

# WHEN IS IT ADHD?

Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a mental health diagnosis many parents and educators have heard of or encountered. However, recent research estimates that as many as 1 million school-age children may be misdiagnosed with the disorder ([www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)). ADHD is a difficult disorder to diagnose, having four different subtypes: predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, combined-type, or not otherwise specified (NOS).

If you are concerned your child or student may exhibit symptoms of ADHD, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offer a simple checklist at <http://www.cdc.gov/NCBDDD/adhd/widget/checklist/index.html>. While this can be a useful tool, it is important to remember that it is not a substitute for diagnosis by a qualified medical or mental health professional.

There are many other disorders that children suffer from that have symptoms similar to ADHD. These include anxiety and bipolar disorder, which is why a professional evaluation is the key to an accurate diagnosis. “Anxiety may cause restlessness that can be interpreted as hyperactivity. Or it may bring worries or concerns that cause a child to be inattentive. As anxiety levels increase, the child may appear to be acting quickly or irrationally in order to minimize stress. A parent might label him as impulsive. A superficial assessment might suggest that the child has ADHD, when he really has an anxiety disorder” ([www.additudemag.com](http://www.additudemag.com)).

“With ADHD, a child or teen may have rapid or impulsive speech, physical restlessness, trouble focusing, irritability, and, sometimes, defiant or oppositional behavior. Children or teens with bipolar disorder often have similar behaviors” ([www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)). It is suggested that your child be evaluated by a medical or mental health profession over a period of time, not just one visit. Providing the professional with reports or assessments from teachers and other caregivers can be helpful in determining the correct diagnosis. However, keep in mind that, “About half of all children with attention deficit disorder (ADHD) also have a learning disability, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anger-control difficulties, a motor tic disorder, bipolar disorder, or an anxiety disorder” ([www.additudemag.com](http://www.additudemag.com)). Even with an ADHD diagnosis, the child may have a secondary diagnosis that needs to be considered and addressed.

If you have concerns, it is important to have your child evaluated by a professional, sooner rather than later. As Dr. Mark Mahone, Director of the Department of Neuropsychology at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, warns, “We want to catch ADHD early because it has such a profound effect on learning and academic development.

Children whose symptoms begin in early childhood are at the highest risk for academic failure and grade repetition” ([www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)).

Dr. James Perrin, a pediatrician and spokesman for the American Academy of Pediatrics, suggest that parents get two opinions. "We do recommend there be an independent verification," says Perrin, who has consulted for pharmaceutical companies that make medications for ADHD. "If the diagnosis is ADHD, environmental changes as well as medication are recommended," Perrin says, not medication alone. "It may be the child is in the wrong environment." In addition, Dr. George Kapalka of Monmouth University in Long Branch, NJ, adds that the criteria for diagnosing ADHD require clear indication of impairment in at least two settings in the child's life. "So the diagnosis should never be made based on school problems alone" ([www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)).

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