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Signs of autism and ADHD at school

What it can look like in pupils of different ages, and what to write down when you notice it. No single sign means a pupil is autistic or has ADHD. Look for patterns that persist over time and across settings.

	Autism	ADHD
Early years and KS1 Ages 4 to 7	• Plays alone or alongside others rather than with them; may line up or sort toys • Distressed by changes to routine, transitions or unexpected noise • Little back-and-forth in conversation; may repeat phrases or follow their own topic • Strong reactions to sounds, textures, food or clothing	• Finds it very hard to sit for carpet time or wait their turn • Moves from activity to activity without finishing • Acts before thinking: grabbing, calling out, running off • Seems not to listen, even when spoken to directly
Key Stage 2 Ages 7 to 11	• Finds friendships hard to make or keep; may prefer adults or younger children • Takes language literally; misses jokes, sarcasm or implied instructions • Intense, focused interests they may talk about at length • Holds it together in class, then has meltdowns at home (masking)	• Starts work but loses track; unfinished or careless work despite clear ability • Often loses equipment and forgets homework or instructions • Fidgets, taps, leaves their seat or talks a lot • Daydreams and drifts off. Common in girls and often missed
Secondary Ages 11 to 16	• Struggles with unstructured time: corridors, lunch, room or teacher changes • Socially exhausted; may withdraw, seem anxious or avoid school • Rigid about rules and fairness; finds group work difficult • Copies peers to fit in and can look fine at school, especially girls	• Disorganised: missed deadlines, trouble planning revision or long tasks • Restlessness turns inward; easily bored and seeks stimulation • Impulsive choices, risk-taking and emotional outbursts • Achieves well below their ability

What to note down

What you saw. Describe the behaviour, not a label: "left seat 6 times in 20 minutes", not "hyperactive".

When and where. Time of day, lesson, and setting: classroom, playground, transitions.

What came before. Demands, changes, noise, light or crowding.

How often. Dates and frequency, so a pattern can be seen over weeks.

What helps. Adjustments and strategies that make a difference.

At home too? What parents and carers notice outside school.

Strengths and interests. What the pupil enjoys and does well. It helps build a full picture.

GOOD TO KNOW

Autism and ADHD often occur together, and signs can overlap.

Girls and quieter pupils are often recognised later.

A pupil may behave very differently at school and at home.

NEXT STEPS

Share your notes with your SENCO and the pupil's parents or carers. Families can ask their GP about a referral for an assessment.

This guide supports observation. It is not a diagnostic tool.

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