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.)
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 develop 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.
• **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
- **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

This content is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Please consult your healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns.