



The ADD/ADHD Child & School: Not Always a Good Match

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Children, adolescents, and teens with ADHD usually need special help to thrive in an academic setting. While their intelligence may be high (which it often is), and their capabilities strong, they face many challenges that can negatively impact their success in school.

Struggles with schoolwork, and the demands of the school environment, can adversely affect the student's self-esteem and belief in their academic ability and potential. And it is not only the student who is frustrated and unhappy. Parents and teachers are also stressed by the student's uneven performance and problems with homework.

Some students with ADHD excel in school, often overcoming major problems to do so. (This academic achievement can present as problematic when it comes to a diagnosis, as there are still people who erroneously believe that excellence and ADHD cannot coexist.) It is also important to realize that students may 'hit the wall' at different stages in their academic careers. Often, the greater the requirements for independent self-regulation, the more difficulty the student with ADHD will experience (as when the focus shifts from play learning to academics in elementary school; the transition from a primary teacher to different classes in middle school; the pressure of independent study in high school; or the unstructured freedom and need for self-reliance of college).

Students with ADHD might experience many difficulties with schooling. The specific challenges, and the severity of them, depend on both the student AND the situation. Unfortunately, as they become adults, many of these students will continue to experience these same problems in the workplace.

NOTE: People may have ADHD, but they are individuals, and their ADHD is only one component of their being. Everyone has a unique combination of personality traits, learning styles, intelligence, and interests. They may also have (as most individuals with ADHD do have) specific learning disabilities and/or other co-morbid (coexisting) conditions, such as depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, etc. All of these have an effect on a person's ability to succeed in school.

Challenges Faced By Students with ADHD Include:

- Lack organizational and study skills
- Has messy books, desk, book bag, locker
- Can't find needed papers, supplies or books
- Experiences difficulty with transitions from subject to subject or teacher to teacher
- Easily distracted by noise, activity or visual clutter
- Finds it difficult to stay on task for the amount of time needed to complete a project
- Becomes easily frustrated; reacts poorly when frustrated – or impatient – or bored
- Has difficulty remaining seated; constantly fidgets
- Slow starting a task, slow to complete it (often fails to complete) and has difficulty stopping it to do something else (gets caught up in hyperfocus mode)
- Rushes through class work, tests and homework, making careless mistakes
- Difficulty with taking notes, writing down homework assignments or completing class writing projects
- Has to work 'harder' to get the workload done, can be exhausting
- Fails to understand, remember or follow directions; may not even hear them if busy or preoccupied
- Fails (sometimes by accident and sometimes by intention) to abide by the rules; may not really understand the rules
- "Blanks" or "spaces out," leaving gaps in learning; thoughts may wander even when in a conversation
- Has low motivation to work or participate (unless the topic is of personal interest)
- Unrealistic sense of time; poor planning; tends to do everything last minute/night before
- Takes an inordinate amount of time to do homework, or does it incorrectly, late or not at all
- Frequently forgets things, including books and homework (including failure to hand in completed work)
- Performance is often tied to feelings about the teacher and/or the subject
- Gets overwhelmed, and can freeze up, becoming even less productive
- Sometimes doesn't "get" something, even if it's simple, but won't ask for clarification

- Thinks he knows more than he does; insists on doing things his way or not at all
- Does better at challenging (stimulating) projects than with simple, basic (boring) ones
- Oversensitive to perceived unfairness or injustice
- Communicates poorly (disjointed verbal or written presentation, leaves out details, adds extraneous information)
- Has poor peer relationships (fails to read social cues, can't control impulsive behaviors, viewed as insensitive or "different")
- Becomes oppositional, bossy, rude, verbose, hyper, withdrawn, etc.
- Interrupts and calls-out; acts-out and clowns, disturbs the class and demands attention, whether it is positive or negative
- Tries to do things "perfectly" and either takes too long, fails to complete them or just refuses to do difficult tasks
- Has low self-esteem; is emotionally labile (moody, reactive), quick to anger and quick to laugh

Most students with ADHD are not conventional learners. They may require a more hands-on (kinesthetic) teaching style. They may be better at creating a 3-act play about the contents of a book than they would be at writing a 1-page book report. They may have problems with subjects requiring memory and repetition, which are the primary methods by which students are taught, with mastery of these subjects the primary basis on which students are evaluated. They often have difficulty with essays and reports, in terms of planning and organization (and staying on topic).

People with ADHD are usually non-linear (divergent) thinkers, which is why they'll come up with such terrific ideas and plans, but their follow-through is usually poor, and they frequently need time-consuming help to complete projects, and monitoring to complete homework.

They will often do better using techniques like mind-mapping, which allows them to freely develop concepts, express ideas and see relationships, than if they were to use conventional structuring techniques, like outlining. They thrive with lots of attention (and respect), which means they do better with smaller class size. They are more engaged, and learn better, with a group discussion, rather than a lecture. A teacher needs to be knowledgeable and dynamic enough to hold their attention.

There are many in-school accommodations to help students with ADHD. Students may also benefit from academic tutors (they tend to do well one-on-one) and a coach trained to help students with motivation, accountability, organization and time management.

Students with ADHD need structure and consistency, understanding and repeated encouragement. They will test limits at every opportunity, and need teachers who are firm and in control, but who are also fair, reasonable and able to make appropriate accommodations to help the student succeed.