

ADHD IN THE EARLY YEARS

WHAT IS AN ALN?

According to the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021), a child is considered to have an Additional Learning Need (ALN) if they have a learning difficulty or disability that requires Additional Learning Provision (ALP). A learning difficulty or disability is defined as having significantly greater difficulty in learning than most others of the same age, or as having a disability that prevents or hinders access to the education or training generally available to peers.

Neath Port Talbot Council (2024) writes that an Additional Learning Provision refers to educational or training support that is additional to, or different from, what is typically provided. For younger children, this means provision beyond what is ordinarily offered to others of the same age, while for those of compulsory school age or older, it involves tailored support within educational or training settings.



WHAT IS ADHD?

ADHD or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is a developmental condition which is characterised by a consistent pattern of symptoms that may include inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity according to the NHS (2025). Cleveland Clinic (2023) writes that ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, which means it affects how the brain develops, which can lead to symptoms such as inattention.

Similarly, The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH, 2024) writes that individuals with inattention may find it difficult to focus, stay on task, or keep organised. Hyperactivity, another symptom of ADHD, can present as frequent movement, sometimes at inappropriate times in classrooms, a constant sense of restlessness, or excessive talking.

According to the NHS (2025) children with ADHD can be impulsive, which may involve interrupting others, intruding into conversations or activities, or having difficulty waiting for one's turn. These symptoms can affect daily functioning and are typically present across multiple settings, such as home, school, or work, which can mean difficulty for practitioners to educate these children, and for ADHD children to access effective education (Welsh Government, 2019).



According to Elmaghraby and Garayalde (2022), ADHD is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children.

8.4% OF CHILDREN, 2.5% OF ADULTS AND 1 IN 5 PEOPLE IN THE UK HAS ADHD.

(AUSTERMAN, 2015).
WEAVER (2022)

DIAGNOSING ADHD

Diagnosing a child with ADHD can be difficult as there is no single test to diagnose ADHD (CDC, 2024). ADHD symptoms must begin in childhood, typically before the age of 12, and often continue through adolescence and into adulthood.

The criteria for diagnosis vary slightly depending on age. Children up to 16 years old must show at least six symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, or both. For individuals aged 17 and older, at least five symptoms must be present. These symptoms must occur for a minimum of six months, be observable in at least two different settings (such as home, school, work, or social environments), and significantly interfere with social, academic, or occupational functioning according to the CDC (2024).

Because other conditions like stress, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression can cause similar symptoms, a thorough evaluation by a healthcare provider is essential.

Diagnosis may be carried out by a primary care provider or a mental health professional. This evaluation typically includes a review of the individual's medical and mental health history, behavioural observations such as the Leuven scale (Main, 2021), and possibly interviews with family members, teachers, or others who know the person well (ADHDcenter, 2022).

Standardized behaviour rating scales and symptom checklists are often used, alongside psychological tests that assess cognitive functions such as memory, planning, and decision-making, to help confirm the diagnosis and rule out other issues, including learning disabilities.

ADHD can present differently depending on the individual. Boys and men are more likely to display hyperactive and impulsive behaviors, while girls and women often show more inattentive symptoms according to Rucklidge (2010), however, males and females with ADHD are more similar than different. Although symptoms must have started in childhood, ADHD can be diagnosed at any age. In children, hyperactivity and impulsivity tend to be the most visible signs, while inattention often becomes more noticeable as academic and social expectations increase. Teenagers may show fewer hyperactive behaviours, which can appear as restlessness or fidgeting, while inattention and impulsivity often persist and may affect academic performance and relationships.

However, there can be issues regarding the diagnosis of ADHD. In the UK waiting times vary for ADHD assessment. According to the NHS (2025), some may have to wait months or even years for ADHD diagnosis, and it is commonly reported that parents have had to wait 2-3 years for any kind of ADHD assessment (ADHDcentre, 2022). The NHS (2025) claim that this is due to a combination of high demand, limited resources, and systemic barriers. As awareness of ADHD increases, more individuals are seeking assessments, placing strain on already understaffed and underfunded NHS services. A shortage of specialist clinicians, such as psychologists and psychiatrists, further complicates timely diagnosis. These constraints mean that not all children with ADHD will have been diagnosed with ADHD and similarly not all children with poor attention will have ADHD (Welsh Government, 2019).

SYMPTOMS OF ADHD

ADHD is characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning or development according to the NHS, 2025. Symptoms of inattention may include difficulty sustaining focus, being easily distracted, appearing not to listen when spoken to, frequently losing items, and struggling with organisation or completing tasks. Hyperactivity symptoms often involve constant movement, fidgeting, talking excessively, or an inability to stay seated in situations where it is expected. Impulsivity may be seen in behaviors such as interrupting others, difficulty waiting one's turn, or making hasty decisions without considering consequences. These symptoms can vary depending on age and individual, and while some people may display primarily inattentive traits, others may show more hyperactive-impulsive behaviours or even a combination of both.

BARRIERS IN LEARNING

Children with ADHD frequently encounter a variety of barriers within early years educational settings, which can significantly impede their learning and developmental progress according to ADHD Foundation (2018). Difficulties with attention and concentration may hinder their ability to follow instructions, remain on task, and participate effectively in structured activities and impulsivity and limited self-regulation often manifest in behaviours such as interrupting, difficulty with turn taking, and acting without forethought, all of which can disrupt classroom routines and challenge peer interactions (Bray, 2023).

Hyperactivity may further complicate engagement, as affected children often struggle to remain seated or participate in quieter tasks, which can lead to frustration among the other children. Social skill development may also be compromised, with challenges in sharing, interpreting social cues, and cooperating with peers potentially resulting in conflict or social exclusion.