

Looking Beyond the Behaviour

Understanding what your child may be communicating - and how to respond with compassion, connection and practical support.

When a child is shouting, refusing, interrupting, running away from a task, forgetting something for the tenth time or appearing not to listen, it is understandable for a parent to focus on the behaviour that is visible. But ADHD can affect attention, inhibition, working memory, time awareness, emotional regulation, motivation and the ability to shift from one activity to another. The behaviour is real, and boundaries still matter, but the behaviour may be the end of a much longer story. Looking underneath it can help a parent move from “Why are you doing this?” towards “What is making this difficult right now?”

What you may see	What may be underneath	A different first response
Ignoring or not responding	Attention locked elsewhere, slow processing, working-memory overload, or the instruction was too long.	Move closer, gain attention gently and give one clear instruction.
Refusing to start	Task-initiation difficulty, uncertainty, perfectionism, overwhelm or not knowing the first step.	Make the first step tiny and, where helpful, begin alongside them.
Exploding over something small	Accumulated demands, tiredness, hunger, sensory load, frustration or emotional overload.	Reduce language and demands first. Problem-solve after regulation returns.
Constantly forgetting	Working-memory and prospective-memory difficulties rather than lack of care.	Put the reminder outside the brain: visual cues, baskets, alarms, checklists and routines.

The aim is not to excuse everything

Understanding ADHD does not mean a child never hears “no”, never repairs hurt, or never learns responsibility. It means we teach those things in a way that takes account of the skills the child currently has. A consequence cannot teach a skill that has not yet developed. If a child repeatedly struggles with remembering equipment, stopping an impulse, beginning homework or leaving the house on time, ask what support would make the required skill more achievable. Support can then be reduced or changed as independence develops.

Before responding, check the load

A useful parent check is: **body, brain, environment, demand**. Is your child tired, hungry, in pain or physically uncomfortable? Is their attention already absorbed? Is the room noisy, bright, crowded or unpredictable? Has there been a difficult school day? Are they being asked to stop something rewarding and begin something effortful? Is the request actually several instructions bundled together? These questions do not tell you exactly why a behaviour happened, but they can reveal pressure that was invisible a few seconds earlier.

What helps in the moment

When emotions are high, fewer words are usually more useful than a lecture. Keep your voice steady where you can, shorten sentences, remove unnecessary demands and allow physical space if that is what your child needs. Some children regulate through movement; others need quiet, pressure, familiarity or simply time. Avoid forcing an immediate explanation while the child is overwhelmed. “Tell me why you did that” may require reflection, language and impulse control at exactly the moment those capacities are least available.

1. Connect

Use the child's name, come to their level if appropriate and communicate safety without crowding them.

2. Reduce

Lower noise, language and competing demands. Decide what actually has to happen now and what can wait.

3. Make it concrete

Replace vague instructions such as “get ready” with one visible next step: “Shoes on.”

4. Regulate before reasoning

Save teaching, consequences, explanations and repair conversations for when the nervous system is calmer.

Afterwards: repair rather than shame

Once everyone is calmer, return to what happened without making the child's character the problem. Separate the person from the behaviour: “You were really overwhelmed, and hitting still isn't safe.” Explore what happened before the difficult moment, identify the point where support might have helped, and agree one small strategy for next time. If the parent shouted or became overwhelmed too, repair can go both ways. A parent can acknowledge their own response without abandoning the boundary. This models accountability rather than perfection.

Look for patterns, not isolated incidents

For one or two weeks, notice when difficulties are most likely: particular times of day, transitions, homework, getting out of the house, hunger, poor sleep, noisy environments, sibling conflict or the period immediately after school. Also record what helped. The purpose is not to keep a behaviour score. It is to discover the conditions in which your child finds regulation and executive functioning harder or easier.

A simple parent reflection

What happened just before?	_____
What might my child have been finding difficult?	_____
What did I try?	_____
What helped even slightly?	_____
What could we change before this situation happens again?	_____

Supporting the parent matters too

Parenting a child with ADHD can involve repeated school contact, forgotten belongings, disrupted routines, emotional storms, sibling tensions and the feeling that ordinary tasks require extraordinary effort. Advice that sounds simple on paper can be difficult to use when you are exhausted. You are allowed to consider your own regulation as part of the support plan. If a situation is safe, taking a moment before responding, sharing responsibilities where possible, simplifying routines and choosing which battles genuinely matter can protect the relationship as well as the parent's capacity.

Try not to judge your parenting by whether difficult behaviour disappears. A more useful question can be: Is my child gradually gaining language for what happens inside them? Are we recovering more safely? Are we learning which supports work? Can we repair after hard moments? Progress may look like an outburst becoming shorter, a child accepting help sooner, a parent recognising overload earlier, or one transition becoming easier.

Practical changes to try this week

Choose only one or two. Put a visual reminder where the action happens rather than repeatedly calling it from another room. Break one recurring instruction into single steps. Give a transition warning before stopping a preferred activity. Create a predictable landing period after school before questions and demands. Prepare commonly forgotten items in one consistent place. Notice and name effort specifically: "You came back and tried again," rather than relying only on general praise.

When additional help may be useful

Seek professional or school support when difficulties are significantly affecting learning, relationships, sleep, family functioning, safety or the child's emotional wellbeing. In the UK this might involve the school SENCO, GP, paediatric or ADHD service, or other professionals already involved with the child. Urgent help should be sought if there is immediate risk of serious harm. This resource is educational and supportive; it is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological or safeguarding advice.

Further reading

Useful starting points include NHS information on ADHD and support, NICE guideline NG87 on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and parent/carer resources from the ADHD Foundation. Books parents may wish to explore include *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare, and *The Explosive Child* by Ross W. Greene. No single approach will fit every child; use resources as ideas to test and adapt rather than as a measure of whether you are parenting "correctly."

A message for parents

Behind behaviour there is often a child trying to manage more than we can immediately see - and beside that child there may be a parent trying very hard too. You do not have to understand every difficult moment perfectly. Curiosity, repair, consistency and connection can sit alongside boundaries. Sometimes the most useful change begins not with asking how to stop a behaviour, but with asking what support would make the situation easier to manage next time.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 1