

ADHD

A BRIEF GUIDE FOR
PARENTS



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Association
for Attention
Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder

WHAT DOES IT MEAN

Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD.

WHO SUFFERS IT

It affects children, teenagers and adults. We find around 1 or 2 children with ADHD in a class of 30 students. Among adults, around 2 or 3 out of every 100 people working with us suffer this disorder. It appears three times more often in males.

HOW DOES IT SHOW

It is mainly characterized by the difficulties in keeping one's ATTENTION focused (resisting distraction) and CONCENTRATING (noticing little details or keeping their attention focused over a certain period), HYPERACTIVITY (excess unrest) and IMPULSIVENESS. These difficulties must have been clearly present since early childhood and in the different environments in which a person develops (at home, at school, out in the street). It is often accompanied secondarily by low tolerance to frustration, difficulties in relating with others, a tense family environment, alterations of conduct, failure at school, and a sharp decline in self-esteem. There is an increasing stress on difficulties in the EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS, those in charge of organising thought and cognitive response; they are responsible for organisation, planning, hierarchisation, inhibition of impulsive responses, etc. (acting as the 'conductor' of our mental processes).

WHAT IS ITS CAUSE

It basically consists of a delay in the maturing of the brain in the areas where these executive functions reside. These areas, among others, are the pre-frontal lobule, the striated cores and the cerebellum, as well as their connections with other structures.

It originates due to a combination of genetic causes (many parents were also hyperactive but were never diagnosed as such) and environmental ones (highly stimulated environments, low socio-economic level, inconsistent education, excess contact with lead and tobacco, complications at birth, etc.).



THE IMPORTANCE OF DIAGNOSIS

It is essential that a proper diagnosis be made, without mistaking it for other conduct disorders. ADHD is a sub-group within conduct disorders, which has specific treatments and, if it is well handled, it has a favourable prognosis. That is why it is important that, if the teachers or parents detect a child with problems, they should watch him carefully, tell the school psychologist or the psychopedagogue and speak to the family, so that they can arrange an interview with their paediatrician, who will decide whether the child is derived to a specialist in child and teenager psychology, or to the neuropaediatrician.

There are no specific diagnosis tests and what is essential is the child's clinical history and observing the child in different atmospheres, guided by

an experienced specialist, with whom both the family and the school must cooperate, providing information regularly and according to certain points of interest that he will point out to you.

In order to make a correct diagnosis it is necessary to assess whether there is an underlying disease (alterations affecting the child's hearing, vision, the sensorial connections with the processing areas in the brain or any other neurological disorder), whether there is a psychiatric disorder explaining the symptoms (anxiety, depression), or whether there are other learning difficulties that cause the lack of concentration (for instance dyslexia). Because of this, sometimes it will be necessary to conduct neurological tests, neuropsychological tests (including general intellectual capacity, specific learning problems, visual and spatial capacity, etc), ophthalmologic or optometric appraisals, hearing tests, etc.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

If a hyperactive child is handled adequately, he can evolve and become a perfectly normal and satisfied adult.

ADHD means that a child has a **different brain development** than other children, but it is largely up to the family and the school to ensure that this difficulty causes as few problems as possible and becomes just **another characteristic of the child** or, otherwise, to let it become a permanent 'stumbling block' in the child's development.

Children generally want to please their parents and teachers, they like to be praised, they love to be distinguished, both verbally and in the form of academic results, they don't like punishment or to be scolded, or to have their parent on their back all day long repeating the same things over and over. If this is what is happening, ask yourself as parents **why this child**

isn't like other children, and if you cannot find the answer and cannot get your child to behave properly, **ask for help**.

Besides doing everything possible to try and make **a child's school life a rewarding experience**, one must be aware that **standard learning requires more effort than usual for these children**. One must avoid depriving them from extra-curricular activities that they enjoy and do well just to allow them to have more time to study. Quite the contrary, one must **encourage them to practice artistic, musical or sports activities to boost a child's self-esteem, allowing them to learn and develop in other ways**.

It is advisable for **children to have an appropriate group of people their own age with whom they can relate**. To do this sometimes it is best to insist that they participate in activities where they excel or are more skilled (sports, artistic or social activities), so that they can meet people who share their same interests, people with whom they can identify, create bonds and relationships as friends. Parents can help their child to make plans without waiting for someone else to make proposals.

There are two aspects in the life of a hyperactive child that have proven to have a determining influence in terms of negative evolution: the fact that they do not belong to an adequate peer group and the exposure to a family environment in which they are strongly criticised and hostile feelings are developed.

» AVOIDING GUILT

No parent wants their child to be hard to educate, or to be unable to relate well with other people. No parent has wanted to transmit their less efficient genes to their child or has wanted their child to behave sometimes in a non-adaptive way. Therefore, if one has a hyperactive child, why feel guilty and be weighed down by that negative feeling? Why not replace it with a responsible

approach, 'looking ahead', with the goal of helping your child and being better every day—a better person, a better parent, a better companion ...?

» POSITIVE THOUGHT

It is important to grant hyperactive children the chance of starting anew every day. Dragging on penalties or quarrels for minor issues (order, punctuality, distractions, etc.) makes it impossible to have the right emotional tone to be able to help.



Hyperactive children do not modulate their conduct according to long-term consequences but they do bear in mind short-term consequences.

Mothers and fathers can also look at themselves, do a little bit of self-criticism, amend their style of educating and adapt to the needs of their child in order to do things better every day.

» FAVOURING INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT

Hyperactive children are not typical children who can adapt to any circumstance, with the capacity to do anything they want to: they will probably not feel too good leading a contemplative, sedentary or passive life style. They need to be allowed to grow along their own path, going forward, being themselves and not a clone of their parents or a reflection of what their parents dreamed that their child would be or, even worse, what they themselves wanted to be but were unable to. The capacity to feel good (as children while they are growing up and as adults) depends largely on their personal balance, on the possibility of realising their potential, of regulating/controlling their emotions and behaviour and of relating with others in a positive manner, rather than on any other achievement. It has not been shown that academic success foretells success throughout one's life.

Children will be able to develop and face difficulties much better if they feel the unconditional love of their parents, if they feel loved and understood at all times.

» UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH A HYPERACTIVE CHILD

Boys, girls, teenagers or adults with ADHD do not behave voluntarily in a non-adapted manner, but due to their condition (ADHD) their attention skills are more limited than in most people, it is harder for them to wait for their turn and not rush forward, it is hard for them to reason and they need to be moving continuously.

However, in spite of their hyperactivity, their body and specifically their nervous system are very pliable, much more than we can imagine, and if we add to this the effect of personality, there is a lot that can be done to favour people with ADHD and get them to conceal those defects that are usually

so obvious for others, and instead they can exploit other features which can help them to appear more adequate (for instance goodness, sensitivity, passion, creativity...) and to find their place in life.

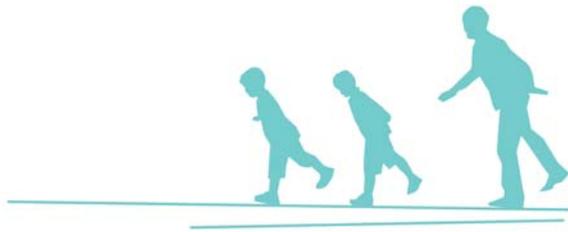


There is no point in trying to get a child to stop being hyperactive (or not to be so tall or to have blonder hair). Instead we must help that child, in spite of this disorder, to learn, to mature and become a competent and satisfied adult.

» ASKING FOR HELP

To begin with, in order to have a clear idea of why a child can be having problems that most children in his or her environment do not have, it is advisable to do the following:

- ~ Comment it between parents, or even with older siblings, the partner or caretakers who spend a lot of time with the child/teenager/adult.
- ~ Speak to their teacher or tutor at school.
- ~ Visit the paediatrician to get their opinion and appraisal of the case. Where appropriate, the paediatrician will derive the case to a specialist in child and teenage psychology who can conduct a comprehensive evaluation.
- ~ Access through one's own initiative to specific social, educational, family or even healthcare benefits via regulated assistance associations.
- ~ Follow the specialist's indications in terms of treatments and resources.
- ~ Although parents are ultimately responsible for taking care of their children, the more difficult their situation or the more de-structured their family is, the greater their need for help will be.



» SEEK SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL

It is normally recommendable and very desirable to have those responsible for educating the child at school to become involved in the treatment plan.

A lot can be done at school given the amount of time children and teenagers spend there and the importance of the way they manage themselves in that environment for their ability to relate with others, their self-esteem,



their capacity to overcome difficulties and their motivation... If a child feels that people do not understand him or that he is unattended at school, if the school is not capable of adapting to the child's educational needs and accepting him with his special characteristics, it might be that the school is not the most suitable one and you will have to look for another school that is better suited for what you consider more convenient for your child.

Parents should not replace teachers, but they must see to it that their child is taught by teachers who want to help him, who want him to learn, and who adapt in the way they teach and evaluate. Parents must stand by their child to find the appropriate school environment, a place where, among other things, they do not insist on finding out what the child does not know, where they know how to evaluate what he does know, giving the child more time if it is necessary, or making other modifications to help the child to be evaluated in a more adequate way for the child. Parents will always be in time to stand by those representing authority when their child does not behave properly.

» FAVOURING COMMUNICATION AMONG THE ADULTS INVOLVED IN THE CARE OF THE CHILD (specialist-parents-school)

Multi-disciplinary work is critical to help a child. Paediatricians, family doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, teachers, monitors, caretakers, assistants... Let's do away with prejudice, most people will have some problem or other throughout their lifetime and the best way not to stigmatise these children is by speaking naturally about what's the matter with them.

» TREATMENT

There are tested treatments for the symptoms of ADHD that can be recommended, but there are also a number of treatments that have not been sufficiently studied.



Non-pharmacological treatments. Most parents of hyperactive children would benefit from training in conduct modification, that is, learning the adaptations of customary educational patterns to start using the tools that have proven to be most useful in helping these children (for instance, how to motivate them, how to reinforce positive conduct even though it is less frequent than negative conduct, how to selectively penalise negative conduct in order to shape their behaviour, etc.). It should be borne in mind that the symptoms of the disorder (ADHD) are just part of the problems these children have and sometimes they are not the most important ones. They often have (quite often secondarily) emotional problems, difficulty in their relations with their parents, the authority or their companions, difficulty adapting, anxiety ... This is why many types of interventions such as interpersonal therapy, game therapy, relaxation, therapies assisted by animals, therapies based on music or art, even though they are not specific treatments for ADHD, they play an essential role in helping to achieve a positive development of children with ADHD. It is important to individualise in each child and his family, according to their characteristics and needs, the interventions that may be useful and to furnish them with support.

Pharmacological treatments. Pharmacological treatments with methylphenidate, amphetamine salts, and atomoxetine have proven their efficacy for symptoms of ADHD (hyperactivity, inattention, impulsiveness) and they are used in cases where other types of interventions (educational, behavioural/educational) are not sufficient for the child to fare sufficiently well at the required level (social, personal, academic). There are many other pharmacological treatments that are used for certain symptoms that are sometimes associated to ADHD (aggressiveness, extreme impulsiveness, anxiety) and cause a great deal of suffering and maladaptation.

Besides the pharmacological and psychological treatments and the therapeutic interventions suited to each case, parents, supported by educators, doctors and therapists, must seek and foster healthy lifestyles for

their children in terms of proper nourishment, hours of sleep, balance between cognitive academic activities and other creative and pro-social activities, time for leisure, catering to interpersonal relations, etc. A global, balanced development of the individual will most often offset the deficiencies and difficulties for life that ADHD causes for a child.



» SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- ~ Provide the child with an orderly life style, organising his schedules and establishing periods for recreation and physical exercise.
- ~ Establish routines for the things he likes less.
- ~ Tasks to be done must be divided into short time periods, with rests and continuous reinforcement of what is achieved.
- ~ Set a time limit after which everyone will be released from doing homework.
- ~ Furnish guidelines for the child to pay attention to the fundamental aspects of what he is doing.
- ~ In times of crisis, do not let a situation of irritation to get out of hand. Calm down the situation and later on, once everything is over, reflect upon it.
- ~ Adapt learning to their abilities: structure their homework, encourage activities in which they can stand out. Do not spend too much time doing things that are most difficult, otherwise there will be no time left to develop other vital aspects.

- ~ Make an effort to find their virtues and avoid continuously judging their actions.
- ~ Praise them all the time for what they do well, even if it seems like something petty or expectable.
- ~ Avoid criticism all the time in the family.
- ~ Spend time (even if it's just a few minutes every day) to share an activity that the child enjoys. If they are older, speak with them about how they feel, what they think, what they are concerned about, what they want. It is their time, exclusive for them. If the child is small, play with them or read and tell them stories.
- ~ Make it very clear that we are concerned about him, that we love him, that we believe in him.
- ~ Reinforce eye contact when communicating with the child, it helps strengthen bonds and enhances the quality of communication.
- ~ Rules should be few and clear. Children sometimes do not heed the rules because they do not understand them or they are simply unaware of them
- ~ Orders or instructions must be direct, concise and clear. Let's keep out the emotional element, especially emotional blackmail (these children are usually very sensitive and they can be at a loss due to the emotion implied in the message). A neutral tone of voice is best.
- ~ Do not pay attention when the child interrupts and stress when he is allowed to intervene, congratulating him when he does it at the right time.
- ~ Try to ignore negative behaviour, as much as possible.
- ~ Use a routine sentence as a reminder that what he is doing at a certain time does not please us and that we don't want to go further: "if you continue doing THAT... there will be consequences."

- ~ Reinforce positive behaviour, even with brownie points and little prizes. Acknowledge short-term goals and reward important goals attained in the medium term, always on an individual basis.
- ~ Specify the behaviour for which we are congratulating him: put a label on the congratulation.
- ~ Avoid using the word NO when giving instructions, be creative and make up positive statements.
- ~ Avoid punishment except in extreme situations where their behaviour is intolerable, and in those cases avoid confronting the child and keep emotional involvement out of what is said to the child. With small children resort to 'time out', that is, a short period in which they sit still on a chair or in a corner at home.
- ~ To communicate something that is important choose a moment when the child is receptive, on good terms with us... not when the child is angry or feels frustrated. In these situations it is best to wait for a better occasion.
- ~ Convey the importance of behaving in public places ever since they are little.
- ~ Spend time with your child... always in a reasonable way... parenthood is important... investing time in children usually has positive consequences that benefit both parents and children.
- ~ Ask for help when you feel overloaded. These children can be exhausting for their parents and help in time from a member of the family, a friend or a professional will allow you to calm down and continue putting forth your best efforts.
- ~ Analyse what things there might be in the family that may not be healthy and try to change these. "Investing in promoting a healthy lifestyle is a source of good health."



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