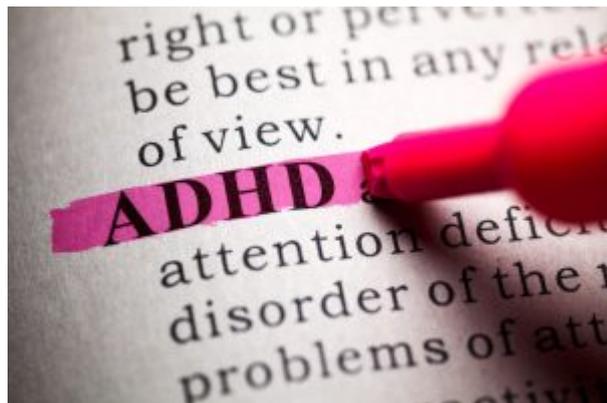


ADHD and school. This is a challenge that has always been close to my heart. As a teacher, counselor, and parent I've worked with many students who struggle with inattention, distraction, and restlessness.

ADHD and School - what it looks like



Students who can't focus lose their homework in the bottom of their backpack, remember science fair projects the night before they're due, and make silly mistakes on tests. They have trouble with managing time, staying focused, remembering details, and planning ahead.

Recently, several parents have either asked me about ADHD and school, or told me that their child has recently been diagnosed with ADHD. So it seems like a good time to share some basic information about what ADHD is...and what it isn't.

My perspective is a little different from much of what you'll find on the internet or hear from other professionals, but it's practical. When I work with students we focus how their brain learns, and the fastest way to make a shift.

With that in mind, here are 5 things you need to know about ADD, ADHD and school:

1. ADHD is a problem with focus*

"I want to pay attention," my daughter told me in sixth grade. "Every day, I promise myself that I will, and every day I end up looking out the window."

Students want to learn, but sometimes wanting isn't enough. If the challenge is big enough, and it goes on long enough, school starts to feel like a game they can't win. But students can't win if they can't focus.

The DSM-V and many ADHD checklists describe students who:

- get distracted easily (they forget to write down homework)
- don't know how to get organized (they can't find the assignment)
- have a hard time sustaining attention (they skip parts of the assignment)
- avoid tasks that require sustained mental effort (they procrastinate)
- lack attention to detail (and make trivial but point-losi



ng mistakes)

don't follow through (you have to remind them 5 times to set the table)

lose things (or forget to turn in homework once it's complete)

All of these are problems with **focus**. However, problems with focus don't necessarily mean someone has ADHD.

2. A Problem with Focus is not Necessarily ADHD

Your ability to focus has to do with your environment, your level of stress, how you eat, and many other factors. You need to investigate all the possibilities, or your treatment plan will be meaningless.

One parent told me that their child was prescribed medication, and the family later discovered that the real problem was bullying. A child who hasn't eaten breakfast will have trouble focusing too - the brain needs glucose to function well.

Here are a few of the things, besides ADHD, that can affect focus.

Each of these challenges needs a different approach for students to succeed in school.

Development: Several studies have found that the youngest children **within a grade** are diagnosed with ADHD at much higher rates than oldest ones. In [one study](#), the likelihood of being diagnosed with ADHD increased for each month of age difference. Especially in younger grades, younger children are noticeably less mature. That doesn't mean they have ADD.

Stress: Stress affects concentration, memory, and recall. But that's what focus is: a student's ability to concentrate, to remember information, and to recall it when needed. The [relationship between stress and learning](#) has been studied for decades.

For students, stress is the norm.

About 80% of teens surveyed in a U.S. survey on stress say that they feel stressed about school - they don't understand assignments, they're over-scheduled, or they feel pressure about grades.

In addition, there are other potential [sources of stress for teens](#): relationships, bullying, recent household moves, parent separation, illness in the family, and so forth.

Lack of sleep: Students need adequate sleep to focus and learn. For teens, this means about 9 hours a night. Few teens get this much, which means that most teens could improve their focus by sleeping more.

Environment: [Multitasking is a myth](#), and the easiest way for many students to improve focus is to do away with distractions. This means turning off phones and computers, and doing homework somewhere where you won't be interrupted. In middle school this might

mean the kitchen table; in college, might be a remote specialty library.

Medical and nutritional issues: Vincent J. Monastra in, "Parenting Children with ADHD: 10 Lessons that Medicine Cannot Teach," lists some of the medical and physiological problems that can disrupt focus: difficulty with vision or hearing; deficiencies of iron, zinc, or magnesium; anemia, thyroid disorder, sleep apnea, and others. He suggests a comprehensive medical evaluation before investigating the possibility of ADHD.

This post is continued in *"5 Things Every Parent Needs to Know About ADHD and School - Part II,"* which you'll find next week. In Part II you'll learn about these key issues:

3. *ADHD Has a Lot to Do with Your Brain*
4. *Rewards and Punishments Don't Work*
5. *You Can Train Your Brain to Focus [Here's How]*