How to Explain ADHD Assessment to a Child



A child may hear the word “assessment” and imagine a test they can fail. A teenager may worry that adults are trying to find something wrong with them. How to explain ADHD assessment starts with changing that frame: it is a process for understanding how a person pays attention, manages tasks, responds to demands and experiences daily life across settings.

For parents and caregivers, the aim is not to persuade a child that they have ADHD. It is to give them accurate, calm information about why some adults (parents or

teachers) want to understand their experiences better. An assessment may identify ADHD, another explanation for the difficulties, more than one factor, or a need for further information. At BNC, no diagnosis is ever promised; the outcome of the assessment is shered only when the process is complete.

Start with a simple, honest explanation

The explanation should match the child or teenager's age, language and level of concern. Younger children usually need a short explanation focused on what will happen. Older children and teenagers often benefit from more detail, including how their views will be included.

For a child, a parent might say: "We are meeting with a psychologist to understand what could make schoolwork, routines or concentrating easier or harder for you. There are no right or wrong answers; the psychologist will talk with us and may ask you to do some activities."

For a teenager, it may be more appropriate to say: "This assessment looks at attention, organisation, impulsivity and other parts of daily life. It also considers stress, sleep, learning and mood, because these can affect concentration too. It is not about blaming you or deciding who you are."

Keep the language neutral. Avoid describing ordinary behaviour as proof of ADHD, and avoid comments such as "the psychologist will tell us what is wrong". A useful message is that the assessment is designed to build a fuller picture, not to judge effort, intelligence, parenting or character.

Explain what an ADHD assessment involves

Children often cope better when they know the basic plan. It can help to explain that an ADHD assessment is usually made up of several pieces of information rather than one appointment or one questionnaire.

A psychologist may speak with the parent or caregiver about developmental history, including early childhood, health, family circumstances, schooling and day-to-day functioning. They may ask about when particular patterns began, where they occur

and how they affect home, school, friendships or routines.

The child or teenager will usually have time to speak with the psychologist as well. This conversation may cover school, interests, friendships, emotions, sleep and practical tasks. The clinician may use structured questionnaires or rating scales completed by parents, teachers and, where appropriate, the young person. School information can be helpful because ADHD patterns need to be considered across more than one setting, but it should be sought with parent or caregiver consent.

Some assessments also include cognitive or learning measures where there are concerns about learning, processing, memory, language or academic skills. These activities are not a school exam. They help the psychologist understand strengths as well as areas that may need support.

The appointments, forms and information requested will vary. A child with a complex learning history may need a different assessment pathway from a teenager whose main difficulties relate to planning, emotional regulation or completing work. Explaining this variation in advance can prevent the expectation that one short task will provide every answer.

A sentence children can hold onto

For many children, one clear sentence is enough: “You do not have to be perfect at anything today - you just need to be yourself and tell the truth about what things are like.”

That message matters because some children try to give the answer they think an adult wants. Others may worry that saying school is hard will get them into trouble. Letting them know that uncertainty is acceptable can reduce pressure. They can say “I don’t know”, ask for a question to be repeated or take a break if needed.

Be clear about privacy and who will hear what

Older children and teenagers may be especially concerned about confidentiality. It is reasonable to explain that a psychologist will discuss relevant information with parents or caregivers as part of a child or adolescent assessment, while also making

space to hear the young person's perspective directly.

The clinician will explain the limits of privacy in an age-appropriate way, including circumstances where safety concerns need to be shared. Parents can avoid making promises about secrecy that the assessment process cannot keep. A more accurate statement is: "The psychologist will explain what can stay private and what may need to be discussed with the adults supporting you."

It can also help to clarify that an assessment report is not automatically shared with everyone at school. Parents or caregivers can discuss with the clinician what information may be useful to provide, who should receive it and what support may be considered. For teenagers, involving them in these conversations where appropriate can support trust and participation.

How to explain ADHD assessment without creating pressure

The lead-up to an appointment does not need to become a long series of conversations about symptoms. Repeatedly checking whether a child can sit still, remember instructions or finish homework can make them feel watched. It may also change how they approach everyday tasks.

Instead, give practical information close to the appointment. Explain where the appointment will be held, who is likely to be there, whether a parent will stay for part of it and how long it may last. If the appointment is by telehealth, arrange a quiet space, charged device and headphones if useful. The psychologist can advise on the specific format for the assessment.

Parents can also tell children that the family may be asked to bring school reports, previous assessments or examples of work. These documents are not evidence for or against a diagnosis on their own. They provide context about the child's development and functioning over time.

Try not to use the assessment as a consequence or bargaining tool. Phrases such as "You need to behave for the psychologist" can increase anxiety and make the

appointment sound disciplinary. The child does not need coaching on what to say. Honest information, including both good days and difficult days, is more useful than rehearsed answers.

When the child asks, “Do I have ADHD?”

This is a reasonable question, and it does not require a rushed answer. A parent can say: “We do not know yet. The assessment is how we gather information carefully. ADHD is one possibility the psychologist will consider, along with other reasons that attention or daily tasks may be difficult.”

If ADHD is identified, it can be explained as a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a person manages attention, activity, impulses and organisation. It should not be framed as an excuse, a flaw or a fixed limit on what a child can do. If ADHD is not identified, the concerns that led to the assessment still deserve attention. The feedback process may clarify learning needs, emotional wellbeing, sleep, environmental demands or other factors that warrant support.

Children may also ask whether they will need medication. A psychologist can discuss assessment findings and support options, but psychologists do not prescribe. Any medical decisions sit with an appropriate medical prescriber, such as a GP, paediatrician or psychiatrist. It is usually best not to make medication the focus of an initial explanation unless the child raises it.

Preparing for the feedback appointment

Assessment does not end when forms are completed or tasks are finished. The feedback appointment is where the psychologist explains the information gathered, whether diagnostic criteria are met and what the findings mean in daily life. Parents can prepare a child by saying that the family will talk about what was learned and what support might make home, school or routines more manageable.

For some families, the child attends all or part of feedback. This depends on age, maturity, the information being discussed and the clinician’s approach. A younger child may only need a short, strengths-based explanation. An adolescent may wish to

hear more detail and be involved in planning supports.

Where a diagnosis is made, the next steps may include school adjustments, parent support, psychological therapy for related functional difficulties, behavioural strategies, or coordination with a GP, paediatrician or psychiatrist. Where indicated, a clinician may also recommend other assessments or supports. The pathway should be based on the individual findings, not on a one-size-fits-all plan.

A calm explanation leaves room for the child's voice

The most helpful explanation is usually brief, truthful and repeated only as needed. It tells the child what will happen, makes clear that they are not in trouble and leaves room for their own questions. The assessment is one part of understanding their experience, and their perspective belongs in that process.

For more information

Call (03) 9848 9100

Published: 11/10/2026 and updated on: 12/10/2026 by Dr Jacques Duff-PhD; BA Psych; Grad Dip Applied Psychology; FANSA; Clinical Neuroscientist