

What ADHD Students Wish Their Teachers Knew

By Lisa Gridley of the Barrie ADHD Network

Although each child should be treated as an individual with their own strengths, challenges and needs, here is a list of the most commonly experienced issues for students with ADHD.

1. **I have a condition called Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder.** It is a real medical condition which doctors define as impairment to my executive functions (cognitive management system) in my brain. That means that learning is hard for me because executive functions include:

- Organization, prioritizing, estimating time and starting work
- Focusing, sustaining and shifting attention to tasks
- Regulating alertness, sustaining effort and processing speed
- Managing frustration and modulating emotions (worry, disappointment, anger)
- Utilizing working memory and accessing recall
- Monitoring and self-regulating action (behaviours such as impulsiveness, hyperactivity and social skills)

The part of my brain that manages these skills is like an orchestra conductor who tells all the musicians how to play together and on time to make beautiful music. My conductor is having trouble communicating with the musicians and so I need your help.

2. **I am not crazy, lazy, bad or stupid.** In fact, my IQ score is most likely above average to average and many people with ADHD are also gifted. But because my brain is wired differently than regular students, I sometimes feel stupid or bad. Sometimes it's hard for me to admit that I need help. Sometimes it's easier and less humiliating to act like I understand or to act angry to distract you from finding out that I am having trouble and so that the other kids in the class don't know that I'm struggling. I need to know that you won't make fun of me and shame me when I ask for help. Another challenging thing about having ADHD is that one day I can do

something really well but the next day, I can't. Please don't make me feel bad by saying, "I know you can do this if you really try – you did it yesterday." Instead, show me how to get started just as if I was learning it for the very first time. You can also help me by letting me try some of the work but checking it quickly to make sure that I've got the right idea. Don't let me do a bunch of the work wrong because I'll have trouble getting the wrong way out of my mind and I'll be very annoyed that I have to do the work all over again.

3. **Because you cannot see my ADHD, you might have trouble remembering that I need your help.** When you look at me, pretend that I am a blind student and think about how you would feel about helping.
4. **I have a lot of trouble controlling my behaviour sometimes.** Being inside my head is like having several radio stations all playing at the same time so it's hard to just listen to one. It's very stressful and frustrating and so sometimes when you ask me to do something and I respond in a negative way, it's because I simply can't handle any more stress.
5. **You can really help me by pretending that you're my coach.** Good coaches get the best performance from their players by encouraging them, rewarding them and praising them immediately, especially in front of others. Punishment for things that I'm not very good at only makes me feel worse about myself. And please don't embarrass me in front of the class – please talk to me privately about issues. I sometimes have trouble making and keeping friends and responding appropriately to social interactions. Please coach me on how I can do things better. Show me in detail, model it for me - I don't tend to learn well if I'm just told how to do something. And give me praise and encouragement when I try.
6. **To help me remember the rules, please post them somewhere where I can constantly see them.** I'll need your help to know when I'm breaking a rule and reminders and warnings to follow the rules – basically, I need practice to follow the rules. Let me know right away if I'm breaking a rule and let me know what I should be doing instead.
7. **I'll need your help to learn and practice:** organization skills (things like writing assignments in my agenda, planning them out, completing them, and getting them back to you when they're

due), note taking, study skills and test taking strategies. When you mark my work, please look for areas that I am struggling with and show me how I can do better.

8. **It's really hard for me to remember lots of instructions when you give them all at once.** Please give me one instruction at a time. For assignments, it really helps if I have written instructions so I don't have to try and remember everything.
9. **The medication that I am taking helps me to focus and calms my hyperactivity.** But as I grow, my medication may need to be adjusted. You can really help by letting my parents know if you notice that my medication is not working as well as it did.
10. **Even with the help of medication, I still feel the need to move.** Movement helps me to learn. Sometimes it helps if I can stand while you're teaching. Sometimes I really need to work off the energy because it feels like I've got high voltage electrical currents running up and down my arms and legs. Let's develop a private signal that lets you know that I'm really needing a break from sitting still – I could run something to the office for you, hand out or collect papers or wipe off the board. Or you could involve the whole class in a stretch break and no one would know that it's really just to help me.
11. **Do not take away recess or gym as punishments.** I desperately need physical activity several times a day to work off the excess energy that I have and relieve the stress of having to sit still for so long. Without this time to 'blow off steam', I am more likely to have increased hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour.
12. **The other thing that helps is if I have something to do with my hands.** Clay, a stress ball or even elastic helps my body to get rid of the extra energy.
13. **Finding a good seat in your classroom is important.** I may need to sit at the front of the room so that I'm not distracted by what all the other students are doing and so that I'm closer to you when I need help. Or I may do better at the back of the room so that I'm not always turning around to see what's going on behind me. Being at the back also takes away my 'audience' and allows me to stand up if I need to without distracting the other students. I also need to sit somewhere away from other distractions like windows and pencil sharpeners and other

students who are struggling. And it helps if I can sit beside a student who can help me when you're too busy because when I need help, it's hard for me to wait.

14. **If you see that I've lost my focus, please give me a private signal to get me back** or walk by my desk and touch my shoulder. Or say something like, "Now this is very important, so please pay attention." Please don't ever humiliate me by using sarcasm or sayings like "Earth to _____".
15. **I can be very sensitive to small noises and sensations** like the hum of fluorescent lights, the temperature of the room, the tags inside my clothes or the sound of the kid behind me as he writes. Sometimes, I just can't concentrate because these small things are so distracting. It helps if I have a quiet place to go to if I feel the need or if you see that I'm having trouble concentrating but please give me the choice to go there. Do not force me to go there because it will only humiliate me in front of my friends. If you offer this 'quiet place' to the whole class, it helps me to accept the option without feeling centered out.
16. **I have trouble making transitions from one task to another** especially if I'm doing something that I enjoy. Sometimes I can hyper focus and it's hard for me to stop and change tasks. You can help me by giving me advance notice that we will be starting something new in a few minutes. It gives me the time that I need to work on putting the brakes on in my mind. Changing from doing something active to doing seatwork (coming in from recess or gym) is especially hard for me. Help me by slowing me down gradually and rewarding me when I settle quickly.
17. **Handwriting is difficult for me.** Please let me print if I want to. Using a computer is even better because I can think faster than I can write and a computer will help me to get my thoughts down without having to worry about mistakes and organization which can be corrected later.