

ADHD: Talking with your child

If your child has been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), you may be wondering whether to talk to them about the diagnosis and what to say. It is important to talk to your child about ADHD, how to shape the conversation, and how to help your child adjust to the diagnosis and treatment.

Should I talk to my child about ADHD?

Most child experts say that yes, you should talk to your child about ADHD. Knowing what's causing symptoms can be a relief for children, who may have been labeling themselves as “stupid” or “lazy” because they didn't know why they acted differently from their friends.

Talking about ADHD gives your child a chance to ask questions. It also helps your child see why treatment is helpful and more likely to actively participate in treatment.



How do I tell my child about ADHD?

As a parent, you know the best way to talk to your child. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful:

- **Work with your child at their own pace,** looking for “teachable moments.” Your child may not be ready for a full conversation about ADHD all at once.
- **Affirm your child's unique strengths.** Explain that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Use yourself and other family members as examples.
- **Talk about the trouble your child has been having.** To introduce ADHD, focus on what your child has said they're concerned or frustrated about, like waiting their turn or having trouble sitting still.
- **Gear the conversation to your child's perspective.** Stick with language familiar to your child and use metaphors to help create mental pictures. Avoid technical terms.
- **Discuss your child's fears.** Your child may wonder if ADHD is dangerous. Acknowledge your child's fears, but explain that ADHD can be treated and is not dangerous. It may help to tell your child that lots of people have ADHD — and they have great lives.
- **Emphasize positive goals.** Talk about the benefits of treatment, like having free time because they finish homework more quickly, getting along better with friends, keeping up in class, or enjoying more privileges.
- **Describe treatment as a way to help your child be in control,** rather than the ADHD being in control.

What's an example conversation about ADHD I can use?

These are some example conversation geared for an elementary school child. You can adjust it for your child's age and needs. Don't worry about covering everything at once.

- **The reasons for an ADHD evaluation:**

- "This year has been tough, and school hasn't been fun for you. You know how I'm always upset about you fighting with your sister and not staying at the table during dinner? We wanted to find out if there are reasons some of these things are happening. That's why we met with your teachers and went to the doctor."

- **The diagnosis and how ADHD works:**

- "The doctor said you have ADHD. Do you know what that means? It helps explain why you've been having these problems. You know how you've said it's hard to stop yourself sometimes, and it's too boring to sit and read? That's because of ADHD."
- "ADHD means your brain is like a racecar with a powerful engine but brakes that don't work perfectly. The sights out the window go by really fast, and sometimes it's hard to slow down to look at them or read the road signs." – "Another way to think about ADHD is watching TV when the channels change every few seconds — or a bunch of channels play all at once. That can make it hard to pay attention."

- **Putting ADHD in perspective:**

- "I'm glad we know about your ADHD. Now we know why things have been tough for you lately, and we can do something to help. Lots of kids have ADHD and learn to manage it just fine."
- "ADHD is just one part of who you are, like the way you like strawberries and soccer, but can't do a cartwheel. We're all different. Your dad can go up on the roof, but I'm scared to stand on a ladder. I'm a good singer, but your dad can't sing at all."

- **Treatment and outlook:**

- "You'll start taking medicine every day for ADHD. Just like glasses help someone's eyes focus, the medicine helps your brain focus. We'll also work together on ways you can practice slowing down and paying attention. We'll set some goals, and you'll feel better and better. I think your behavior will improve, so you won't have to take as many time outs. School will probably be easier, too."
- "You'll learn to manage ADHD, and you may even outgrow it. Lots of successful people have ADHD, and they have done great things in their lives."

How do I help my child adjust to the ADHD diagnosis?

Your child may wonder what the diagnosis might mean at school and with friends. Siblings also need to understand what this means for your family. Here are some suggestions for talking about how ADHD affects them.

- **Talk about ways your child can tell their friends about ADHD and medicine.** Your child might simply say, "I have ADHD, so it's harder for my mind and body to keep still and focus on things. I take medicine to make it easier."

- **Practice what your child can do if ADHD-related behavior causes problems.** For example, your child could say, "I'm sorry about that. My ADHD sometimes makes things harder for me. I'm working on ways to do better."

- **Explain how teachers will be involved.** You might say: "Your teacher knows you have ADHD. That's great, because he can help you with it. He might change where you sit to make things easier or give you extra chances to practice focusing on assignments. You and your teacher might be able to talk about a private signal he can use to remind you when you're having trouble focusing."

- **Discuss ADHD with other family members.** Help siblings understand what ADHD is and that it's just part of who their brother or sister is. Tell them ADHD isn't contagious (they can't "catch it") and that treatment will help their brother or sister focus better. You might also discuss setting some routines to help things go more smoothly at home.