

## Why Is My Child Having Trouble in School?

It is very common for children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to have difficulties in school. These problems can occur for several reasons.

- Symptoms of ADHD like **distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity** make it hard for children with ADHD to pay attention or stay focused on their work, even though they may be capable learners and bright enough to understand the material.
- Many children with ADHD also have **trouble organizing** themselves, breaking an assignment down into smaller steps, staying on a schedule, and managing their school materials.
- Some children with ADHD have **difficulty with self-control** and get into trouble with peers or teachers.
- Many children with ADHD also have a **learning disability**. Schools usually define a learning disability as a discrepancy between a child's IQ score and his or her performance on achievement tests. A child with a learning disability has difficulty understanding information he or she sees or hears or trouble putting together information from different parts of the brain.
- Children with ADHD often **can learn material, but it may take longer** and require more repetition.
- Children with ADHD often show **inconsistency in their work** because of their ADHD; one day they may know information and the next day they cannot seem to remember it.
- Many children with ADHD have **trouble managing homework challenges** such as
  - Failing to write down assignments
  - Not completing classroom assignments
  - Forgetting homework at home
  - Failing to hand in homework
  - Poor persistence to tasks (follow-through)
  - Needing constant supervision or help with class work and homework
  - Taking hours to do minutes of work

### Typical School Performance Difficulties Associated With ADHD

- Getting started
- Poor organization and study skills
- Difficulty expressing themselves in written and spoken language
- Difficulty with writing skills

- Difficulty with sequencing of a complex task and breaking an assignment down into manageable parts to be completed over a course of time, such as a long-term project
- Analyzing and problem-solving schoolwork and behavior
- Behavior that interferes with learning and affects interpersonal relationships
- Immature social skills

### What Can I Personally Do to Help?

There are many different ways that a parent's participation can make a difference in a child's school experience, including

- **Build your support team.**
  - Talk with your pediatrician regularly about academic, behavior, and homework problems. Treatment modifications may help.
  - Ask your pediatrician how often he or she would like to have the parent and teacher fill out follow-up forms. Set up a system for sending the forms back to your pediatrician.
  - Ask your child's teacher to fill out the teacher follow-up form in this toolkit, then send a copy of the form to your treating physician.
- **Start the school year by sending your child's teacher a letter** with strengths, problems, and classroom and management interventions that have worked in the past for your child. If your child has an education plan, send a copy of the plan for your child (504 or individualized education plan) to the teacher (teachers in middle school and high school).
- **Ask your child's teacher to fill out a parent contact sheet** that includes information such as name, e-mail address, phone number, best times to contact him or her, how homework is assigned, procedures for turning in homework, and other classroom policies.
  - Some schools have a school-wide Web site on which parents can log on to retrieve assigned homework and classroom policies and procedures.
- **Talk with your child's teacher** to identify where your child is having the most problems. Set up a regular schedule of communication by phone, e-mail, or notes. Ask for face-to-face meetings early and often.
  - Keep a record of all communication that you have with the teacher and other school staff about issues and discussions regarding your child. Use a binder and place all information and communication dated and in order.



- **Work with your child's teacher** to make a **plan** for how you will address these problems and what strategies at school and home will help your child be successful at learning and completing work.
  - (Sample) Use a school-to-home tracker to assist with communicating how your child is following through with behavior and classroom work. Reward your child for his or her positive progress on the school-to-home tracker.
- **Set up a homework space** with your child. A structured homework plan can be helpful.
- **Praise your child** and reward him or her for a job well done immediately after completing tasks or homework.
- **Make sure your child actually has mastered** new material so that he or she does not get behind academically.
- **Foster your child's strengths.**
  - Incorporate your child's strengths into daily home behavior incentive plans and school educational plans.
  - Review strengths with your child. Help him or her to see these strengths.
- **Ask the teacher to modify homework** expectations if homework is a major problem for your child.
- **Acknowledge how much harder** it is for your child to get organized, stay on task, complete assignments, and learn material compared with other children. Help your child to get organized, break tasks down into smaller pieces, and expend his or her excess physical energy in ways that are OK at home and in the classroom.
- **Find out about tutoring options** through your child's school or local community groups. Children with ADHD may take longer to learn material compared with other children even though they are just as smart. Tutoring may help your child master new materials.
- **Acknowledge the extra efforts your child's teacher** may have to make to help your child.
- **Spend time** in the classroom and volunteer to help on special occasions if your work schedule allows, and observe your child's behavior.
- **Read all you can about ADHD** and share it with your child's teacher and other school officials.
- **Become an expert on ADHD and your child's individual needs.**
- **Join a support group** for parents of children with ADHD or learning disabilities, such as Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD). Other parents may offer ideas to help your child.
- **If your child is consistently having problems with academics or behavior in the classroom, write a letter to the principal asking for an evaluation.** The school can then determine whether your child is eligible for accommodations or special education services. Your school has a regular education process that helps teachers with students who are having learning or behavioral problems that the teacher has been unsuccessful in solving. The process differs in various school districts and even among different schools in the same district. Some of the names this process may go by include Student Study Team (SST), Instructional Support Team (IST), Pupil Assistance Team (PAT), Student Intervention Team (SIT), or Teacher Assistance Team (TAT).

Parents are encouraged to request a meeting about their child to discuss concerns and create a plan of action to address their child's needs. In addition to the child's teacher, members of the team may include the child, the parents, a mentor teacher or other teachers, the principal, the school nurse, the resource specialist, a speech and language specialist, or a counselor or psychologist. The team members meet to discuss the child's strengths and weaknesses, the child's progress in his or her current placement, and the kinds of problems the child is having. Team members brainstorm to develop a plan of action that documents the kinds of interventions that will help the child, the timeline for the changes to take place, and the school staff responsible for the implementation of the team's recommendations.

The team should also come up with a plan to monitor the child's progress. A follow-up meeting should be scheduled within a reasonable time frame (usually 4 to 6 weeks) to determine whether the team's interventions are actually helping the child in the areas of difficulty.

Adapted from Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders Parent to Parent: Family Training and material developed by Laurel K. Leslie, MD, MPH, San Diego ADHD Project.

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