

# Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Behavioral Tips for Parents

Many parents assume that the only “treatment” available for ADHD involves medications. However, behavioral approaches are an important part of your child’s overall plan to improve his daily life and long-term wellbeing.

Behavioral strategies can help you manage ADHD symptoms at home. You may want to try these on your own, or you may want to get help from a professional, like a psychologist or developmental-behavioral pediatrician.

## What is ADHD?

ADHD is a disorder of attention and executive functioning (EF). EF refers to the skills we use every day to accomplish goals, like multi-tasking. EF starts to develop in the preschool years and develops steadily into young adulthood. Children with ADHD look like they are “not following directions,” “scattered” or “forgetful.” These behaviors are not done on purpose. They are the direct result of EF problems.

## What kinds of ADHD are there?

There are a few different types of ADHD, based on symptoms:

- **Predominantly Inattentive:** A child has trouble paying attention, but is not hyper or impulsive.
- **Predominantly Hyperactive/Impulsive:** A child is mostly hyper and impulsive, but is able to pay attention.
- **Combined:** A child has difficulty with both paying attention and hyperactivity/impulsivity.

## How should I start to change my child’s behavior at home?

Structure at home is the “magic ingredient” for behavior management. All kids need structure, but this is especially true for children with ADHD. Here are some basic tools.

- House rules
- Bed times
- Rituals: Put shoes away, wash hands, feed pet, etc. These kinds of routines keep the day moving and let your child know what is expected in a predictable way.
- Chore charts, visual schedules and bulletin boards can help even more.

## How can I be a good behavior “coach”?

**Stay cool:** If you try to manage your child’s behavior when you are upset, your child will miss the message. He will just want to know, “Why is mom or dad so upset?”

You want your child to listen to your message and learn from it and not be distracted by your emotions.

## Should I reward good behavior or punish bad behavior?

We all do our best when we get positive feedback. Keep in mind that children with ADHD usually get a lot more negative than positive attention: “Stop doing that,” “Sit still,” “Pay attention.”

What tends to help is “catching” your child doing something good. This means pointing out good behaviors that you want to see (“I like how you put your shoes away”) and choosing your battles over the problem behaviors that you want to address.

## What is the extinction burst?

A behavior that gets praised and rewarded is more likely to happen again. A behavior that does not get praised or rewarded tends to happen less, but may get worse, briefly, before it gets better. This is called the “extinction burst.”

Negative attention, like yelling, bargaining, negotiating or even just showing strong emotions on your face can make a bad behavior worse. Pay attention to the good stuff and ignore the bad stuff—as long as everyone is safe.

Unsafe behaviors are physically dangerous to your child or the people around him.

## What is token economy?

A token economy is a structured method of noticing and rewarding good behavior. With a token economy, a caregiver gives rewards for specific, desired behaviors.

For example, you might give your child a few jobs to do after school. When all the jobs are done, he may earn stickers on a chart or special time with a parent.

## How consistent do I need to be?

Problems come up when behaviors are inconsistently reinforced. For example, you sometimes respond to a negative behavior by becoming upset or by offering a bribe to make it stop. Even if you ignore it some of the time, your child is likely to continue the negative behavior.

## What are some tips for staying consistent?

### If you remember nothing else, remember to be consistent!

Start shifting rewards away from stickers and small toys to relational things, like time with a family member or playing a board game. Positive time with family will be the most rewarding to your child.

Keep things simple. Complicated behavior plans are hard to use. Change up things like chores and rewards to keep things interesting without adding complexity.

When things start to get better or worse, that does not mean you should stop using the behavior plan. Too many changes in your response to your child's behavior can create an "intermittent reinforcement schedule" that can be very hard to undo.

## Should I use Time Outs?

- Time Out allows you to use discipline while teaching self-control.
- Many parenting books suggest giving 1 minute of time out per the child's age in years. But some children with ADHD often cannot do this. Being too rigid about this rule can cause Time Out to fail.
- Instead, think of Time Out as an opportunity for skill building. Praise your child for being able to sit in Time Out for however long he can do it. For example, if your 3-year-old cannot sit for more than a minute, praise him for that minute and then build up to 3 minutes over time.

## Should I explain to my child why his behavior led to a Time Out?

- Time Out is a way to calm things down quickly, not a time to process what has happened.
- During a Time Out, you and your child may be emotional. This is not a good time to talk about what happened or to teach. Children need to be calm in order to learn.
- You may be tempted to talk to your child in detail about the behavior that led to the Time Out. But the Time Out itself is more important than the talking.
- Keep it simple when you talk with your child. For young children or those with developmental delays, use a very simple statement such as "No hitting," said in a calm manner.
- If your child is older, you can say more, but still keep it simple. For example, "The rule is no hitting. If you hit, you will get a Time Out."

## Time Out 101

### Step 1:

Identify the space(s) in your home where Time Out will happen. These should be in areas that are safe. They should not have toys and be boring areas.

### Step 2:

Stay calm—your voice, your body, everything.

### Step 3:

Tell your child in simple words what the problem behavior is ("no hitting"), and that he needs to pick out from these choices:

- Take Time Out
- Take a break
- Go to his room and rest

### Step 4:

- Do not worry about how long your child sits/rests. You are trying to teach your child to calm down.
- Do not be too strict. The goal is to make the behavior boring so it happens less often, not that your child needs to follow your orders.
- Try not to focus too much on how long he sits and whether he stays in the exact same spot.

### Step 5:

- After your child has calmed down, praise him for doing a good job. Remind him why he was put in the Time Out ("remember, no hitting").
- Let your child go back to the group/activity normally. Remember that the Time Out was the punishment, and now it is over. There is no need to continue to show your child you are upset. Move on and have fun with your child.

## Contact us

Call 617-355-7025 for more information or to make an appointment.

## What are ways to prevent behavior problems?

- **Redirection:** You see a negative behavior coming, and you offer something else for your child to do instead.
- **Disarm and distract:** You notice your child becoming upset or about to behave badly. Instead of giving a Time Out, change the mood or the "direction" of the behavior.
- **Replacement behaviors:** Replacement behaviors are behaviors that your child *can* do but ones that he *cannot* do at the same time he is engaging in the behavior.
- **Shaping:** This means catching your child doing something good so he does it more. Instead of targeting a specific problem behavior, you are noticing *all* of the good behaviors that he does every day and pointing them out.

## Resources

### Online

#### General:

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)  
[www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)

Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA)  
[www.caddra.ca](http://www.caddra.ca)

#### Psychotherapy:

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT)  
[www.abct.org/Home/](http://www.abct.org/Home/)

Psychology Today "Find a Therapist"  
[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)  
[www.pcit.org](http://www.pcit.org)

#### Comorbid Conditions:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)  
[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

Lost at School (for Disruptive Behavior)  
[www.lostatschool.org](http://www.lostatschool.org)

Healthy Parent  
[www.healthyparent.com](http://www.healthyparent.com)

### Print

"1, 2, 3 Magic" by Thomas Phelan

"SOS: Help for Parents" by Lynn Clark

"The Explosive Child" by Ross Greene

"Taking Charge of ADHD" by Russell Barkley

"Defiant Children" by Russell Barkley

"Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents" by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare

"Academic Success Strategies for Adolescents with learning Disabilities and ADHD" by Esther Minskoff and David Allsopp

"The ADHD Book of Lists" by Sandra Rief

## How should I pick my battles?

- Start slow. Work on 1 behavior at a time and only when you can give 100% attention and effort to it.
- Do not make *not doing a behavior* a goal ("don't hit your brother"). This actually calls attention to a negative behavior when it is not happening.

Expert Ross Green, PhD ("The Explosive Child") recommends dividing a child's behaviors into buckets that determine whether or not you need to react:

- 1 Safety issue: You need to react—quickly.
- 2 High-priority: Not a safety risk, but something that you are concerned about and working on.
- 3 OK to ignore: Nobody is getting hurt.

*This Family Education Sheet is available in [Arabic](#) and [Spanish](#).*

## Quick Definitions

**Executive Functioning (EF):** Brain-based skills that allow us to "multi-task" and work toward goals.

**Prefrontal Cortex:** The part of the brain that helps us to regulate attention and behavior.

**Reinforcement:** How we respond to a child's behavior. Reinforcement can be positive or negative. They can be actual things, like a reward or punishment. Or they can be subtle, like your tone of voice or behavior.

**Token Economy:** A structured way of rewarding good behavior. A caregiver gives rewards (stickers on a chart, poker chips in a jar) for specific behaviors.

**Intermittent Reinforcement Schedule:** This is what we want to avoid as parents. It means responding inconsistently to problem behaviors, and it actually keeps those behaviors going. For example, you might punish your child when he jumps on his bed one day, but laugh or plead with him to stop the next day.

**The Extinction Burst:** When you start ignoring a problem behavior, a child will respond by "raising the volume," or ramping up the behavior to get that old response back.

**Time Out:** The removal of reinforcement—positive or negative. For example, having your child sit in a quiet space with no toys to settle down.