



## FACT SHEET

### ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

Pennsylvania Chapter

#### ***What is ADHD?***

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is marked by poor ability to pay attention, easy distractibility, a high activity level, and impulsivity. They often don't finish tasks or chores. Children with ADHD are inattentive at home, school, or child care and often have poor social skills. These traits begin early, generally before children reach age 6 or 7 years. About 3-5% of school age children are diagnosed with ADHD.

#### ***What causes ADHD?***

Doctors aren't sure what causes ADHD. But experts agree that *biological* factors cause ADHD, not a child's parents. Children with ADHD are difficult to care for. Parents and caregivers often need advice and support to work with children with ADHD.

#### ***How do I know if a child has ADHD?***

Normally, preschoolers are very energetic. They prefer running, climbing, wrestling, and vigorous play over sitting quietly. They have limited insight and judgment, and often act before they think about consequences. Preschoolers have short attention spans and may be quite distractible, especially in noisy environments. Many have not developed social skills for resolving conflicts, sharing, or cooperating and get into fights or arguments.

It's hard to tell if a preschooler has ADHD because all children this age have a high activity level, impulsivity, limited attention, and aggression. However, parents, teachers, and caregivers, often recognize children whose activity level or inattention is extreme for their age. These children are the most active and least attentive in the classroom. Frequently, they fail to complete activities, take toys out to play with, but then jump to something else after barely getting started. They may have difficulty in learning letters, numbers, and other pre-academic skills. Children with ADHD have difficulty making friends and demand extra adult attention.

#### ***What should I do if I think a child has ADHD?***

1. Talk with the child's parents. Get a complete picture of the child's traits and behaviors in other settings. You might say to parents, "We're concerned because your child is extremely active." Offer the parents documentation (such as ECELS-Healthy Child Care PA Behavioral Data Collection Sheet) that supports your observations. Parents may feel guilty about their child's problems. If the parents are experiencing similar problems with the child, support them by saying, "It must be so difficult for you. We'll work on this problem together."
2. If parents share your concerns, suggest they contact their child's primary care provider. Hyperactivity and inattention may indicate problems other than ADHD. Avoid labeling a child unnecessarily.
3. Try the behavior management techniques listed below. Many of these changes will benefit the entire class.

### **What can I do to manage the behavior of a child with ADHD?**

- *Modify the environment.* Children with ADHD often show the greatest problems in loud or busy environments. Lower the classroom noise level and use a calm, quiet voice when you want the child's attention.
- *Simplify social situations.* Limit the number of children interacting at one time. Point out social cues to the child with ADHD and interpret them if necessary. You might say, "Your friend wants to share this toy. How can you share it with her?"
- *Maintain structure.* Children with ADHD, as well as children developing typically, do better when they know what to expect. Make a daily schedule and stick to it.
- *Increase the child's motivation to pay attention.* Children with ADHD can settle and concentrate under some circumstances. They are more likely to pay attention when there are rewards for doing so and when there are consequences for not doing so. Identify rewards and consequences for the whole group. Natural rewards work best. Try saying, "We can go outside when we finish with clean-up."
- *Provide clear instructions.* Communicate clearly and quietly. Make sure the child is paying attention by touching his chin and getting him to look at you. Break complex instructions into small chunks and ask children to repeat the instruction.
- *Celebrate successes.* Praise the child for concentrating and completing work. This reward increases the child's motivation. Don't forget to provide opportunities for children to be active. For example, allow children to talk or jump between activities.

### **Are medications OK for preschoolers with ADHD?**

Medications are available for children of all ages with ADHD. Common medications include Ritalin, Dexedrine, Cylert, Tenex, Adderall, and Catapres. Some of these medications must be given during the school day to be effective. Medications are somewhat less effective in children under 6 than they are in older children.

Many families and physicians are reluctant to use medication in preschoolers. The impact of long-term use of ADHD medication for preschoolers has not been well researched. ADHD medicines are associated with side effects such as poor appetite, irritability, moodiness, or social withdrawal in very young children.

ADHD medications are most useful for reducing problems that interfere with learning. Often, medications for preschoolers in child care can be postponed. Behavioral strategies are usually more important for this age group. Consultation with educators and behavior specialists in early intervention programs may be useful. In some cases, medicine may be necessary.

### **What is the long term outlook for children with ADHD?**

Problems may subside as children get older and have opportunities to choose activities and exert control over their lives. Adults should help children with ADHD understand their behaviors and lead them to situations where a high activity level is desirable. It's important for children with ADHD to maintain a healthy self-concept. Parents, teachers, and caregivers can encourage a healthy self-concept by giving love, attention, and appreciation of the child's strengths.

**Written by:** Heidi Feldman, MD, PhD, FAAP, 2/98. UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh

**Reviewed by:** Susan S. Aronson, MD, FAAP 11-04

