

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have problems with paying attention and controlling impulses. The condition can cause them to be easily frustrated and behave inappropriately in certain situations.

ADHD is a complex condition with no one cause. Many biological and environmental circumstances can be involved. There are several types of treatment for ADHD, including medication and psychological and behavioral therapies. Many experts believe that some combination of these treatments works best to control the symptoms of ADHD. Family involvement and support also help and can protect children from self-esteem and social problems that can result from ADHD.

Understanding ADHD is important to foster parents. Because social, emotional, and environmental factors play a role in a child's developing ADHD, the disorder may be more common in foster children. The condition can be very disruptive to families and can pose special challenges to parents who have a foster child with ADHD. But there are strategies that can help you, your family, and your child cope with ADHD.

You and Your Foster Child

ADHD or normal toddler behavior?

It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a toddler has ADHD or is simply displaying typical toddler behavior. Being hyperactive, lacking attention, and occasionally not controlling impulses are normal behaviors for toddlers and preschoolers. Most toddlers, for example, cannot sit still very long during meals or while at play.

Also, studies suggest that foster children are more likely to have behavioral, emotion-regulation, and physical problems. So, you might wonder whether your child's behavior is due to circumstances associated with foster care or ADHD, especially if your child is very active or has trouble staying on task. Knowing a little about the signs of ADHD will help.

Signs and symptoms of ADHD

There is no test that clearly diagnoses ADHD. The condition is diagnosed by first ruling out other disorders and then identifying specific behaviors that suggest ADHD. In diagnosing ADHD, doctors usually look for the following:

- Symptoms must be seen for at least six months.
- Symptoms must have begun before 7 years of age.
- The symptoms must be seen in at least two contexts—at home and at school, for example.
- The child's condition must interrupt his or her daily functioning.

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You and Your Foster Child is a publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education. Additional topics in the *You and Your Foster Child* series are available on the Internet at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/fosterparent. Other helpful publications on parenting, children, youth, and families from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development are also available online at www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family. *You and Your Foster Child* may be reproduced for nonprofit use only.

- All other disorders must be ruled out, such as anxiety, schizophrenia, mania, dissociative disorder, personality disorder, or developmental disorder.

There are three subcategories of ADHD: 1) mostly inattentive, 2) primarily hyperactive-impulsive, and 3) a combined type with symptoms from both.

Inattention

Some examples of behaviors that are associated with inattention include:

- Failure to listen to directions.
- Unable to focus on details resulting in making careless mistakes.
- Inability to carry out instructions or complete assignments.
- Difficulty organizing work.
- Easily distracted and misplaces things.
- Frequently forgetful.

Hyperactive/impulsive

Hyperactive/impulsive children lack behavior control and are frequently:

- Fidgety and squirm a lot.
- Unable to stay seated.
- Run and climb frequently, especially in situations that are inappropriate.
- Have difficulty playing quietly.
- Constantly seem to be driven or “on the go.”
- Talk excessively, often interrupting teachers by blurting out responses.
- Have difficulty taking turns.
- Interrupt or intrude on others.

A combination of both conditions

The combined type of ADHD is diagnosed when a child has severe problems with most, if not all, of the above-mentioned symptoms in a number of contexts, such as at home and at school. This is the most common type of ADHD, and it puts a child at the greatest risk for social and academic difficulties.

Dealing with ADHD

Many families with a child with ADHD view their home life as a constant battle, with the child seeming to control the family. Effective treatment will help both child and family.

Many children with ADHD are prescribed medication, but there are other things you can do to help as well. Here are some suggestions:

- Learn behavior management techniques. Using them helps to reduce symptoms and improve the quality of life of children with ADHD.
- Be patient. Foster children may not trust foster parents at first, which can make any treatment plan more difficult. Your patience and understanding will help.

- Be accepting and committed to your foster child. You can be a therapeutic role model for your child, and that will help in dealing with the symptoms of ADHD.
- Deal with your own stress and anxiety. Find ways to lessen the anxiety related to parenting a child with ADHD.
- Be organized and planful. But also be flexible.
- Be an advocate for your child. You may need to insist on services from agencies and schools. Accept their help.
- Provide structure for all treatment plans, especially behavior management plans.
- Learn about this condition, and stay positive about your child’s potential.
- Remember that your child is not misbehaving deliberately.
- Improve your child’s nutrition. For example, limit sugar and caffeine, which have been linked with hyperactive behavior.
- Teach your child stress-reducing behaviors, such as deep breathing exercises.
- Exercise and outdoor recreation help reduce ADHD symptoms.
- Teach social skills. Many children with ADHD lack the social skills to interact appropriately with peers.
- Be nurturing. A nurturing approach can help you build a better relationship with your foster child, which will help with any treatment plan.

When to seek professional help

Children who show most of the symptoms should be evaluated by a pediatrician or other qualified professional to determine whether they have ADHD and, if recommended, start a treatment plan. Specialists in ADHD can be found among the following professionals:

- Pediatrician.
- Child psychiatrist.
- Cognitive or behavioral therapist.
- Child psychologist.
- ADHD support group or social skills group.
- Educational specialist.

Remember—stay positive

Having a child with ADHD can be a challenge. But always keep the following in mind:

- There are many positive things your child can do.
- Your child with ADHD can succeed in school.
- Your child needs your encouragement and needs you to have confidence that he or she can succeed.

