

ADHD & Behaviour Problems

The impact of ADHD

ADHD and behaviour problems are *not* the same thing.

- ADHD problems are poor concentration, being overactive and being impulsive ('acting without thinking'). We mostly think of behaviour problems as being defiant, getting angry a lot, being aggressive or destructive, telling a lot of lies etc.
- We know that about 60% of children with ADHD also have behaviour problems. This is not surprising and certainly not parents' fault, as children with ADHD have problems with being very impulsive. This means they find it hard to wait when they want something, and cannot 'remind themselves' that something is naughty or dangerous, even though they can tell you when you ask afterwards.

- Treating your child's ADHD by medication *may* reduce some of his or her behaviour problems. If they have been going on for a long time (more than a year) he or she will probably need some extra help, although it is usually better to treat the ADHD first.

Other factors that affect behaviour:

Most behaviour problems in young children (under 5) are part of growing up and learning to fit into the world, and are seen in the very common experience of frustration and tantrums. When problems start later than this, they are usually short-lived (a few days or weeks at most), and are a child's way of showing that they have some unhappy things in their lives.

Other serious factors that affect children's behaviour in the longer term and can add to the impact of ADHD are:

- Parents arguing a lot, domestic violence, separation and divorce.
- Parents strongly disagreeing about behaviour standards.
- Stress in parents' lives such as relationships, debts, bad housing and mental health issues.
- Drug and alcohol problems
- Failing in school.
- Being bullied.

When should a parent be worried?

Parents should be concerned if:

- Problems started before age 5.
- They have gone on for more than a year.
- Any of the above 'extra' factors are present.
- Parents feel they can't cope, or are beginning to dislike their child.
- Parents feel they are telling children off all the time but nothing changes.



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Strategies for parents

Before starting to change your child's behaviour:

- Try to understand how your child may be feeling when being told off all the time and thinking he or she can do nothing right. A child with ADHD has genuine difficulties in coping with some of the tasks of daily life.
- Remind yourself that bringing up children, especially with ADHD, is a very tough job. Take care of your own emotional state and deal with issues in your life that get you down. Admitting them is the first step.
- Remember that your behaviour has as much or even more impact on your child as his or her's does on you. So try to set a good example and try not to 'lose it' yourself.

Dealing with behaviour:

- If you think about it, what you want is more good behaviour, rather than less bad behaviour. So the most important thing you can do is to notice and encourage the good behaviour that you want. When your child is behaving well, go out of your way to tell him or her that you like it. The less good behaviour there is, the more important it is that you notice and respond to it. Even sitting quietly watching TV is being good.
- As you respond more to your child's good behaviour, you will start to feel better about him or her, and you can begin to build a more positive relationship. Just spending a short amount of time regularly playing with your child can make a big difference.

- As you begin to notice good behaviour and praise your child, he or she will feel better, and will start to want to please you and behave well for you. That's half the battle!
- Cut right down the amount of attention you give to small examples of annoying or naughty behaviours. Use the 'silent treatment', and look away for as long as your child misbehaves. But then switch immediately to noticing good behaviour when it happens.
- Stay calm yourself and respond to your child's behaviour, not to how you are feeling, so your child learns to get attention from you for the good behaviour not the bad.
- Set clear rules and consequences (not too big) for dangerous or damaging behaviour.

Traffic Lights

You can use the analogy of a traffic light system to help identify the type of behaviour, and how to respond to it.

GREEN = good behaviour
(reward)

AMBER = annoying behaviour
(ignore)

RED = dangerous behaviour
(act)

