

Reading with children with ADHD

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You may already know a child has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Or you may see some signs of ADHD.

ADHD is a brain disorder which gives rise to particular behaviours. Children with ADHD show inattentiveness, and hyperactivity and impulsiveness.

Some children with ADHD also struggle with reading comprehension. It may be harder for them to pay attention to the text, and to decode and understand complicated reading.

We're not there to diagnose. We are sharing this information so that you are aware of some of the signs. If you ever have concerns about a child, the right thing to do is to speak about it with your Team Leader directly.

Signs of ADHD are normally noticeable in children before 6.

Main signs of inattentiveness:

- having a short attention span and being easily distracted
- being unable to concentrate on tasks
- appearing unable to listen or carry out instructions
- constantly changing activity or task
- having difficulty changing tasks

Main signs of hyperactivity and impulsiveness:

- being unable to sit still, especially in calm or quiet surroundings
- constantly fidgeting; excessive physical movement
- excessive talking
- being unable to wait their turn
- interrupting conversations
- little or no sense of danger

Difficulties with reading may include:

- Sounding out and recognising words
- Understanding the text, making connections within the story, and relating it to what they already know
- Missing phrases in the text, skipping over words and sentences, losing track of where they are, missing details and connections. This is more obvious with long and complicated passages

- Difficulty remembering and holding key information in their working memory. For instance, you might notice that older children read aloud fluently and accurately but have trouble answering questions about what they just read.

Sources: NHS; ADDitude

During the session

A consistent routine, and a sense of structure which the child can get used to, are helpful.

Decide a regular routine for your sessions and get into a familiar rhythm. It might be really simple, like saying hello the same way, finding the book, taking turns reading, some questions, and then saying goodbye the same way.

It's better to break up activities that require calmness into chunks of time, to help the child succeed. If they can only tolerate a few minutes of reading, your session could have a break to hop around and wiggle or whatever they decide on. Over time, you might start to suggest they sit down again for another couple of minutes reading.

Allow children to fidget while engaging in a task -- like reading -- which requires a lot of patience.

Make sure you're asking them to do only one thing at a time.

Give specific praise. Instead of a general: "Good reading!", you could say: "You read a whole four pages today!"

Bear in mind social situations may be more difficult when a child is feeling tired or hungry, and we visit after their day at school and before their supper. If it's not fun anymore, it's OK to stop.

Don't be afraid to keep sessions short and sweet.

Anna's experience.

During my volunteer shift, I used to read with Y., a child who was not officially diagnosed with ADHD, and might in fact not have it, but displayed some of the known symptoms. His attention span was short, he burst with energy and most of the time, what he wished to do during sessions was chat rather than read. He found sitting down and reading for more than a couple of minutes extremely hard, as he would get up every few minutes and 'interrupt' the reading by telling me a story about his day, or show me a super-action he learned from a cartoon character, starting to roll on the floor and showing me his power kicks! We found that comics and factual books worked best, anything that felt short and snappy and gave him a sense of achievement at the end.

The volunteers who previously had read with him found it challenging – not much reading got done with him, and they felt like they weren't doing it right, or not able to achieve the scope of the visit. To me, it was a familiar experience as it reminded me of my own brother who had been diagnosed with ADHD, and struggled throughout his childhood to sit down, listen attentively in class, or focus on a long story.

When visiting children with ADHD, we need to be able to leave our own expectations of what the session will look like at the door. Flexibility is the key – for the session to be fun for the child especially, but also for us. Make the most of their bubbling personality and contagious energy – that can make for a truly interactive, imaginative and exciting session. Are there ways you can channel that energy while exploring books? Bring storytelling to life, but at the same time don't be afraid to keep it short-lived.

At times, children with ADHD can find school incredibly draining, as having to sit down and limit talk most of the day every day can be challenging. It's therefore important they feel our sessions are not an extension of school or homework time, but a space to have fun and fully express their own selves.

Choosing what to read

Try choosing short things to read. Something where you can get to the end within one session may be more motivating.

That might be a short story. It might be a single spread in a non-fiction book, or even just a couple of picture captions. And don't forget poems, rhymes and limericks.

For example, *Stories for Boys who Dare to be Different*, and *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* (9-12 years old) set out a complete story on a single page.

It's always easier to understand books about subjects you know something about. Help select books that reflect the child's interests and encourage them to bring their own knowledge and experience.

Reading tips

Go with the child's flow, and accept it!

Make sure it's an enjoyable time for the child, not a forced chore. It's OK if you only read a few words, or a few sentences -- as long as they're relaxed and having fun.

For little children, listening to a story requires their patience and focus and needs practice. Begin with short passages and see if you can extend the time over the weeks.

Engage their imagination: When they're listening or reading, encourage them to visualise the events in the story as if it were a film, then ask them to describe it.

You could build up to asking the five W questions: Who are the characters, where and when does the story take place, what conflicts do the characters face, why do they act as they do.

Ask for predictions: Stop occasionally to ask what might happen next. This means children have to integrate what they've learned so far about the characters and the story, and the way stories are organised.

Relate to their own life: Ask them to look for things in their everyday life which connect with the story, and bring them to the session to have a talk about them.

Do a quiz: Ask some questions about the story at the end of your reading, as part of your regular routine.

Try again next week! Sometimes making headway takes a lot of time. Be patient and be consistent.

Parents

Caring for a child with ADHD can be draining. The behaviour typical of ADHD can make everyday activities exhausting and stressful.

Ask parents what they think their child would find most helpful -- you don't need to guess! Find out their advice and if there's anything to avoid. If they're comfortable with it, you could even ask them to join the session to show you how they read together.

Some parents may have developed careful, regular routines to help their child, for instance round tea, bathtime and bedtime. Bear this in mind! If parents tell you when is a good time to visit, try hard to respect it.

Try to avoid really excitable/noisy reading sessions if you're visiting right before supper and bedtime.

Sources and further reading

ADDitude, US-based ADD online magazine <https://www.additudemag.com/>

ADHD and reading comprehension www.verywellmind.com/adhd-and-reading-comprehension-20806