

# ADHD: Helping Handout for Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Children and adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) exhibit highly frequent and severe inattentive and/or hyperactive-impulsive behaviors that are inappropriate for their age, persist over time, and are found across settings. In addition, they often experience academic, behavioral, emotional, and social problems that affect their everyday lives. These difficulties are seen in children even as young as preschool age and often persist into adulthood. If left untreated, individuals with ADHD are at greater risk for long-term negative outcomes, including educational, employment, and mental health problems. Fortunately, there are numerous research-supported interventions for youth with ADHD, including medications (e.g., Adderall, Ritalin, Strattera) and behavioral interventions that can be used at home and school. Whereas parents must consult with their child's medical doctor regarding any need for medications, this handout focuses on home-based behavioral intervention strategies (see *ADHD: Helping Handout for School* for school-based intervention strategies).

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

In choosing among recommended intervention strategies for a child or teen with ADHD, parents should consider the following factors.

### Developmental Level

Problem behaviors in children with ADHD can vary by age and developmental level. For example, hyperactivity and tantrums may be primary concerns in early childhood, whereas difficulties related to delinquency and substance use may emerge in adolescence. Academic concerns, such as completing homework, may continue throughout development. Thus, it is important that parents select interventions

that not only are appropriate for the current primary concern, but also have research support for use at the child's specific age. Parents should also reevaluate intervention choices as the child matures.

### Environmental and Cultural Factors

External and environmental factors can have real effects on both development and behavior. When selecting an intervention, parents should think about what is happening in the child's environment, including influences in the home, school, and community that may either help or hurt an intervention's success. Things to notice would include where and when the behavior occurs (e.g., while completing homework, in public places, during transitions); the help and resources the child receives; and the child's cultural and language background. For example, interventions that involve home-school communication can be effective for academic problems in elementary school students. However, without modification, this sort of intervention would likely not be an appropriate selection by an English-speaking teacher for a student whose parents are non-English speakers.

### Target Behavior

When a child displays several challenging behaviors, it may be necessary to identify treatment priorities to address the behavior of greatest concern, which becomes the target behavior. Specifically, parents should first target those behaviors that pose a danger to the individual or others. For example, aggressive or destructive behaviors (e.g., hitting others, biting self or others, throwing objects) should be addressed before distracting or disruptive behaviors (e.g., excessive talking, constant movement).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended for parents (and other caregivers) to review and consider

for use in the home. When selecting strategies, parents should think about what children may be trying to communicate through their behavior. Often children engaging in challenging behaviors are sending their parents a message that something isn't right or that their needs aren't being met. Common reasons for challenging behavior include (a) to get access to adult attention (positive or negative); (b) to get access to an item or activity; and (c) to escape attention, a task or direction, or an activity. Once parents have identified the reason behind their child's challenging behaviors, they can select an intervention strategy that they think will help reduce the problem behavior and best meet their child's needs. Although recommended strategies may not eliminate problem behaviors, they can serve as a foundation for future skills and build on one another to help decrease problem behaviors.

1. **Praise appropriate behavior.** Specific positive feedback and encouragement lets the child know you approve of the behavior. Praise should be given immediately and consistently after each desired behavior (e.g., "Nice job pushing in your chair and putting your dish in the sink. I really appreciate it when you help with cleaning up!"). (See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home*.)
2. **When giving directions, make sure they are understood.** When giving directions to children, it helps to first get their attention and look directly into their eyes. Then tell them in a clear, calm voice specifically what they are expected to do. Keep directions simple and short. After giving directions, ask your child to repeat them back to you.
3. **Set clear expectations and consequences.** This is often best done in four steps:
  - a. **State the expectation.** "We are going to the grocery store. Remember, when we are in the grocery store we use our walking feet and we stay next to Mom or Dad."
  - b. **Model the expectation.** Demonstrate what walking feet look like and how close to the grocery cart the child should be.
  - c. **Establish the consequence.** "If you walk next to me while we are in the grocery store, you can earn a sticker or a reward. If you don't walk next to me, then I will hold your hand." Then return to the car and start over, with no prize.
  - d. **Follow through.** Provide frequent specific verbal praise; provide a reward or consequence.

4. **Give attention to your child, and especially to the behavior you want to see.** For example, when your child is playing, position yourself nearby, follow the child's interest in play or engage in conversation (e.g., ask questions related to play), repeat the child's comments to show interest and name or describe objects, and make eye contact while you praise or recognize the appropriate behavior (e.g., high fives, hugs).
5. **Use a reward chart.** A reward chart provides a visible way for children to see that they are meeting parental expectations. Also, reward charts provide multiple opportunities for children to receive positive attention. The following steps are suggested for making a reward chart:
  - a. **Choose the behaviors to change or encourage.** The behaviors that are chosen should be specific (e.g., say "Use polite words" instead of "Play nicely") and ones that can realistically change. Additionally, state exactly what you want your child to do, avoiding using words such as "no," "don't," "stop," or "not." For example, you should say "Share your toys with your brother" instead of "Do not hit your brother."
  - b. **Decide on the reward.** The reward should be something the child wants to earn and enjoy.
  - c. **Set up a chart.** Create a chart that shows the child the behaviors and rewards that have been chosen. The chart should be made in such a way that the child can understand it. Using pictures and simple words may be helpful for younger children.
  - d. **Explain the reward chart to the child.** The child should be told exactly what must be done to earn a reward.
  - e. **Use the chart.** Place the reward chart somewhere the child can easily see it. Rewards should be given to children immediately after their behavior to make sure they know what they did to earn a reward. The reward should be given alongside verbal praise.
  - f. **Slowly change the selected behavior or phase out the reward chart.** When first using the reward chart, reward the child often. Over time, you should notice the child is doing the right thing more and more often. At this point, you can consider stopping the reward for that behavior and move on to rewarding a different behavior.

6. **Create and follow routines.** Establish simple and predictable rituals for meals, homework, play, and bed. For example, children should be taught to lay out their clothes for the next morning before going to bed, and to put whatever they need to take to school in a special place.
7. **Use transitional warnings.** When changing from one activity or setting to another, alert the child about the upcoming change. Examples of transitional warnings include minute warnings (e.g., “You have 2 minutes to get ready to leave.”), countdowns, timers, and repetitive statements that help children stay calm as they move through change (e.g., “You’re doing a great job of getting ready to move on to our next activity”).
8. **Use visual schedules.** Visual schedules are pictures of what a child should expect to happen throughout an activity or day. Using a visual schedule helps children transition from one activity to the next. The following are suggested steps for making and using a visual schedule:
  - a. *Decide on the format of the schedule.* Picture schedules may be more appropriate for young children, whereas written schedules are best for readers.
  - b. *Decide on the length of the schedule.* Depending on the child’s needs and abilities, the schedule may depict the entire day or just one or two activities at a time.
  - c. *Teach the child how to use the schedule.* Briefly explain the concept of the schedule and how it can be used (e.g., take pictures off, cross item off the list).
  - d. *Monitor how the child is doing.* Once the schedule is being used, note whether the child is using it independently or needs additional instruction and modeling. Make changes to the schedule format as needed.
9. **Recognize the importance of good home–school communication, and use a daily behavior report card, if needed.** By maintaining regular contact with your child’s teachers, you know what is being taught and any behavioral concerns (and improvements!). Where needed, consider using a daily behavior report card. This is a home-based reinforcement technique for building and maintaining appropriate classroom performance and behavior. Typically, parents and teachers collaborate to design a system that targets specific behaviors (e.g., work completion) for change. The daily report card is completed by the teacher and given to the child to bring home to the parents. You then incorporate this daily feedback about your child’s school performance and behavior into a positive reward system in the home. (See *ADHD: Helping Handout for School* for the steps needed to successfully implement a daily report card.) A similar strategy would be using a home–school notebook that travels back and forth between home and school to help keep all parties aware of what is happening at home and school.
10. **Where needed, adopt ways to help your child complete homework.** Children who complete homework learn more and do better on tests than those who do not, especially in middle and high school. If your child is struggling with homework, the following are steps that you can take to help your child (also see *Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home*):
  - *Set up a homework routine.* Pick a regular place for doing homework that is away from distractions, such as other people, TV, and video games. If your child does not have homework, still maintain the same homework routine—sitting at a desk while working in a workbook, reading, or doing some other task.
  - *Help your child get started on homework.* For example, read the directions and do the first problem together. Then watch your child do the next problem alone. Leave once your child is working independently.
  - *Break homework into small segments.* Take frequent breaks to help your child complete the homework. For example, after your child has completed several items on a math worksheet, allow your child to briefly do something that the child enjoys. Then prompt the child to return to complete additional items before taking another brief break.
11. **Provide practice with social skills.** It is sometimes challenging for children with ADHD to learn social skills and rules. Parents can help their child with ADHD become a better listener, read people’s faces and body language, and interact more smoothly in groups. For example, you might do the following:
  - Role-play various social situations with your child.
  - Create opportunities for your child to play with others (e.g., schedule playdates).

- Find a “teachable moment” to speak with your child about inappropriate social behavior and its impact on friendships.
- Identify and label improper behavior. Using a neutral, nonjudgmental tone, comment on the behavior (e.g., “You’re interrupting my conversation with your dad.”) and then teach the correct social skills (e.g., “Please wait for a pause in the discussion and then say, ‘Excuse me.’”)
- Point out appropriate social behavior exhibited by characters on television, movies, or books. Have your child create similar scenarios using toys, puppets, stuffed animals, or action figures.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

<http://www.chadd.org/Understanding-ADHD/For-Parents-Caregivers.aspx>

This website for the National Resource Center for ADHD provides useful information to parents and caregivers regarding assessment and treatment for youth with ADHD.

<https://ccf.fiu.edu/about/resources/index.html>

The Center for Children and Families at Florida International University has many helpful resources for parents of youth with ADHD, including fact sheets about medication and behavioral treatments, homework tips, and a guide to developing a daily report card system.

### Books

Barkley, R. A. (2013). *Taking charge of ADHD: The complete, authoritative guide for parents* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This is a comprehensive, research-based guide to ADHD for parents.

McNerney, N. (2011). *Homework: A parents guide to helping out without freaking out*. Reston, VA: Integrated Publishing.

This guide provides clear, effective strategies for parents to help their children with homework.

## Related Helping Handouts

Attention to Task and Work Completion: Helping Handout for School

Calling Out in Class: Helping Handout for School  
Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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