

A PARENT'S GUIDE

# Understanding *ADHD*

The science behind your child's brain — and the strategies that help them thrive.



FOR

Parents & Caregivers

EDITION

2026

## WELCOME

# Your child is not **broken**.

ADHD — Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder — is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions of childhood. It's not a flaw, a phase, or the result of bad parenting. It's a difference in how the brain develops and processes information. With understanding and support, kids with ADHD can — and do — thrive.

~7%

of children worldwide are estimated to have ADHD

3 yrs

average delay in cortical maturation seen in ADHD brains

70-80%

heritability — ADHD is one of the most genetic conditions

## Myth vs. Fact

### MYTH

"Kids with ADHD just need more discipline and willpower."

### FACT

ADHD involves real differences in brain structure and chemistry — willpower alone can't override neurobiology.

### MYTH

"ADHD is overdiagnosed and not a real condition."

### FACT

Decades of research — including brain imaging and genetics — confirm ADHD as a well-defined neurodevelopmental disorder.

### MYTH

"My child can focus on video games for hours, so it can't be ADHD."

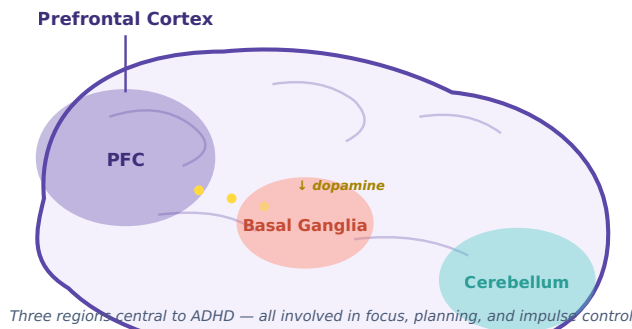
### FACT

ADHD is a difficulty regulating attention, not a lack of it. Highly stimulating activities are exceptions, not exclusions.

## THE SCIENCE

# Inside the ADHD brain.

Brain imaging and decades of research have revealed something important: the ADHD brain is wired differently — not worse. Three regions and two key brain chemicals tell most of the story.



## ● Prefrontal Cortex

The brain's "CEO" — handles focus, planning, impulse control, and working memory. ADHD brains show weaker activity and slower maturation here.

## ● Basal Ganglia

Filters distractions and regulates motor activity. Differences here help explain hyperactivity and the trouble with "stopping."

## ● Cerebellum

Long thought of as just for movement, it also coordinates timing and attention. Reduced volume is observed in ADHD.

## ● Default Mode Network

The "daydreaming" network. In ADHD, it doesn't quiet down properly when focus is needed — leading to mind-wandering.

## The chemistry: dopamine & norepinephrine

These two neurotransmitters help neurons in the prefrontal cortex talk to each other. ADHD brains often have less of these chemicals available — and more "transporter proteins" that vacuum them away too quickly. The result: fewer signals telling the brain "focus here," and more difficulty with motivation, follow-through, and emotional regulation.

## THREE PRESENTATIONS

# ADHD doesn't look **the same** in every kid.

Clinicians recognize three presentations of ADHD. A child's profile can also shift over time as they mature. None is "milder" than the others — they just look different.



## Predominantly Inattentive

The "daydreamer." Trouble sustaining attention, easily distracted, often forgetful, loses things, struggles to follow multi-step instructions. May appear quiet or "spacey" — and is often missed, especially in girls.



## Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive

The "engine that won't stop." Constant motion, fidgeting, talking excessively, blurting out answers, trouble waiting turns, acting without thinking. Often the most visible — and the most disruptive at school.



## Combined Presentation

The most common. Significant traits from both inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive categories. Children may be both unfocused *and* in motion — or oscillate between the two depending on the setting.

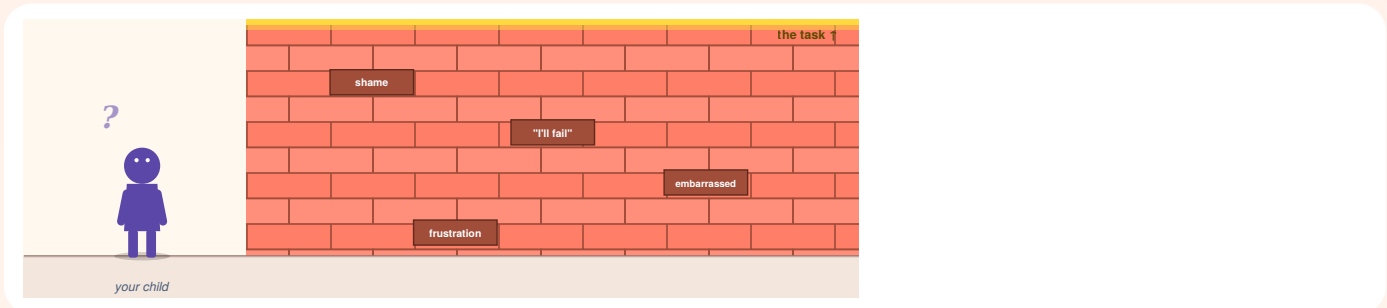
## The strengths side of ADHD

ADHD brains are often deeply **creative**, **energetic**, **highly curious**, and capable of intense **hyperfocus** on things they love. Many entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, and inventors share this wiring. The goal isn't to "fix" your child — it's to help them work with their brain, not against it.

## A POWERFUL CONCEPT

# The "Wall of Awful."

Coined by ADHD coach Brendan Mahan, this is one of the most validating ideas a parent can learn. It explains why "just do it" never works — and why simple tasks can feel utterly impossible to your child.



## Bricks that build the wall

- "Last time I tried, I failed"
- "Mom got frustrated with me"
- "My teacher said I wasn't trying"
- "I felt stupid in front of friends"
- "I got punished even though I tried"

## Signs your child is at the wall

- ! Meltdowns over "small" tasks
- ! Avoidance and procrastination
- ! Anger when reminded of the task
- ! "I can't" or "I'm stupid"
- ! Stomachaches before certain activities

## How to help them over the wall

### Don't add bricks.

Frustration and shame make the wall taller — even when unintended.

### Make tasks tiny.

Don't say "do your homework." Say "let's just open the binder."

### Validate first.

"I know this feels really hard." Acknowledgment lowers the wall.

### Climb beside them.

Co-regulation is a ladder — don't shout from the other side.

Concept by Brendan Mahan · ADHD Essentials Podcast

## QUICK TIPS

## 8 strategies you can start today.

Small, consistent changes have the biggest impact. Pick one or two to try this week — and remember: progress over perfection.

### Give one instruction at a time

01

"Go upstairs, brush your teeth, and grab pajamas" overloads working memory. Try: "Go brush your teeth," then check in.

### Make routines visual

02

Picture-based morning and bedtime checklists outsource memory to the wall — so it's not all on your child (or you).

### Catch them being good

03

Aim for a 4:1 ratio of specific praise to correction. "I love how you started your homework without being asked" beats "good job."

### Move first, focus later

04

Physical activity boosts dopamine. 10 minutes of movement before homework or school can dramatically improve focus.

### Break tasks into chunks

05

"Clean your room" feels impossible. "Put the books on the shelf" feels doable. Use timers — try 10 minutes on, 5 off.

### Protect sleep fiercely

06

ADHD symptoms worsen with poor sleep. Consistent bedtime, dim lights, and no screens an hour before bed make a real difference.

### Stay calm during meltdowns

07

Emotional regulation is part of ADHD. Your calm becomes their calm. Save consequences and conversations for after the storm.

### Connect before you correct

08

Get on their level, make eye contact, touch a shoulder. Connection-first turns power struggles into cooperation.

## AT SCHOOL

# Helping your child **succeed** in the classroom.

Traditional classrooms aren't built for ADHD brains — but the right partnerships and accommodations can change everything. Be your child's advocate, ally, and translator.



## Open a partnership with the teacher early

Don't wait for problems. Share what works at home, what triggers struggles, and ask about a daily or weekly check-in system. Teachers can't help with what they don't know.



## Ask about a 504 Plan or IEP

If ADHD substantially affects learning, your child may qualify for legal accommodations. A 504 Plan provides classroom adjustments; an IEP includes specialized instruction. Both are free and your right to request.



## Use a Daily Report Card

One of the most-researched ADHD interventions. Identify 3–5 specific, observable goals (e.g., "completed morning work," "kept hands to self at recess"), track them daily, and tie them to a small home-based reward.



## Make homework manageable

Set a consistent time and place with minimal distractions. Use a timer for short work blocks (15–20 minutes) followed by movement breaks. If a worksheet takes 4× longer than peers, talk to the teacher about reducing — not just adding more.



## Protect their identity as a learner

Repeated correction shapes self-image. Find your child's strengths and make sure those are visible at school — through a club, a passion project, an art class. Confidence in one area buffers struggles in others.

## Common Classroom Accommodations to Request

These are widely supported by research and easy for most teachers to implement:

- ✓ Preferential seating near teacher
- ✓ Extended time on tests and assignments
- ✓ Movement breaks built into the schedule
- ✓ Written instructions in addition to verbal
- ✓ A fidget tool or standing desk option
- ✓ Reduced homework load when appropriate
- ✓ Tests in a quiet, separate room
- ✓ Use of noise-cancelling headphones

## AT HOME

# Building a life that **fits** the brain you have.

ADHD families thrive on structure, movement, sleep, and connection. These four pillars are the foundation everything else rests on.



## Structure & Routine

- Predictable wake-up, meal, and bedtime
- Visual schedules where the child can see them
- Designated spots for backpacks, shoes, keys
- Prep tomorrow's outfit and lunch tonight
- Use timers to signal transitions



## Daily Movement

- At least 60 minutes of active play daily
- Outdoor time — green space helps focus
- "Movement before homework" rule
- Sports, dance, swimming, climbing — anything they love
- Walk or bike to school if possible



## Sleep Hygiene

- Same bedtime every night, weekends too
- Wind-down ritual: bath, story, low lights
- No screens 60 minutes before bed
- Cool, dark, quiet bedroom
- Watch for sleep issues — ADHD often co-occurs with them



## Emotional Connection

- 15 minutes of one-on-one "special time" daily
- Let them lead the activity sometimes
- Listen more than you advise
- Repair after conflict — every time
- Remind them: you're on the same team

### A NOTE FOR YOU, PARENT

Raising an ADHD child is harder than raising a neurotypical one. Period. You will lose your patience. You will second-guess yourself. You will need help. **Take it.** Therapy, support groups, parent training programs, and even just a friend who gets it — these aren't luxuries. They're part of the plan.

# You don't have to figure this out alone.

Talk to your pediatrician or a child psychologist if your child's symptoms are persistent, affecting multiple settings (home, school, friendships), and interfering with their happiness or development. Earlier support means better outcomes.

## Start with your pediatrician

They can rule out other causes (sleep issues, anxiety, vision/hearing problems) and refer you to a specialist for formal evaluation.

## Loop in the school

Request a written evaluation under your school's special education process. This is free and federally protected.

## Find your people

Organizations like CHADD (Children and Adults with ADHD) and the ADHD Foundation offer parent support groups, webinars, and evidence-based resources.

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***ADHD is not a deficit of attention.  
It's a difference in how attention works. Once you see your child's brain clearly,  
you can finally help them shine.***

— A FINAL THOUGHT