

THE CHILD ADHD ASSESSMENT GUIDE

Chapter 2

What is ADHD?

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Before deciding whether to seek an assessment, it helps to know what ADHD in children really means. ADHD is a recognised neurodevelopmental condition, not a modern label, a phase, or a question of discipline. This chapter explains it in plain terms, sets out the three presentations, and clears away a few myths that get in the way of understanding your child.

ADHD in plain terms

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The name is a little misleading, because it is less about a shortage of attention and more about how attention is regulated. Children with ADHD can focus intensely on things that grip them, a game or a favourite topic, yet struggle to start or stay with things that do not, such as homework or getting ready in the morning.

It is a neurodevelopmental condition, which means it is part of how the brain has developed from early life. Evidence of traits from childhood is part of the picture, which is one reason a thorough assessment looks at how things have been over time, not just on a single day.

The three presentations

ADHD is usually described in three ways, depending on which traits stand out most. Children can move between them as they grow, and the picture often changes with tiredness, routine and the demands of the school day.

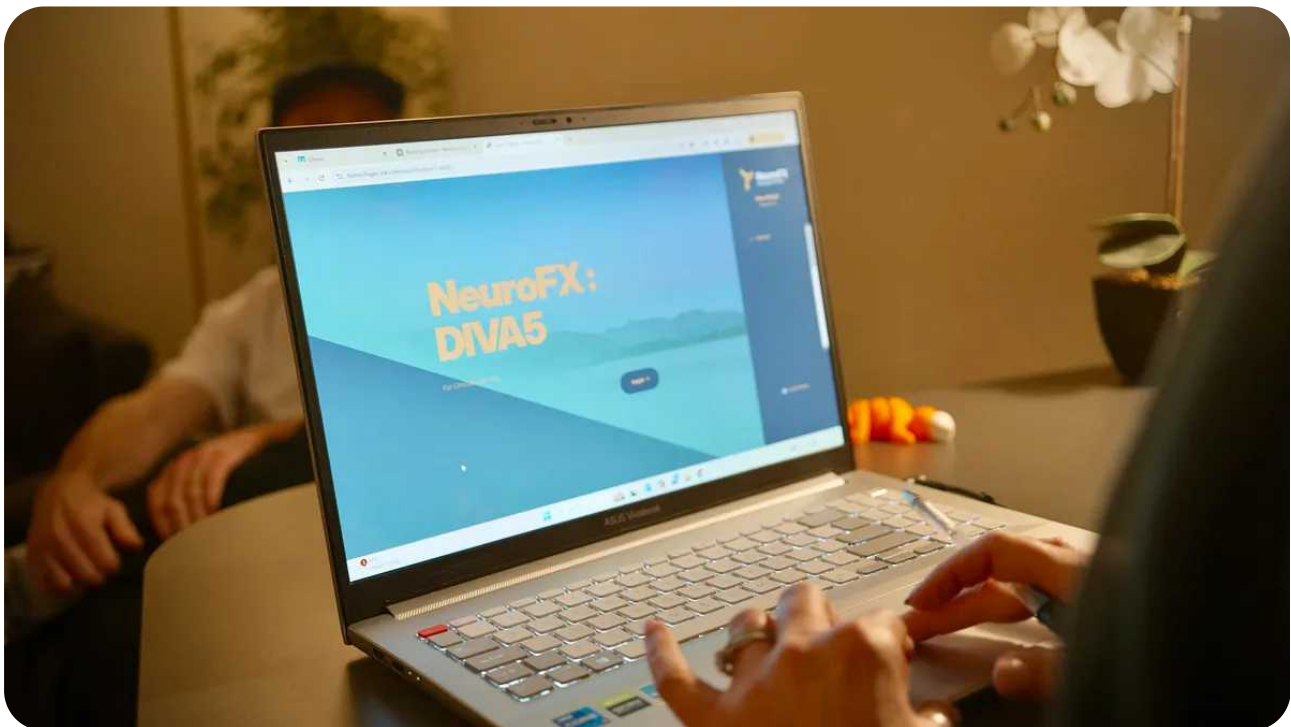
	Mainly inattentive	Mainly hyperactive and impulsive	Combined
In a sentence	Attention drifts, instructions slip, focus is hard to steer.	Always on the go, acting first, finding it hard to wait.	A mix of both, in varying measure.
Day to day	Daydreaming, losing things, forgetting what was just asked.	Fidgeting, interrupting, struggling to sit still or take turns.	Some days look dreamy, others restless.
Why it gets missed	Quiet and internal, so it rarely disrupts a classroom.	Mistaken for being naughty, disruptive or simply lively.	Traits are read as character, not a pattern to explore.

The same condition can present in three different ways in children.

Myths worth letting go of

A few ideas about ADHD are simply wrong, and they keep families from seeking help:

- **It is just bad behaviour or poor parenting.** ADHD is about how the brain regulates attention and impulse, not about discipline or how you parent.
- **A quiet child cannot have it.** The mainly inattentive presentation is easy to miss, because it rarely disrupts a classroom.
- **They will simply grow out of it.** Traits change with age, but for many children they continue into the teenage years and beyond.
- **It is caused by sugar or screens.** These can affect any child's behaviour, but they do not cause ADHD, which is neurodevelopmental.
- **Every child is a bit like this.** Most children are restless or distractible sometimes. ADHD is a persistent pattern that affects several areas of life.



Structured, validated tools sit at the heart of a thorough assessment.

It is not about effort or intelligence

ADHD says nothing about how clever or capable a child is. Many children with ADHD are bright and creative, which is part of why their difficulties can be overlooked for so long. Some learn to hold themselves together at school and let everything out at home, so what you see may be very different from what their teacher sees.

ADHD also rarely travels alone. Anxiety, low mood and sleep difficulties often sit alongside it. A good assessment always considers other explanations for the difficulties, so that the answer you receive is the right one rather than the first one. You can read more about [how ADHD shows up in children](#) in the next chapter.

Where the understanding comes from

Our guidance follows [NICE guideline NG87](#), the national standard for recognising and managing ADHD. That matters, because it means an assessment is not one clinician's opinion. It is a structured process measured against an agreed national framework, drawing on more than one viewpoint, including yours and the school's. If you are wondering whether you recognise these traits in yourself too, there is a [companion guide for adults](#).

Key takeaways

- ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition about how attention and impulse are regulated, not about discipline or parenting.
- It is described in three presentations: mainly inattentive, mainly hyperactive and impulsive, and combined.
- It can look very different at home and at school, and quiet, inattentive children are easily missed.
- ADHD says nothing about intelligence or effort, and a good assessment always considers other explanations too.

Common questions

At what age can a child be assessed for ADHD?

We offer assessments for children from age 6 upwards. Traits are often present earlier, but a structured assessment is most reliable once a child is school age.

What are the three presentations of ADHD?

Mainly inattentive, mainly hyperactive and impulsive, and combined. They describe which traits stand out most, and children can shift between them as they grow.

Can a well-behaved child at school still have ADHD?

Yes. Some children hold themselves together at school and struggle more at home, and the quiet, inattentive presentation rarely disrupts a classroom, so it is easily missed.

Does ADHD come with other conditions?

Often. Anxiety, low mood and sleep difficulties commonly sit alongside it. A thorough assessment considers these so the conclusion you reach is accurate.

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This guide is general information, not a substitute for individual clinical advice, and it cannot diagnose ADHD or any other condition. If you are concerned about yourself or your child,

please speak to your GP or arrange a professional assessment. NeuroFX is a CQC-registered clinic and our guidance follows NICE guideline NG87.