

When My Child Can't Get Started

Understanding executive functioning, task initiation and how to reduce conflict at home.

A child can know what they need to do, want to do it, and still feel unable to begin. For many children with ADHD, the difficult part is not understanding the task but activating the brain to start it. Adults may see delay, wandering, talking, avoidance, staring at the page or becoming upset. The child may be experiencing something very different: too many steps, no obvious starting point, low interest, fear of getting it wrong, difficulty shifting attention, poor time awareness or an overwhelmed nervous system.

Repeatedly hearing “just get on with it” can turn a skill difficulty into a relationship battle. Support works better when we make the starting point clearer, reduce the amount the child has to hold in mind and help them create enough momentum for the next step.

Task initiation is an executive-function skill

Executive functions help us organise behaviour towards a goal. They include holding information in mind, inhibiting impulses, shifting attention, planning, monitoring progress and getting started. ADHD can affect these processes. This means a child may manage a task easily on one day and appear completely stuck on another. Interest, urgency, novelty, fatigue, stress and the environment can all change how accessible those skills are.

What adults may see	What may be happening	What may help
“I’ll do it in a minute.”	Time feels vague; the future task has not become immediate enough to activate.	Use a visible timer and define exactly what happens when it ends.
Sitting in front of homework but doing nothing.	The task feels too large, unclear or mentally effortful.	Identify the first tiny action: open the book, write the date, read one question.
Getting distracted while preparing.	Each object or thought competes for attention and the original goal drops from working memory.	Use a short visual sequence and reduce unnecessary items in the space.
Becoming angry when prompted.	The child may already feel stuck, ashamed, pressured or overloaded.	Reduce repeated verbal prompting; offer a calm choice about how to begin.

Make the beginning smaller

When a task feels enormous, do not begin by explaining the whole task again. Shrink the entry point. “Tidy your room” might become “put the dirty clothes in the basket.” “Do your homework” might become “bring your bag to the table.” “Get ready for school” might become “put your socks on.” Once movement has begun, the next step can be introduced. This is scaffolding, not doing everything for the child.

Reducing the battle around starting

Parents can easily become the child's external reminder system: asking, reminding, asking again, becoming frustrated and eventually raising the intensity. The child may then begin only when the parent is visibly upset. Over time, both people can become trapped in a cycle where conflict becomes the cue that finally creates enough urgency to start.

The aim is to move the cue away from escalating parental emotion and into the environment. A checklist by the door, an alarm, a written first step, a consistent homework station or a “ready basket” can carry some of the remembering. The parent can then support the system rather than having to be the system.

1. Get alongside, not above

Instead of calling instructions repeatedly from another room, approach, connect and establish what the child thinks the task is.

2. Find the stuck point

Ask: “Which bit feels hardest to start?” The answer may be choosing, finding equipment, understanding the instruction or stopping the current activity.

3. Create a visible first step

Write or show one action. A child who cannot hold a sequence in working memory may cope much better when the sequence exists outside their head.

4. Use company when it helps

Some children start more easily with another person nearby. You do not have to complete the task for them; quiet presence can provide structure and momentum.

Motivation is not the same as caring

A child may desperately want good marks, a tidy bedroom or to stop being late and still struggle to activate for tasks that are repetitive, distant in reward or mentally demanding. Avoid using the difficulty as proof that the child “doesn't care.” Instead, make the reward or endpoint more immediate, introduce novelty where appropriate, use short work periods, build in movement and acknowledge completion of small stages.

Transitions can be the hidden problem

Sometimes the child is not resisting the next activity so much as struggling to disengage from the current one. Give transition warnings, make the stopping point predictable and avoid adding several new instructions during the switch. A brief transition ritual - save the game, drink of water, stretch, then sit down - can create a bridge between activities.

A practical plan for one recurring task

Choose one situation that regularly causes conflict. Do not try to fix mornings, homework, bedtime and bedroom tidying simultaneously. Observe the task and identify exactly where the process breaks down. Then design support around that point.

1. The task we are working on	
2. The point where starting usually breaks down	
3. The smallest possible first step	
4. What can become visual instead of verbal?	
5. What distraction can we reduce?	
6. Would movement, a timer or company help?	
7. How will we notice effort and progress?	

Language that can reduce pressure

Try replacing “Why haven’t you started?” with “Let’s find the first step.” Replace “I’ve told you five times” with “The reminder isn’t working - let’s make it visible.” Replace “You know how to do this” with “I know you understand it; getting started seems to be the difficult bit.” These changes do not mean parents must speak perfectly. They simply shift the conversation from blame towards problem-solving.

When support becomes independence

The goal of scaffolding is not permanent dependence. Once a strategy is working, involve the child in deciding what they can take over. Perhaps the parent initially creates the checklist, then the child ticks it independently, and later the child helps rewrite it. Independence often develops through supported practice rather than through suddenly removing support.

When to seek additional support

If task-initiation and executive-function difficulties are significantly affecting education, relationships, self-esteem, sleep or family functioning, discuss them with the professionals involved with your child. In the UK this may include the school’s SENCO, GP, paediatric or ADHD service. Difficulties that look like ADHD can also be affected by anxiety, learning differences, sleep, sensory needs and other factors, so individual assessment matters.

A message for parents

When you have asked repeatedly and nothing seems to happen, frustration is human. But a child who cannot begin may already be frustrated with themselves. You do not have to remove every demand or complete tasks for them. Sometimes the most powerful support is to make the beginning small enough to reach, stay beside them while momentum builds, and recognise that starting can be a skill in its own right.

Further reading and guidance

Useful sources include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. For practical executive-function ideas, parents may also find *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare useful. This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.