD

Some children seem to move through life as though there are fifty browser tabs open in their brain at all times.

A teacher is speaking. Somebody drops a pencil. The fluorescent light is buzzing. There is a bird outside the window. They suddenly remember something embarrassing from three years ago. Their sock feels strange. They are trying to listen. They really are. But by the time the instruction finishes, half of it has already disappeared.

ADHD is far more than being “busy” or distracted.

It is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects attention, impulse control, emotional regulation, organisation and the brain’s ability to manage and direct energy. It can affect learning, friendships, family life and everyday functioning in ways that are often deeply misunderstood.

Many children with ADHD are bright, creative, curious and capable. Many are also exhausted from constantly hearing that they are:

- careless
- lazy
- disruptive
- dramatic
- disorganised
- “not trying”
- too emotional
- too much

Often, the problem is not effort.

It is that the child’s brain is being asked to regulate attention, emotions, impulses, time, organisation and self-control in ways that may require far more conscious effort than adults realise.

What ADHD can look like

ADHD does not look the same in every child.

Some children are constantly moving, talking, climbing and touching everything around them. Others sit quietly staring out the window, missing half the lesson while appearing to pay attention perfectly.

Some children seem endlessly energetic. Others look dreamy, emotionally overwhelmed or permanently disorganised. Some bounce between all of those states in the same afternoon.

A child with ADHD may:

- struggle to sustain attention on tasks that do not feel engaging
- hyperfocus intensely on preferred interests

- interrupt conversations or blurt things out impulsively
- lose belongings constantly
- forget instructions moments after hearing them
- struggle with organisation and time management
- appear inconsistent academically
- become emotionally overwhelmed very quickly
- avoid tasks that feel mentally exhausting
- struggle to start tasks, even when they want to do them
- fidget, move or seek stimulation constantly
- react before thinking things through
- become intensely frustrated by everyday demands
- feel discouraged after repeated criticism

Many children with ADHD are carrying years of shame before anybody realises what is actually happening underneath the behaviour.

ADHD is not a lack of intelligence

One of the biggest misconceptions about ADHD is that children are not paying attention because they do not care.

In reality, many care enormously.

They often notice everything at once.

The difficulty is not always attention itself. It is regulating attention. A child may be unable to focus on a worksheet for ten minutes, then spend three straight hours building an intricate Minecraft world, researching sharks or memorising every detail about Formula 1.

This inconsistency confuses adults constantly.

- But inconsistency is often part of ADHD.
- The child who forgets their homework may also remember facts nobody else noticed.
The child who cannot start the assignment may still understand the work completely.
The child who looks distracted may actually be overwhelmed by how much information is arriving at once.

Emotional regulation and ADHD

For many children, the emotional side of ADHD is one of the hardest parts to live with.

Small frustrations can suddenly feel enormous. A sibling touching the wrong thing. A change of plan. A maths question that felt manageable thirty seconds ago and now suddenly feels impossible.

Disappointment can hit like a tidal wave.

A correction from a teacher may replay in their mind for the rest of the day.

Many children with ADHD struggle with emotional regulation, frustration tolerance and impulsive reactions. This can look like:

- emotional outbursts
- shouting or impulsive reactions
- crying easily
- panic when overwhelmed
- difficulty calming down once upset
- explosive frustration over seemingly small things
- intense sensitivity to criticism or rejection

Adults sometimes assume these reactions are manipulative, dramatic or attention-seeking.

Often, the child's nervous system has simply become overloaded.

The invisible effort behind ADHD

Many children with ADHD spend huge amounts of energy trying to keep up with expectations that appear effortless for other people.

Remembering homework.

Tracking time.

Packing bags.

Following multi-step instructions.

Starting tasks.

Finishing tasks.

Sitting still.

Waiting their turn.

Stopping themselves from speaking impulsively.

Trying not to forget what they were about to say halfway through saying it.

Children hear corrections all day long.

Sit properly.

Focus.

Stop interrupting.

Pay attention.

You need to try harder.

After a while, some children begin to believe they are failing at things everybody else somehow finds easy.

That emotional weight builds quietly over time.

ADHD in girls

ADHD is often missed in girls because it does not always present in loud or disruptive ways.

Many girls:

- daydream quietly
- mask difficulties socially
- internalise anxiety
- appear emotionally sensitive rather than hyperactive
- work extremely hard to compensate
- become perfectionistic
- appear capable while struggling internally
- hold everything together at school and collapse afterwards

Some girls are diagnosed only much later because their difficulties were mistaken for anxiety, personality traits or emotional sensitivity.

School and ADHD

School can be exhausting for children with ADHD.

Not because they are unwilling to learn, but because many school environments demand constant:

- attention
- sitting still
- organisation
- self-monitoring
- working memory
- emotional control
- task switching

These are often the exact areas ADHD affects most.

A child may genuinely understand the work and still forget to hand it in.

They may know the answer but miss half the instructions because somebody coughed in the passage and their attention disappeared sideways for ten seconds.

They may start homework immediately one day and seem completely unable to begin the next.

This inconsistency can be incredibly frustrating for adults, but it is often frustrating for the child too.

Helpful supports at school may include:

- movement opportunities

- visual reminders
- written instructions alongside verbal instructions
- breaking tasks into smaller steps
- extra processing time
- support with organisation and planning
- predictable routines
- calm communication
- reduced overwhelm where possible
- flexible seating or movement options

Children generally cope better when adults become curious about what is making things difficult instead of assuming every struggle is deliberate behaviour.

ADHD at home

Many parents describe after-school hours as the hardest part of the day.

Some children spend the entire school day trying to hold themselves together, then unravel completely once they get home.

Homework battles. Forgotten tasks. Missing school shoes five minutes before leaving. Emotional explosions over things that seem tiny from the outside. The constant repetition of:
Please brush your teeth.

Please pack your bag.

Please come back and finish what you started.

Parents often end up feeling like they are:

- repeating themselves endlessly
- managing chaos all afternoon
- constantly firefighting
- trying to parent through overwhelm while overwhelmed themselves

This does not mean the family is failing.

ADHD affects the entire rhythm of daily life.

Helpful approaches at home may include:

- reducing unnecessary overwhelm
- creating predictable routines
- using visual reminders and external supports
- allowing movement and breaks
- recognising signs of overload early

- focusing on connection before correction
- understanding that skills may be inconsistent
- separating the child from the behaviour

Children with ADHD often hear far more negative feedback than their peers.

Home matters enormously because it becomes the place where they most need to feel understood, safe and accepted, not constantly “fixed”.

Strengths and capacity

Children with ADHD are individuals first.

Many are imaginative, funny, curious, energetic and deeply passionate about the things that matter to them. Some think in wonderfully unexpected ways. Some notice patterns and connections other people miss completely.

Many also show strengths in:

- creativity
- humour
- spontaneity
- big-picture thinking
- problem-solving
- resilience
- originality
- passion-driven learning

At the same time, strengths do not erase support needs.

A child can be highly intelligent, insightful and creative while still struggling enormously with executive functioning, emotional regulation or everyday demands.

Both things can be true at once.

When to seek support

If a child is consistently struggling with attention, impulsivity, emotional regulation, organisation or coping with everyday expectations, it may help to speak to an appropriately qualified healthcare or educational professional.

Assessment is not about labelling a child negatively or excusing every behaviour.

For many families, understanding ADHD brings enormous relief.

Suddenly, years of confusion begin to make sense.

A final thought

Children with ADHD are often described as though they are simply not trying hard enough.

In reality, many are trying harder than anybody realises.

Sometimes the child who looks careless is actually overwhelmed.

Sometimes the child who keeps interrupting is terrified they will lose the thought before they can say it.

Sometimes the child who cannot start the homework has already spent the entire day mentally exhausted from trying to hold everything together.

Sometimes the child who has spent years feeling “wrong” finally starts to understand themselves differently too.