

Supporting Children with ADHD in the Classroom

Script for Video.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that is characterised by levels of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity that are significantly greater than would be expected for a child or young person's age and developmental stage, affecting their everyday functioning (Welsh Government, 2025; NICE, 2018).

Individuals may experience difficulties in one, two, or all three of these areas, and the nature and severity of symptoms can vary considerably from person to person. Symptoms of ADHD typically emerge in early childhood, often before the age of seven, and may persist throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Welsh Government, 2025; NICE, 2018).

Within educational settings, children and young people with ADHD may find it challenging to sustain attention, follow instructions, organise tasks and regulate their behaviour. These difficulties can have a significant impact on academic attainment, school attendance and social relationships. As a result, some learners may require additional educational support and in some cases, may be at increased risk of exclusion from school. These challenges can also affect progression into further and higher education (Welsh Government, 2025).

ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in childhood. Approximately **3-9% of children** meet ADHD diagnostic criteria.

ADHD occurs across:

All socioeconomic groups

- All ethnicities
- Both genders

However, girls are often under-recognised due to less obvious hyperactive behaviours (NICE, 2025).

ADHD present in one of three ways, either Predominantly Inattentive Presentation, Where children may :

- Appear distracted

- Forget instructions
- Lose belongings or
- Struggle to sustain attention

Or Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Presentation

In which children may:

- Fidget constantly
- Interrupt others
- Act without thinking or
- Struggle to remain seated

Or lastly a Combined Presentation

Which features both inattentiveness and hyperactivity/impulsivity characteristics.

This is the most commonly identified presentation in school-age children. NHS,2025; W.G, 2025).

Neurodiversity refers to the range of difference in the way that people perceive, process and interact with the world. In the same way that humanity is diverse so are our brains. A person is neurotypical when their thinking, learning and behaviours are similar to what is expected of most people or consider common or typical. A person is neurodivergent when their brain works in a way that differ from what is considered common or typical. A person does not need a diagnosis to identify as neuro divergent. Neurodivergence should be recognised as a difference not a deficit. There is no right or wrong way of being (Neurodivergence Wales, n.d.)

Impact

ADHD can significantly impact many areas of a child's life including their relationships with others, their mental health and wellbeing as well as their academic achievement –

Research consistently highlights that children with ADHD are at greater risk of:

- Lower academic attainment
- Poorer literacy and numeracy outcomes
- School exclusion
- Low Attendance

- Lower examination attainment and
- Reduced educational participation (May *et al.*, 2021).

Further research found children with ADHD had nearly twice the rate of unauthorised absences compared with other children.

Reduced attendance means:

- Less exposure to teaching
- Gaps in learning
- Reduced opportunities to develop social skills (May *et al.*, 2021).

Possible contributory factors include:

- School anxiety
- Peer relationship difficulties
- Behavioural challenges
- Negative experiences of learning
- Emotional dysregulation

The issue behind poor academic achievement is more often not down to ability, but the difficulties children and young people have accessing learning in a way that works for them.

Factors to consider:

Executive functioning.

This refers to the mental skills needed to:

- Plan
- Organise
- Prioritise
- Initiate tasks
- Sustain attention
- Manage time
- Monitor performance
- Control impulses

Difficulties in these areas can affect every aspect of school learning.

As children with ADHD may struggle to:

- Remember instructions
- Retain information whilst solving problems
- Resist distractions
- Think before acting
- Adapt strategies
- Transition between activities (Sayah *et al.*, 2018).

Another factor to consider is Sensory Processing difficulties.

Sensory processing refers to the way the brain receives, organises and interprets information from our senses in order to better understand the environment around us and how best to respond.

For many children with ADHD processing sensory information can be challenging at times. Difficulties with sensory processing can impact and reduce a child's engagement and participation in school.

Children with ADHD in your classroom may also be - Sensory Seekers, who need regular movement to stay regulated, may touch objects frequently or seek noise and stimulation.

On the other hand they may be Sensory Sensitive or Sensory Avoiders – Who may become overwhelmed by loud noises, may find bright lights distressing or maybe sensitive to touch or crowded environments.

Sensory overload can reduce concentration and increase stress, frustration and disengagement from learning.

This may result in:

- Reduced attention
- Avoidance behaviours
- Increased classroom disruption

Which may also impact attendance

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to be able to - manage feelings, cope with frustration, recover from setbacks and respond appropriately in challenging situations.

Many children with ADHD experience difficulties with regulation their emotions.

In school this may present as:

- Frustration
- Emotional outbursts
- Anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Rejection sensitivity
- Difficulty coping with mistakes

Repeated experiences of failure can negatively impact motivation and engagement in learning (NHS, 2025).

These difficulties rarely occur in isolation and without effective support and intervention this cycle can continue throughout a child's educational journey.

Visual supports

Visual supports are tools that use pictures, symbols, objects, gestures, signs, photographs or written words to support understanding and communication.

Visual supports give children something they can see and refer back to. Unlike spoken words, which disappear as soon as they are said, visual supports remain available, giving children more time to process information, understand expectations and prepare for what is happening next.

When visual supports are used alongside spoken language, they can help children:

- Understand routines, instructions and expectations.
- Prepare for changes and transitions.
- Process information at their own pace.
- Develop their communication skills.
- Express their choices, needs and preferences more effectively.

Visual tools such as visual timetables and *Now, Next, Then* boards can also promote independence by helping children organise their day, understand what is expected of them and stay engaged with tasks. By making language visible, these supports help children follow routines and complete activities more successfully.

Children who find it difficult to remember sequences, routines or instructions can often become frustrated or anxious. Visual supports reduce this demand on memory, helping children feel more confident, successful and in control. As a result, they can

enhance confidence, self-esteem, independence and enjoyment of learning (Almuwaiziri, Trakulphadetkrai and Williams, 2023; Thomas and Karuppali, 2022).

Adapting the Classroom Environment

One of the simplest and most effective things we can do to support children with ADHD is to adapt the environment around them. Small changes can reduce the demands placed on attention, executive functioning and sensory processing, helping children to engage more successfully in learning.

Many children with ADHD learn best when they are able to move. Being expected to sit still for long periods can make focusing even more difficult. Planned movement breaks throughout the day can help children to self-regulate, improve concentration and reduce restlessness.

Other environmental adaptations, such as flexible seating, can also make a significant difference. Not all children concentrate best when sitting in a standard chair. Options such as wobble cushions, alternative seating, standing desks or opportunities to work while standing can provide the movement some children need whilst remaining engaged in learning.

Fiddle-to-focus items can also support self-regulation and concentration. Small sensory tools, such as poppers, fidget spinners or even a piece of Blu Tack, can provide sensory input that helps some children maintain attention without distracting them from learning.

The physical environment itself is equally important. Many children with ADHD can become overwhelmed by busy, highly stimulating classrooms. Simple adjustments, such as reducing visual clutter and carefully considering lighting, can help. Where possible, natural light can create a calmer learning environment than bright fluorescent lighting. Lamps and softer lighting can also reduce visual fatigue and overstimulation.

It is also important to provide access to quiet, low-stimulation spaces. A sensory or calm area gives children somewhere to go when they feel overwhelmed, helping them regulate their emotions before difficulties escalate. This should be a supportive, welcoming space that encourages self-regulation and emotional wellbeing.

Ideally, classrooms would offer both a gym area for movement and sensory input, and a spa area for relaxation and calming. Providing access to both types of spaces

helps children identify and meet their sensory needs, leading to improved self-regulation, engagement and wellbeing (Pingale *et al.*, 2022; Mills *et al.*, 2025).

Interview

Tom is 16 years old and currently attends sixth form at a mainstream secondary school. He received a diagnosis of ADHD at the age of 11, prior to starting high school.

To help illustrate the importance of implementing effective strategies and interventions for children and young people with ADHD, Tom was asked the following question:

“Looking back on your time in compulsory education, what strategies or interventions did you find most helpful in supporting your learning and success at school?”

Tom's response:

I think the most useful strategy that helped me better manage my ADHD in school was ensuring I had sufficient movement breaks.

In primary school before I was diagnose, I would often not finish my work and it was common practise that if you didn't finish work you had to stay in during break time to finish, which meant I had to stay in most break times to finish my work, however, during break time I found it very difficult to finish whatever task I was working on because I felt it was really unfair that it was always me who had to stay in. I would get very upset, actually very angry and frustrated especially because I could see my friends through the window playing on the yard. however in year 6 I had a teacher called Mr Robbins and he made it very clear that he felt exercise was equally as important as learning, so no-one was ever kept in class during break time. I think he made a rule for myself and a few other boys that needed to move, but he never said it was for that reason. i realised that after playing football on the yard for 20 minutes or however long it was, I was able to come in and finish what I needed to do very quickly, very efficiently - like my brain just needed some fresh air to be able to re-focus on what I was doing.

I have since then been an advocate for myself to ensure that I get sufficient movement breaks as I am aware of how important it is for me and my wellbeing. I've

recently did my GCSEs where I was able to get up and move around, stretch my legs or whatever I needed to do so that I could re- focus back on the task. I think without that, I probably would have struggled to sit there for 2 - 2 1/2 hours at a time and as a result I walked away with 3 A's and four B's which I am incredibly proud of myself for. Because there was a time when I wasn't able to finish a piece of work or sit and do a test to the end and I thought it was because I wasn't good enough but it was just because I work in a different way than other people, so for any young person out there that has been diagnosed with ADHD or thinks they might have ADHD I will always say remember exercise is equally as important as the learning.

Key Message

Neuro -affirming Practice

- Seeing difference, not deficit
- Focusing on strengths and individual needs
- Moving away from 'fixing' the child
- Listening to and valuing the child's voice
- Providing flexible and personalised support
- Creating inclusive, accessible learning environments (Grey *et al.*, 2025).

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