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ADHD: Information for Kids and Teens

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Imagine the world without Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Disney, Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King Jr., Mozart, and Vincent Van Gogh. All of these individuals have two things in common. They accomplished great things and they were believed to have some type of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Other famous people you might know with ADHD include athletes such as the greatest basketball player of all time, Michael Jordan, and Olympic gold medalist swimmer, Michael Phelps. Actors including Will Smith, Robin Williams, Keira Knightley, and Whopie Goldberg have all had attention problems, too. Even the richest American businessman and computer developer Bill Gates was thought to have ADHD.

If you were told you have ADHD, you are not alone! In fact, ADHD is a very common problem in childhood, and there may be at least one or two students in each classroom with ADHD. It is important to know there is a wide variety of ADHD. However, every child or teen with ADHD is different and unique. It may be difficult to tell who in your school has ADHD, since there are so many different ways to be ADHD. This handout will give you some information about ADHD and how you can work with your parents, teachers, and family physician to meet the challenges of having ADHD.

WHAT IS ADD/ADHD?

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It used to be called ADD, or attention deficit disorder, and some people still call it ADD. ADHD and ADD are used to describe people who have trouble at home and school.

Common Problems for Students With ADHD

Students with ADHD often exhibit the following problems:

- Running, climbing, or leaving your seat when you are told not to
- Blurting out answers in class
- Not waiting your turn
- Not paying attention
- Forgetting things like school supplies, homework
- Losing things like toys, keys

Types of ADHD

There are three types of ADHD.

ADHD, hyperactive/impulsive type. The first type describes children and adolescents who are constantly “on the go,” have a high activity level, and have difficulty slowing down and sitting still. They may squirm in their seats, talk loudly, and interrupt conversations or activities. They may also be impulsive, meaning they don’t think before they act. An example is grabbing a pen out of someone’s hand before asking for it or calling out in class before the teacher calls on you.

ADHD, inattentive type. This type describes individuals who have difficulty paying attention, appear to daydream a lot, and seem “spacey.” Inattentive children may look “zoned out” and have trouble staying focused. They tend to have trouble finishing their work at school. They may also seem forgetful, make careless mistakes, and have difficulty with organizing schoolwork. This type is very similar to what we used

to call ADD. If people say: “He doesn’t have ADHD; he has ADD,” this is what they mean—it’s a problem paying attention.

ADHD, combined type. This refers to children and teens who have both of the above types. This means they have are hyperactive (can’t stop moving), impulsive (they act without thinking), and cannot pay attention. This third type is usually what comes to mind when someone hears the term ADHD.

WHERE DOES ADHD COME FROM?

Nobody knows exactly what causes ADHD. It is not a disease or a virus, like the flu, and you can’t catch it from someone else. Scientists believe that most cases of ADHD are inherited from one’s parents. If this is so, it may mean that the parents of children with ADHD had similar problems when they were young. This helps parents have a better understanding of what their kids are struggling with at home and school.

Some scientists also believe there are differences in the brains of people with ADHD compared to people without ADHD. To put it simply, it’s as if the “gas pedal” is always on, but the “brakes” aren’t always working when they are needed.

HOW DOES ADHD AFFECT ME AT HOME AND SCHOOL?

Having ADHD can mean a lot of things. For many kids with ADHD, it could mean feeling overwhelmed and frustrated trying to keep up with the demands at home and school. Many with ADHD feel like they are trying as hard as they can, but it doesn’t seem to pay off. Some kids may feel they are constantly getting in trouble and are a disappointment to their parents and teachers. Other kids feel rejected by friends, lonely, and upset. All of these thoughts and feelings are common. The following things are also common among children and teens with ADHD:

At Home

At home, you might notice that you often:

- Forget to complete chores
- Lose items
- Upset your parents for breaking rules; get grounded or lose privileges
- Fight with your brothers and sisters
- Run around and don’t easily calm down when asked

At School

When you are at school, you might:

- Disrupt the classroom
- Blurt out answers

- Forget homework
- Get poor or failing grades
- Lose focus and miss important details
- Feel “lost” or confused
- Get detentions and lose recess or other privileges
- Fight with classmates
- Leave your seat or desk without permission
- Take too long to get seatwork done because you are easily distracted by classmates or noises
- Struggle to finish timed tests because of distractions

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY ADHD?

The good news is there are lots of things you can do to help yourself. The best way to start coping with ADHD is to find information to help you and others understand it. However, knowing you have ADHD is not an excuse for bad behavior and poor school performance. Rather, it is an explanation for why it is difficult for you to do the same things that other kids can do more easily. It means you will have to try that much harder.

Support From Family, Friends, and Teachers

Because ADHD affects you at home, school, church, and other settings, it is important that everyone in your life is a part of helping you.

At school. Your teachers might meet with your parents to discuss ways they can change the classroom and your learning experience. Examples include:

- Moving you to a different desk to avoid distractions
- Giving you class notes in advance
- Giving you more time on tests
- Developing an incentive (reward) program for good behavior and completing work

At home. You and your parents should discuss ways to improve your behavior and help you stay organized. Together, you could write down the things that cause the most problems and then discuss ways to make small improvements. For example:

- *Develop a plan with your parents to help you remember to complete your daily chores.* Make a chart to put on the refrigerator with the date and check off if you complete your chores that day. This would be a reminder every time you open the refrigerator door and can be a record of your behavior for the entire week. Your parents could offer a reward for every 3 days you completed a chore, such as extra computer time.
- *Establish routines at home to help you reduce other problems.* For example, if you know you always forget

your school supplies, get into the habit of packing and putting your bookbag next to the door each night.

Self Help Ideas

To help deal with ADHD, think about your strengths and weaknesses and then change a few things at home and school to build on your strengths and play down the weaknesses. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps used the swimming skills that helped him focus in the pool to help him focus in other settings. It takes dedication and hard work, but you can be successful if you don't give up. There are many ways you can help yourself overcome the challenges of ADHD:

- *Avoid distractions.* Find a quiet place to do homework and study. Turn off the television, computer, cell phones, and avoid being around other people when you are working. Instead of trying to do homework in the family room, try finding a quiet space at the kitchen table or at a desk in your bedroom.
- *Get into a routine.* If you do something enough times, it becomes a habit. To help yourself get into a routine, start by posting reminders around the house or on your desk at school. "Did you put your name on your paper?" is one example of a reminder note.
- *Get organized.* Reduce the stress on your brain by writing things down. Use a planner, daily agenda, or notebook to write down all assignments and responsibilities.
- *Relax.* Practice relaxation strategies such as deep breathing, yoga, or exercise.
- *Feel successful.* Find something you are good at and get involved with that activity or other kids who like the same thing. Doing something you like will improve self-esteem and may help you focus on other important things like school. Also, it's always a good idea to get support from others.
- *Ask for a "do-over."* It's okay if you make a mistake and say or do something without thinking. Most people will be willing to help you if you say "sorry" and ask if you can try again.
- *Give yourself a break.* It's tough having ADHD. It's okay to feel frustrated. Give yourself a break by walking away from a situation where you might do something without thinking. Also, give yourself lots of breaks during homework or study time.
- *Give your parents a break.* Help them help you by working together to reduce problems.

WHAT ABOUT MEDICATION?

Most experts agree that your family and teachers should first try ideas and reward systems like the ones

described above. Sometimes, even with all those efforts, children and teens with ADHD still have difficulty and need more help. The decision to try medication is something your parents should discuss with you and your doctor. There are pros and cons and it is important to figure out if medication is the best option for you and your family.

You may be scared or upset about taking medication, but it has helped many young people with ADHD. Most medications used to treat ADHD are called *stimulants*. This means they stimulate the part of the brain used to help you slow down and pay attention. Most of the time, there are very few side effects, and you cannot become addicted to ADHD medication. Finding the right medication may take some time. Sometimes doctors will ask you and your parents a lot of questions to make sure they are prescribing the right one.

Since everyone's body is a little different, it might take a few tries to find a medication that works best for you. Remember that if you take medication for any type of condition or illness, it is very important that you follow your doctor's directions carefully. Always take the amount of medication prescribed, at the time prescribed, and the way your doctor recommends (with or without food, for example). If you have questions about medication, or if you feel sick or funny when you take your medication, talk to your parents or doctor right away. You can also learn more about medication from some of the resources listed below.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

There are many resources on the Internet and in the library for you and your family.

Books

- Dendy, C. A. Z., & Ziegler, A. (2007). *A bird's-eye view of life with ADD and ADHD: Advice from young survivors* (2nd ed.). Cedar Bluff, AL: Cherish the Children Foundation. (ages 12-18)
- Quinn, P. O., & Stern, J. M. (2000). *50 activities and games for kids with ADHD*. Washington, DC: Magination Press. (ages 8-13)
- Quinn, P. O., & Stern, J. M. (2009). *The "putting on the brakes" activity book for kids with ADHD* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Magination Press. (ages 9-12)
- Walker, B. (2004). *The girls' guide to AD/HD: Don't lose this book!* Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. (teens/young adult)

Online

ADDvance, Answers to your questions about ADD (ADHD), *Information for teens with ADHD and their parents*: <http://www.addvance.com/help/teens/index.html>

A site aimed at teens and parents, including resources for more information.

KidsHealth, ADHD: http://kidshealth.org/teen/diseases_conditions/learning/adhd.html

A great resource for a range of issues including ADHD and learning disabilities.

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