School Adjustments for ADHD to Support Learning



A child may understand the lesson, want to do well and still regularly lose worksheets, miss instructions or become overwhelmed when the classroom changes pace. School adjustments for ADHD are not about lowering expectations or giving a child an unfair advantage. They are practical changes to the way learning, instructions and assessment are organised, so the child has a fairer opportunity to show what they know.

For parents, the difficult part is often deciding what to ask for. A useful starting point is not a broad request for “more support”, but a clear description of the situations where school is becoming difficult. This gives teachers a workable basis for planning and reviewing adjustments.

What school adjustments for ADHD are designed to address

ADHD can affect attention regulation, working memory, planning, task initiation, impulse control and emotional regulation. These difficulties may look different across classes and across days. A student might concentrate well during a preferred hands-on activity but struggle to start a written task, particularly when several instructions are given at once.

School adjustments should respond to functional needs rather than assumptions about a diagnosis. A formal diagnosis can help a school understand the broader clinical picture, but schools can often begin responding to observed learning and participation needs while assessment is underway. Individual school processes vary.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 require education providers to consult with students and parents or carers about reasonable adjustments where a student has a disability. In practice, consultation means discussing what is getting in the way, considering possible changes and reviewing whether they remain appropriate. An adjustment should be proportionate to the student’s needs and practical within the educational setting.

The aim is participation. A child may still need to complete the same learning task as peers, but may need a different pathway to begin, organise or demonstrate that work.

Start with patterns, not labels

Before meeting with the school, it can help to note patterns over two or three weeks. Brief, specific observations are more useful than a general statement that a child is struggling. For example, a parent might note that homework is manageable with one

instruction at a time, but the child becomes stuck when asked to plan a project independently. A teacher may observe that the student contributes verbally but rarely completes written work in the available time.

Consider when the difficulty occurs, what happens immediately before it, and what appears to reduce it. Is the main issue noise and distraction? Is it copying from the board, moving between activities, remembering equipment, writing at length, or managing frustration after a correction? The answer will shape the adjustment.

It is also worth asking what is already working. A child who responds well to a visual checklist, a quiet reminder or a predictable seating position may not need a complex plan. Small, consistent changes can be more useful than a long list that is difficult for busy staff to maintain.

Adjustments that may be considered

There is no standard set of adjustments that suits every student with ADHD. The following approaches are commonly considered in schools, depending on the child's age, classroom demands and learning profile.

Make instructions easier to hold in mind

Working memory difficulties can make multi-step verbal instructions hard to retain, even when a student is listening. Teachers may provide one step at a time, write key instructions on the board, check the student has understood the first step, or use a short visual checklist.

This does not mean repeatedly prompting a child through every task. The adjustment should support increasing independence. For an older student, a teacher might agree on a simple system for recording tasks in a planner or digital learning platform, rather than relying on memory at the end of a busy lesson.

Reduce avoidable distractions

A seating position can matter, but "front of the class" is not automatically the best choice. Some students benefit from being near the teacher; others find a high-traffic

area or proximity to particular classmates more distracting. The school can trial a position that offers clearer access to instruction and fewer interruptions.

Access to a quieter space for some independent work may also be considered. This needs balance. Removing a child from the classroom too often can reduce connection with peers and teaching. A short, planned option for focused work is different from routinely excluding a student from the learning environment.

Break larger tasks into visible steps

Long assignments can be difficult because they require planning, estimating time and maintaining effort over several stages. Teachers may divide an assessment into smaller checkpoints, provide a planning template, clarify what a completed section looks like, or schedule brief progress check-ins.

For younger children, this may mean completing a few questions before checking in. For adolescents, it may mean separate due dates for choosing a topic, preparing a plan and submitting a draft. The academic standard can remain the same while the organisational load becomes more manageable.

Allow movement in a planned way

Some students concentrate better when movement is built into the day. A practical arrangement might include delivering a note, collecting materials, taking a brief supervised movement break, or using a standing workspace for part of a lesson.

Movement supports need clear boundaries so they do not become disruptive or draw unwanted attention. What is suitable will depend on the classroom, the student's safety needs and the nature of the activity.

Consider assessment conditions carefully

A student who understands course material may find timed tests difficult because of slow task initiation, distractibility or difficulty organising written responses. Depending on school policy and the student's documented needs, possible adjustments may include supervised rest breaks, a quieter room, additional planning

time, or alternatives for demonstrating learning.

Not every student needs altered assessment conditions, and an adjustment that is useful in class may not be appropriate in every exam setting. Schools will need to follow their own policies and, for senior secondary assessment, relevant external requirements.

How to work with the school

A calm, collaborative conversation is usually more productive than trying to resolve every concern by email. Ask for a meeting with the classroom teacher, year-level coordinator or learning support staff member, depending on the school's structure. Bring concise examples of the difficulties and any relevant reports, while recognising that teachers can add important observations from the classroom.

A helpful discussion identifies one or two priority problems first. For example: starting written work, recording homework correctly, and becoming distressed during transitions. Agree on the adjustment, who will put it in place, and when it will be reviewed. A plan that names the action is easier to follow than a general commitment to provide support.

It can help to ask how the school will communicate with home. Weekly contact is useful for some families, while a brief update each fortnight may be enough for others. Daily reporting can unintentionally increase stress for a child or family if it becomes focused only on difficulties. The right level of contact depends on the child's age, the concerns being addressed and the family's circumstances.

When an assessment report can help

A comprehensive ADHD assessment considers current concerns alongside developmental history, school functioning, structured measures and other factors that may affect attention, behaviour, learning or emotional wellbeing. For children and adolescents, information from parents and school is often part of the process.

An assessment report can assist families and schools by describing the areas of difficulty identified, relevant strengths and recommendations for psychological and

educational support. It does not replace the school's own consultation process. Teachers remain best placed to consider how recommendations can be applied in a particular classroom.

Some children have overlapping learning, anxiety, autism or emotional regulation concerns. In these situations, an adjustment plan may need to address more than attention alone. A child who avoids work may be responding to reading difficulty, fear of making mistakes, sensory overload, low mood, or a combination of factors. Careful assessment helps avoid treating every school concern as the same problem.

BNC provides assessment, diagnostic support and psychological therapy for children, adolescents and adults. Where medication is being considered, decisions sit with an appropriate medical prescriber, such as a GP, paediatrician or psychiatrist. Psychological assessment and school planning can occur alongside that medical care.

Keep the plan flexible and respectful

An adjustment is a working arrangement, not a permanent label. What helps in Year 3 may not suit the demands of secondary school, where students have multiple teachers, changing classrooms and more independent work. Similarly, a strategy that supports a difficult term may no longer be needed once routines are established.

Review the plan after a reasonable period and ask practical questions: Is the student starting work more consistently? Are instructions clearer? Is the change manageable for staff? Is the child feeling singled out? If an adjustment is not helping, that is useful information, not a failure by the child, parent or teacher.

The most constructive school plan is one a child can understand without shame: a few clear supports, reviewed with care, that make it easier to participate in the ordinary work of learning.

For more information

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