

Intro to Early Childhood (Preschool) ADHD

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects 5 to 9 percent of children. It is the most common, yet most treatable, childhood mental health condition worldwide. Even though ADHD can cause very significant early childhood impairment, it remains under recognized and under treated in early childhood. Unfortunately, many young children with ADHD continue to be falsely labelled as children who lack discipline and motivation, or simply, as children who are “bad”.

Some Quick Facts About ADHD:

- ① ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is most often inherited; it can be caused by brain trauma before or after birth but this is rare.
- ① Children with ADHD are just as intelligent as other children, but their learning and self-regulation impairments require additional support.
- ① The three core symptoms of ADHD are impairment in attention regulation, impulsivity and hyperactivity.
- ① ADHD core symptoms are most often accompanied by impairments in executive functioning and self and emotional regulation.
- ① All forms of attention regulation are impaired in ADHD. Over-focusing can be as much of an issue as inattention. Prioritizing attention on what is important but not necessarily interesting, breaking and shifting attention are also impaired.
- ① ADHD diagnoses are classified into three different presentations depending on which symptoms are present:
 - predominately inattentive, previously known as ADD - attentional issues only;
 - predominately hyperactive/impulsive, very rare - no attentional issues;
 - combined, most prevalent - all three symptoms present.
- ① Boys are twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed in preschool because hyperactivity and impulsivity (more often seen in boys) are more noticeable than inattention symptoms on their own.
- ① About 50% of all children diagnosed with ADHD also have another disorder, such as a learning disability or Autism (other neurodevelopmental disorders) or an anxiety or mood disorder (other mental health conditions).
- ① Parenting, diet, lack of exercise or too much screen time does not cause ADHD.
- ① Those with untreated ADHD are at a greater risk for: learning difficulties, dropping out of high school, low self-esteem, substance abuse, accidents and injuries, conflicts with law enforcement, and early death.



Preschool children with ADHD, or those who show signs of ADHD in early childhood, can do well in certain unstructured, free play environments. However, once skills commonly impaired in children with ADHD are required differences in functioning will become apparent.

Skills required in preschool that are commonly impaired in children with ADHD:

- ① sitting still;
- ① remaining attentive;
- ① engaging in play, or doing one specific activity for a length of time;
- ① remembering and following schedules and rules;
- ① completing tasks, especially those with complex steps;
- ① interacting appropriately with others their age; and
- ① expressing their frustration.

The good news is that once we recognize these impairments appropriate strategies, supports and treatments can be put in place to help the child function. The earlier everyone understands what is going on the earlier supports can be put in place, even before a formal diagnosis.

Diagnosis In Early Childhood

Because all young children typically have greater difficulty paying attention and are easily distracted, it can be more of a challenge to diagnose ADHD in preschool children. Therefore, those diagnosed at this age frequently have symptoms at the more severe end of the spectrum. In the past, we did not diagnose ADHD until the age of six, but new research has led the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to recommend assessing children for ADHD at the age of four if red flags exist.



A thorough medical assessment, with input on academic and social functioning, needs to occur so we can obtain a clear picture of the “whole child”. We need to understand not just the children’s impairments but also their strengths. During the assessment process the physician will collect feedback on the child’s functioning from several sources such as parents, educators and other care providers. This information is generally gathered through rating scales and interviews.

During the assessment process a full screening for other disorders and issues that may mimic ADHD symptoms such as: Autism, sensory issues, delayed motor skill development and separation anxiety is required. In addition, physical medical conditions such as: impaired hearing and vision, hypothyroidism, poor sleep and medication effects also need to be ruled out as a cause for typical ADHD symptoms.

Diagnosis In Early Childhood (cont)

For ADHD to be diagnosed symptoms must be at a level that impede a child's ability to function in age appropriate activities. Symptoms must be evident in more than one setting and have been present for more than 6 months.

The diagnosis should be shared with the school and teachers as well as others that interact with the child. It is important that parents, educators and medical professionals work as a team to implement strategies, accommodations and treatments. Good communication between the adults in the child's life is essential. Those interacting with the child should always be educated about what ADHD is, how it impacts this child specifically and what strategies and tools are best used to assist the child; the more cohesive the strategies between home and school the better.

Sources used for Intro to Early Childhood (Preschool) ADHD

- <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/pages/AAP-Expands-Ages-for-Diagnosis-and-Treatment-of-ADHD-in-Children.aspx>
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