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## KIDS' AREA

# What Is ADHD?

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ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. It is also called ADD for short (Attention Deficit Disorder). They are the same thing, though ADHD is the official name that doctors use.



ADHD is something that kids, teens, or adults can have. About 1 in every 20 people have ADHD, so you are not alone! All kinds of people have ADHD, and they have all kinds of jobs: office workers, factory workers, teachers, doctors, bakers, lawyers, movie stars, company presidents, athletes — all kinds! Some very famous people had ADHD, for example Thomas Edison who invented the light bulb, the record player, and the movie camera. He was the greatest inventor of all time.



Many people with ADHD have a hard time paying attention to just one thing, or keeping their mind on the most important thing. This is called being distracted. It's like your mind jumps from one thing to another and you lose track of what you were doing. For example you can start doing one thing, like your spelling homework, then start playing with a toy and forget all about the spelling homework. Many people with ADHD lose their patience quickly, or they get bored pretty fast. They can get very impatient and hate waiting in lines or waiting their turn in games or group activities.



Many kids with ADHD are kind of hyper and always on the go. They may feel antsy or fidgety a lot and have trouble sitting still for long. They get bored fast if they have to sit in one place, and feel better if they can stand up or move around from time to time. It can be very frustrating to have a parent or teacher yell at you a lot and say things like "how many times do I have to tell you to slow down?" or "why can't you just sit still and do your work?" Well, for a kid with ADHD it's just hard to slow down! Your mind is very active and your body is very active, and you feel like being on the go.

Some kids with ADHD are not hyper at all, they mostly have trouble with paying attention. They may daydream a lot and "space out" when they should be doing their work, or even while they're talking with other people.



Many people with ADHD can also be very impulsive. That means they have trouble thinking about what they're going to say or do before doing it. Instead of "think before you act," people who are impulsive often "act before you think!" Sometimes kids with ADHD blurt out answers to questions before the question was even finished. Or they say the first thing that pops into their mind. Or they interrupt when someone else is talking. This is not because they're trying to be mean, it's just that their brain is working real fast and they say things quickly without thinking about it first. Or they do something that's foolish, like stealing or breaking something, and feel bad about it later after they have thought about it.

Many kids with ADHD might have problems at school. That is not because they aren't smart, but because they often have trouble paying attention to the teacher, or staying on task while doing school work, or losing and forgetting their school work. While sitting in class or doing homework a lot of thoughts can pop into your head, one after the other. Or sometimes you might daydream a lot. That can be fun but it also can be frustrating and makes it harder to get things done. It may be harder for you to tune out other kids in the class when you should be working.



Many kids with ADHD have a hard time staying organized and keeping track of things. They forget or lose things like homework, books, or supplies. Some kids just make a lot of careless mistakes on school work. It's not because they don't care, but because many times they get distracted, or they get very impatient and rush through things. Can kids with ADHD do well in school? Of course! It just means learning how to do the right things that help you do well. Your teachers, parents, or a counselor can give you some good ideas on that.

What causes ADHD? Doctors know that it is genetic and runs in families. Most people are born with it. If you have ADHD, chances are that at least one of your parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, or other close relatives has ADHD too. Scientists who study ADHD believe that certain parts of the brain work differently in people with ADHD. They may have too little of some brain chemicals, called

neurotransmitters, in the parts of the brain that control attention and impulses. This is a biological thing, it is not an illness or a disease. People with ADHD are just as healthy as anybody else.

Taking the right kind of medicine can give you more of the neurotransmitters which your brain needs, so you can pay attention better, concentrate better, and not be as hyper. Your doctor and parents can figure out if you need to take medicine, and which one is best for you. Working with a counselor can also help a lot in learning how to do things that help you the most.



So what does it mean if you have ADHD? Not much, except that you have to learn how to take care of it. It does NOT mean that you're a bad kid. Most people with ADHD are very nice, friendly people. It does NOT mean that you're dumb — no way. Many people with ADHD are very smart and creative people. ADHD is nothing to be ashamed of, and it includes some very positive things too. We'll talk more about those things in other sections of the Kid's Area.

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## About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.