

Advice For Parents of Children With ADHD: Solutions to Common Problems

General tips.

1. Rules should be clear and brief. Your child should know exactly what you expect from him or her.
2. Give your child chores. This will give him or her a sense of responsibility and boost self-esteem.
3. Short lists of tasks are excellent to help a child remember.
4. Routines are extremely important for children with ADHD. Set up regular times for meals, homework, TV, getting up, and going to bed. Follow through on the schedule.
5. Identify what your child is good at doing (like art, math, computer skills) and build on it.
6. Tell your child that you love and support him or her unconditionally.
7. Catch your child being good and give immediate positive feedback.

It is very hard to get my child ready for school in the morning.

- Create a consistent and predictable schedule for rising and getting ready in the morning.
- Set up a routine so that your child can predict the order of events. Put this routine in writing or in pictures on a poster for your child. Schedule example: Alarm goes off → Brush teeth → Wash face → Get dressed → Eat breakfast → Take medication → Get on school bus.
- Reward and praise your child. This will motivate your child to succeed. Even if your child does not succeed in all parts of the “morning routine,” use praise to reward your child when he or she is successful. Progress is often made in a series of small steps.
- If your child is on medication, try waking your child up 30 to 45 minutes before the usual wake time to give him or her the medication. Then allow your child to “rest” in bed for the next 30 minutes. This rest period will allow the medication to begin working and your child will be better able to participate in the morning routine.

My child is very irritable in the late afternoon/early evening. (*Common side effect of stimulant medications.*)

- The late afternoon and evening is often a very stressful time for all children in all families because parents and children have had to “hold it all together” at work and at school.
- If your child is on medication, your child may also be experiencing “rebound”—the time when the medication is wearing off and ADHD symptoms may reappear.
- Adjust your child’s dosing schedule so that the medication is not wearing off during a time of “high demand” (for example, when homework or chores are usually being done).
- Create a period of “down time” when your child can do calm activities like listen to music, take a bath, read, etc.

- Alternatively, let your child “blow off extra energy and tension” by doing some physical exercise.
- Talk to your child’s doctor about giving your child a smaller dose of medication in the late afternoon. This is called a “stepped down” dose and helps a child transition off of medication in the evening.

My child is losing weight or not eating enough. (*Common side effects of stimulant medication use.*)

- Encourage breakfast with calorie-dense foods.
- Give the morning dose of medication after your child has already eaten breakfast. Afternoon doses should also be given after lunch.
- Provide your child with nutritious after-school and bedtime snacks that are high in protein and in complex carbohydrates. Examples: Nutrition/protein bars, shakes/drinks made with protein powder, liquid meals.
- Get eating started with any highly preferred food before giving other foods.
- Consider shifting dinner to a time later in the evening when your child’s medication has worn off. Alternatively, allow your child to “graze” in the evening on healthy snacks, as he or she may be hungriest right before bed.
- Follow your child’s height and weight with careful measurements at your child’s doctor’s office and talk to your child’s doctor.

My child has problems doing homework.

- Establish a routine and schedule for homework (a specific time and place.) Don’t allow your child to wait until the evening to get started.
- Limit distractions in the home during homework hours (reducing unnecessary noise, activity, and phone calls, and turning off the TV).
- Praise and compliment your child when he or she puts forth good effort and completes tasks. In a supportive, noncritical manner, it is appropriate and helpful to assist in pointing out and making some corrections of errors on the homework.
- It is not your responsibility to correct all of your child’s errors on homework or make him or her complete and turn in a perfect paper.
- Remind your child to do homework and offer incentives: “When you finish your homework, you can watch TV or play a game.”
- If your child struggles with reading, help by reading the material together or reading it to your son or daughter.
- Work a certain amount of time and then stop working on homework.
- Many parents find it very hard to help their child with schoolwork. Find someone who can. Consider hiring a tutor. Often a junior or senior high school student is ideal, depending on the need and age of your child.

My child has problems with discipline.

- Be firm. Set rules and keep to them.
- Make sure your child understands the rules, so he or she does not feel uninformed.
- Use positive reinforcement. Praise and reward your child for good behavior.
- Change or rotate rewards frequently to maintain a high interest level.
- Punish behavior, not the child. If your child misbehaves, try alternatives like allowing natural consequences, withdrawing yourself from the conflict, or giving your child a choice.

My child has sleeping problems.

- Develop bedtime rituals/routines.
 - A bedtime ritual is a powerful sign that it is time to sleep. It needs to be simple so the child can perform the ritual even if the parent is not present.
 - Try writing out the bedtime ritual to make it consistent.
- Pay attention to the sleep environment.
 - Background noises, location, sleep partners, bedding, favorite toys, and lighting can all affect a child's ability to fall asleep.
 - A cool, dark, quiet room is best.
- Letting children cry themselves to sleep is not recommended.
 - Teach them to soothe themselves, such as giving the child a special blanket, a picture of the parent(s), or a stuffed animal to hold while falling asleep.
 - Avoid activities that depend on a parent's presence, including rocking or holding the child until he or she falls asleep.
- Make the bedroom a sleep-only zone.
 - Remove most toys, games, televisions, computers, and radios from your child's bedroom if your child is having trouble falling asleep or is often up at night.
 - One or two stuffed animals are acceptable.
- Limit time in bed.
 - Hours spent awake in bed interfere with good sleep patterns; the goal is to make the child's bed a place for sleeping only.
 - Be aware of how much sleep children need at different ages. Even though adults need about 8 hours of sleep, infants and toddlers often sleep over 12 hours, and children usually sleep 10 hours. Teenagers also need lots of sleep, sometimes requiring 9 hours or more.

- Establish consistent waking times.
 - Bedtimes and waking times should be the same 7 days a week.
 - It is easier to enforce a waking time than a bedtime.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine.
 - Caffeine is present in a wide range of beverages, such as tea, soda, cocoa, and coffee. Drinking these beverages past the afternoon may make it more difficult for your child to settle down to sleep.
- Establish daytime routines.
 - Regular mealtimes and activity times, including playtime with parents, also help set sleep times.
- Chart your child's progress.
 - Praise your child for successful quiet nights.
 - Consider marking successful nights on a star chart and providing rewards at the end of the week.
- Waking up at night is a habit.
 - Social contact with parents, feeding, and availability of interesting toys encourage the child to be up late, so set limits on attention-getting behaviors at night.
- Consider medical problems.
 - Allergy, asthma, or conditions that cause pain can disrupt sleep. If your child snores loudly and/or pauses in breathing, talk to your doctor.
- Try medications to help your child sleep only under the care of your child's doctor.
 - Medications need to be used very carefully in young children. Many medications can have complications and make sleep worse.
 - Some children with ADHD may actually be helped by a small dose of a stimulant medication at bedtime. Paradoxically, this dose may help a child to get organized for sleep.
 - A few children may ultimately need other bedtime medications—at least for a little while—to help improve sleep. Talk with your doctor before starting any over-the-counter or prescription medications.

Take care of yourself.

- Come to terms with your child's challenges and strengths.
- Seek support from family and friends, or professional help such as counseling or support groups.
- Help other family members recognize and understand ADHD.

Adapted from the National Initiative for Children's Healthcare Quality ADHD Toolkit.