

Let's Talk About...

ADHD: Talking with your child

If your child has been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), you may be wondering whether to talk to them about the diagnosis and what to say. It is important to talk to your child about ADHD, how to shape the conversation, and how to help your child adjust to the diagnosis and treatment.

Should I talk to my child about ADHD?

Most child experts say that yes, you should talk to your child about ADHD. Knowing what's causing symptoms can be a relief for children, who may have been labeling themselves as “stupid” or “lazy” because they didn't know why they acted differently from their friends.

Talking about ADHD gives your child a chance to ask questions. It also helps your child see why treatment is helpful and more likely to take an active part in the treatment.



How do I tell my child about ADHD?

As a parent, you know the best way to talk to your child. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful:

- **Work with your child at their own pace**, looking for “teachable moments.” Your child may not be ready for a full conversation about ADHD all at once.
- **Affirm your child's unique strengths.** Explain that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Use yourself and other family members as examples.
- **Talk about the trouble your child has been having.** To introduce ADHD, focus on what your child has said they're concerned or frustrated about, like waiting their turn or having trouble sitting still.
- **Gear the conversation to your child's perspective.** Stick with language familiar to your child and use metaphors to help create mental pictures (see figure 1 for example conversations). Avoid technical terms — just say “ADHD.” Many people are confused about the difference between ADHD and ADD. The truth is they are the same thing. The medical community has adopted “ADHD” as the term even for kids who don't struggle with hyperactivity.
- **Discuss your child's fears.** Your child may wonder if ADHD is dangerous. Acknowledge your child's fears, but explain that ADHD can be treated and is not dangerous. It may help to tell your child that lots of people have ADHD — and they have great lives.
- **Emphasize positive goals.** Talk about the benefits of treatment, like having free time because they finish homework more quickly, getting along better with friends, keeping up in class, or enjoying more privileges.
- **Describe treatment as a way to help your child be in control**, rather than the ADHD being in control. (See figure 1 for ideas on how to help your child adjust to treatment.)

Figure 1

What's an example conversation about ADHD I can use?

These are some example conversation geared for an elementary school child. You can adjust it for your child's age and needs. Don't worry about covering everything at once. You'll probably find many chances to talk about ADHD.

- **The reasons for the ADHD evaluation:**
 - “This year has been kind of tough, and school hasn't been fun for you. You know how I'm always upset about you fighting with your sister and not staying at the table during dinner? We wanted to find out if there are reasons some of these things are happening. That's why we met with your teachers and went to the doctor.”
- **The diagnosis and how ADHD works:**
 - “The doctor said you have ADHD. Do you know what that means? It helps explain why you've been having these problems. You know how you've said it's hard to stop yourself sometimes, and it's too boring to sit and read? That's because of ADHD.”
 - “ADHD means your brain is like a racecar with a powerful engine but brakes that don't work perfectly. The sights out the window go by really fast, and sometimes it's hard to slow down to look at them or read the road signs.”
 - “Another way to think about ADHD is watching TV when the channels change every few seconds — or a bunch of channels play all at once. That can make it hard to pay attention.”
- **Putting ADHD in perspective:**
 - “I'm glad we know about your ADHD. Now we know why things have been tough for you lately, and we can do something to help. Lots of kids have ADHD and learn to manage it just fine.”
 - “ADHD is just one part of who you are, like the way you like strawberries and soccer, but can't do a cartwheel. We're all different. Your dad can go up on the roof, but I'm scared to stand on a ladder. I'm a good singer, but your dad can't sing at all.”
- **Treatment and outlook:**
 - “You'll start taking medicine every day for ADHD. Just like glasses help someone's eyes focus, the medicine helps your brain focus. We'll also work together on ways you can practice slowing down and paying attention. We'll set some goals, and you'll feel better and better. I think your behavior will improve, so you won't have to take as many time outs. School will probably be easier, too.
 - “You'll learn to manage ADHD, and you may even outgrow it. Lots of successful people have ADHD, and they have done great things in their lives.”

How do I help my child adjust to the ADHD diagnosis?

Your child may wonder what the diagnosis might mean at school and with friends. Siblings also need to understand what this means for your family. Here are some suggestions for talking about how ADHD affects them.

- **Talk about ways your child can tell their friends about ADHD and medicine.** Your child might simply say, “I have ADHD, so it's harder for my mind and body to keep still and focus on things. I take medicine to make it easier.”
- **Practice what your child can do if ADHD-related behavior causes problems.** For example, your child could say, “I'm sorry about that. My ADHD sometimes makes things harder for me. I'm working on ways to do better.”
- **Explain how teachers will be involved.** You might say: “Your teacher knows you have ADHD. That's great, because he can help you with it. He might change where you sit to make things easier or give you extra chances to practice focusing on

assignments. You and your teacher might be able to talk about a private signal he can use to remind you when you're having trouble focusing.”

- **Discuss ADHD with other family members.** Help siblings understand what ADHD is and that it's just part of who their brother or sister is. Tell them ADHD isn't contagious (they can't “catch it”) and that treatment will help their brother or sister focus better. You might also discuss setting some routines to help things go more smoothly at home.

How do I help my child adjust to ADHD medicine?

Some children have a hard time taking daily medicine. Below are some age-specific tips to help you and your child develop a routine.

School-age children (6–11 years old)

- **Prepare your child.** Explain why your child needs to take medicine and how often and when they will take it. You may want to help them practice (see the bread idea below). Explain that the medicine might make your child feel different and they should tell

you how it makes them feel. Let your child know that they can try a different medicine if this one causes problems instead of helping. Your child's doctor can help you with this conversation.

- **Involve your child.** Let your child have as much control as possible over taking the medicine. Ask them how they can make it more fun or easier to remember.
- **Offer rewards.** Give your child an age-appropriate token (such as a sticker or ticket) each time they take medicine easily. Once your child has earned a certain number of tokens, trade them for an item on a reward list you've created with them.

If your child has trouble swallowing medicine, talk to their doctor about liquid, chewable, or capsule forms that can be sprinkled in food. Some of these options may be more expensive, so consider what works best for your family.

A helpful tip—If your child has trouble swallowing medicine, try this:

- Roll a tiny piece of bread into a ball and have your child swallow it.
- Slowly have your child swallow larger balls of bread until they're about the same size as your child's medicine

Because bread tastes good and doesn't scratch the throat, your child can learn to swallow medicine without fear.

Adolescents and teens (12–18 years old)

- **Explain more about the medicine and its benefits.** Don't assume a teen knows why and how to take medicine. Explain why the medicine is more effective if they take it every day at the same time. Tell them about possible side effects to watch for and why it's important for them to tell you about them. Involve your teen's doctor in this discussion.
- **Agree on a plan.** Create a routine together to help your teen remember to take medicine. You could suggest using day-of-the-week pill boxes, putting the medicine bottle next to their toothbrush, or setting phone alarms. If your teen resists taking medicine or forgets it often, figure out ways to solve the problem together.



- **Offer rewards if necessary.** Teens don't usually need rewards or treats to take medicine, but positive reinforcement can help them change habits.

How do I help my child take their medicine when they don't want to?

If your child isn't taking their medicine regularly, you need to talk about this. Keep the tone positive and encouraging, and explore the problem together. Below are some tips on handling problems that may occur:

- **"I don't WANT to take it!"** If your child actively resists medicine, find out why. Does it taste bad? Are side effects bothering them? Work with your child's healthcare providers to find ways to minimize these problems.
- **"I don't need it."** There are lots of reasons children might think they don't need medicine. They could decide their ADHD has gone away. They may not be able to see a difference from taking the medicine. You can explain that even if they don't see a difference, their teachers, friends, and family members can tell it is helping. (If you don't feel your child is getting much benefit from the medicine, ask their healthcare provider about an adjustment.)

- **“Aunt Jill says I shouldn’t be taking medicine.”**
Other people might share their opinions with your child about whether medicine is appropriate. Help your child understand that these are just opinions, and others may not understand their situation. Your child, you (as a caregiver), and your child’s doctor are the most important members of the care team. Reassure your child that many people — including kids — take daily medicine for different reasons.

What are some resources about ADHD I can use?

The following resources may help you talk to your child about ADHD:

- **AACAP.org:** American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) website (search for ADHD and navigate to the ADHD resource center)
- **CHADDofUtah.com:** Utah chapter of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD) website
- *Focused: ADHD & ADD Parenting Strategies for Children with Attention Deficit Disorder* by Blythe Grossberg
- *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents’ Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* by Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Laurie Dietzel
- *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare
- *Taking Charge of ADHD, Third Edition: The Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents* by Russell A. Barkley
Teaching Teens with ADD, ADHD, and Executive Function Deficits, Second Edition by Chris A. Zeigler Dendy

Famous people with ADHD

It may help your child to know that many famous and successful people have ADHD, including:

- Simone Biles (Olympic gymnast)
- Jim Carrey (actor and comedian)
- Albert Einstein (scientist)
- Bill Gates (founder of Microsoft)
- Tim Howard (professional soccer player)
- Adam Levine (singer)
- Howie Mandel (comedian and TV host)
- Michael Phelps (Olympic swimmer)
- Will Smith (actor and comedian)
- Channing Tatum (actor)
- Justin Timberlake (singer)
- Emma Watson (actress)

(Note: These people have either been diagnosed with ADHD or are believed to have ADHD based on their symptoms.)

You may want to explain that ADHD can be helpful in some careers that require moving from task to task quickly.

Notes

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