



JM Mental Health
Independent Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry



Understanding ADHD in girls



Did you know?

Symptoms in children are often noticeable before the age of 12.

Contents

3 - 5	Introduction - Understanding ADHD in girls
5	Diagnosis age
6	Hyperactivity
7	Emotions
7	Inattention
8	What are the characteristics of ADHD in girls?
8	Social camouflaging
9	Friendships
10 - 11	How you can help your daughter
12 - 13	Activities
14	Co-existing disorders
15	Useful resources
15	Conclusion

Introduction - Understanding ADHD in girls

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a type of neurodiversity that affects the parts of the brain that control attention, impulses and concentration. It is the most common neurodevelopmental condition in the UK.

Diagnostically, the symptoms of ADHD fall into two types of behavioural categories:

- inattentiveness (difficulty concentrating and focusing)
- hyperactivity and impulsivity

ADHD also affects executive functioning, which includes self-awareness, problem solving and memory, and emotional regulation. This is important because a lot of young people don't necessarily identify strongly with the classic ADHD symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention.

Many young people with ADHD have problems in both categories, (ADHD combined subtype) but not always. Around 2 to 3 in 10 people with the condition have problems with concentrating and focusing, but not with hyperactivity or impulsiveness. We call this the inattentive subtype.

Symptoms in children are often but not always noticeable before the age of six. Historically, ADHD has been more often diagnosed in boys than girls. For many (including parents, educators and healthcare professionals) the stereotype of a child with ADHD is still a noisy, impulsive, hyperactive boy.



Girls with ADHD can present differently and so often face unique challenges. As a result, they have frequently been underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed. While boys with ADHD often display hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour, girls with ADHD may exhibit more internalised symptoms, such as daydreaming, inattention, and difficulty organising tasks.

Diagnosis age

Boys are often diagnosed with ADHD at an earlier age than girls. This may be because girls with ADHD may exhibit social behaviours that are more in line with society's expectations of girls (daydreamers, chatterboxes, bossy, even 'hormonal'), making their symptoms less noticeable or easily attributed to other factors. The disruptive behaviour that young boys display is what frequently drives parents to seek a diagnosis.

In addition, junior school isn't as challenging as senior school. A girl with undiagnosed ADHD may be fine in junior school but will struggle once she gets to senior level where the work, organisational and social demands increase and it's harder to mask her ADHD.

The symptoms of ADHD in girls often don't emerge until puberty, a time when most young people start to experience emotional ups and downs. So the ADHD symptoms are often put down to 'being a teenager'. ADHD symptoms increase in girls when they reach puberty because the hormonal fluctuations that take place during a girl's monthly cycle can exacerbate her ADHD symptoms.

Hyperactivity

Most people associate ADHD with excessive hyperactivity but the symptom can present slightly differently in girls. For example, hyperactive girls can:

- talk incessantly
- doodle
- fiddle with hair or nails
- toe tap
- fidget

In a classroom situation, a chatty girl is less of a problem than a boy who repeatedly shouts out answers or disrupts the class. So she can slip under the radar of teachers and families who don't recognise her symptoms as being those of someone with ADHD.



Emotions

Many people with ADHD struggle with 'emotional dysregulation', a decreased ability to control emotional responses such as overreacting, frustration, becoming weepy or quick to anger in situations that don't necessarily appear to warrant such an extreme reaction. Emotional dysregulation is more prominent in (teenage) girls with ADHD.

Girls, in general, mature more quickly than boys. But girls with ADHD can be less socially and emotionally mature than their peers. It can be difficult to fit in, to navigate successfully through day-to-day living. They can feel excluded, frustrated and ashamed; their self-esteem takes a battering. It's all too easy for girls to be ostracised by their peers because of their emotional behaviour or social ineptitude.

Inattention

Girls are more likely than boys to suffer from inattentive ADHD. The symptoms of this sub-type (which include poor attention to detail, limited attention span, forgetfulness, distractibility, and failure to finish assigned activities), tend to be less disruptive and obvious to those around them than those of hyperactive ADHD however are equally impairing.



What are the characteristics of ADHD in girls?

Some characteristics of ADHD in girls might include:

- Daydreaming quietly in class
- Feeling sad or anxious
- Being scatterbrained
- Talking incessantly
- Being 'silly' or 'ditzy'
- Being a perfectionist
- Shyness
- Trouble maintaining friendships
- Picking at their nails/skin; fiddling with their hair
- Not paying attention
- Nosiness

Note: these symptoms could also be due to other conditions or could be 'comorbid' (or they exist alongside another one or more condition/s).

Social camouflaging

Girls with ADHD often develop coping mechanisms to mask their social difficulties, imitating neurotypical behaviour to fit in. For example, it could be perfectionism; going over and over homework to make sure she gets a good mark or repeatedly checking her school bag many times to make sure she has everything she needs. This camouflaging can make it difficult for others to recognise that she is struggling.

Friendships

Friendship between girls can be much more complex than boys, requiring greater sophistication and maintenance. Being forgetful, hyperactive and impulsive (or a combination of ADHD symptoms) may result in social awkwardness meaning its hard to maintain friendships.

Meanwhile, girls with the hyperactive/impulsive or combined-type ADHD can be stigmatised more than boys with the same diagnosis. Boisterous, impulsive behaviour is seen as 'boyish'; girls who act like that can get ostracised.



How you can help your daughter

Build on her strengths

It's easy to lose sight of your strengths when you feel under pressure (from school work, tricky social situations etc) but she will have strengths. Don't let her forget them. She may not be academically great but she could be a good listener or have great attention to detail. Get her to list her strengths and put them up in her room so she can see them and remind herself of them daily. Help her develop her strengths and talents. Together recall the times when she showed her competence and was successful; notice her victories; encourage her to become more self-sufficient, to problem solve, to do new things.

Communication

Create an open and non-judgmental environment where she feels comfortable discussing her challenges. Encourage her to express her feelings and thoughts with you. It's also helpful to teach girls with ADHD how to advocate for themselves. That means encouraging them to communicate with teachers and peers about their needs and challenges.

Focus on solutions rather than the problems when communicating with your daughter. For example, 'What could help you go to bed on time?' rather than 'Why are you staying up late?'

Use descriptive praise (speak in details of what they have done well). When giving instructions phrase them positively. Humour and playfulness won't hurt when appropriate and always reward the good behaviour.

Sleep

Have a night time routine that encourages healthy sleep. See our 'Why teenagers need their sleep' support leaflet.

Physical activity

Regular physical activity is beneficial particularly if your daughter is hyperactive. It doesn't necessarily have to be something sporty – walking the dog, dancing and gardening also count. Exercise helps alleviate the ADHD symptoms and has positive effects on attention and overall wellbeing.

Structure

The executive functioning skills, such as organisation, planning and time management can be particularly challenging for girls with ADHD. Clear routines and consistent schedules are really helpful, such as charts, schedules, and reminders, to help her organise tasks and manage her time. By helping her break down tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, it can make it easier for her to focus and complete assignments.

Provide an appropriate daily routine (eating regularly and healthily, sleeping enough and having daily physical activity).

Be consistent

Have a few clear, fair, agreed rules. If there are consequences to breaking these rules, they must not come as a surprise and should be imposed quickly, without delay. All children need to practice learning what is expected of them. Some will test the limit just once and accept it straight away; others will keep on testing it over and over before accepting it. Patience is needed!



Activities

Challenges and solutions

Fold a piece of paper in half, lengthwise. On one side, ask your daughter to write five challenges she regularly faces. On the opposite side of the paper, work together to list solutions that address each of the challenges. For example, "I always forget to take stuff to school"; solutions could be 'Write a list of what you need the night before'.

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS

Draw up a weekly timetable

Schedule a list of activities for each day of the week based on the solutions you have identified. For example... before school routine (get up, get dressed, clean teeth, breakfast etc) and after school routine (homework, relax, more homework, prepare school bag etc).

	MORNING	EVENING
SUNDAY		
MONDAY		
TUESDAY		
WEDNESDAY		
THURSDAY		
FRIDAY		
SATURDAY		

Co-existing disorders

According to research conducted at Harvard University, 45 percent of girls with ADHD have another serious condition, such as clinical depression or crippling anxiety (the co-existing disorders in girls with ADHD tend to be internalised – i.e. not seen by others, but are not restricted to these). This can influence diagnosis and diagnostic accuracy. Eating disorders have also been linked to ADHD in girls and women.

Girls can internalise their challenges, masking their ADHD and turning their frustrations on themselves rather than others. This can lead to anxiety, stress and low self-esteem – and missed diagnostic and treatment opportunities.

Did you know?

A significant number of children with ADHD also meet the criteria for autism.

Useful resources...

Publications:

Understanding ADHD in girls and women

Joanne Steer

The Gift of ADHD – how to transform your child's problems into strengths

Lara Honos-Webb

Late, lost and unprepared – a parent's guide to helping children with executive functioning

Joyce Cooper-Kahn & Laurie Dietzel

Atomic habits

James Clear

Online:

www.addiss.co.uk

National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service

www.adhdfoundation.org.uk

ADHD Foundation, the neurodiversity charity

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/adhd-and-mental-health/>

Mind - Mental Health Charity

www.ukadhd.com/support-groups.htm

UK ADHD Partnership: support groups and lots of links to other support

Diagnosis and support should always be based on an individual's specific needs and characteristics. So it's important to recognise the diversity of the ADHD spectrum and understand that the presentation of ADHD can vary widely amongst individuals. This includes gender related differences in how ADHD can present in a child or young person. Increased awareness and education about ADHD in girls can only help in getting earlier and more accurate diagnosis, leading to better support and outcomes for individual's and their families.



JM Mental Health

Independent Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Trust your instincts as a parent or carer

We understand that this is a very stressful time for everyone. We want to support you and work with you to improve the situation.

We make no judgements. We listen to you and your child. We make absolutely sure we understand what is going on. Remember, you are not alone. This is a safe place. We are here to support and care for you all.

If you have concerns about your child's moods and behaviour, then you need to act sooner rather than later. Please discuss any concerns with your clinician.

Dr Julia Moss
Founder of JM Mental Health



Helping children and teenagers and their families with mental health difficulties.

www.jmmmentalhealth.co.uk