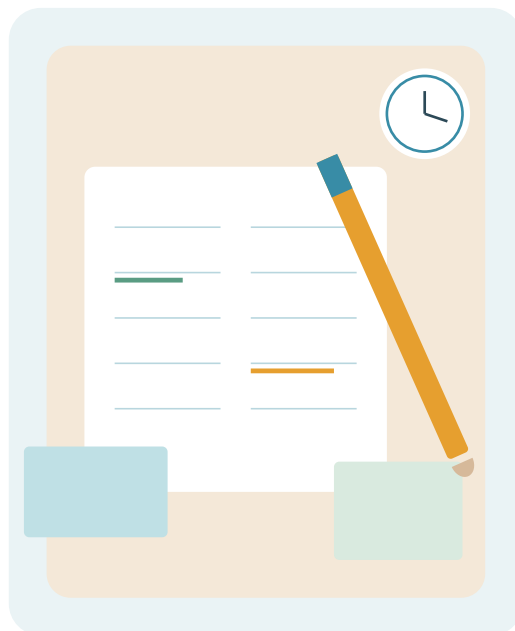


Recognising and Supporting Girls with ADHD

A concise pocket size guide to noticing, understanding and supporting girls with ADHD at school.



FOR TEACHERS, SENCOs AND SCHOOL STAFF

Notice the signs. Support learning. Partner with the pupil and family.

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What ADHD can look like in girls

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition. It may affect attention, activity and impulse control, but it does not look the same in every child. A girl may lose the thread of instructions, forget equipment, struggle to begin work, act quickly before thinking, or find it difficult to organise several steps. One behaviour on one day does not establish ADHD; a qualified clinician considers the pattern, its impact and the child's development. [1,2]

Some girls show quieter or less disruptive difficulties. They may daydream, reread a page repeatedly, miss part of an instruction, or wait to see what classmates do before starting. A pupil can understand the lesson and still have difficulty recording, organising or finishing the work. Good marks, politeness or strong verbal skills do not by themselves show how much effort or adult support is involved.

Masking and compensating can make needs less visible. A girl may copy peers, over-prepare, hide confusion, avoid asking for help or work late to meet expectations. She may seem to cope at school and then become tearful, irritable or exhausted at home. These experiences can have many causes, and not every quiet or anxious girl has ADHD. Use them as reasons to ask thoughtful questions, not to label her.

Ask the young person what is hard and what helps. Use her preferred language for ADHD, and make room for her to disagree with adult interpretations. The aim is to understand this particular child and remove barriers while maintaining appropriate expectations. Support with clear instructions, predictable routines and task steps can begin before an assessment is complete. [1,2]

Do not judge need by whether a pupil can manage once. Ask how reliable the skill is across lessons, how much prompting it takes and what happens after the effort. A girl may complete a task during a quiet one-to-one session yet lose track in a noisy classroom or when several deadlines arrive together. Write down the conditions that helped so adults can repeat them. If she needs a longer recovery after school, include that in the picture too; it may show that the school day is taking more out of her than grades alone suggest.

The way a difficulty appears can change as expectations grow. A younger child may rely on a parent to pack and remember; an older pupil may be expected to manage several subjects, deadlines and social demands independently. The need can become more visible at a transition even when the child has always worked hard. Ask about the history of the pattern, not just the most recent term. Include what the child does well, what takes extra time and what support has been needed to sustain achievement. This protects her from being judged only by a sudden dip in performance.

IN PRACTICE

Think of one recent school moment. Write down what the task required, what the girl did, what she said it felt like and what helped. Keep observations factual and private; include a strength or success as well as the difficulty.

REFLECT

What might adults be seeing, and what effort might be hidden?

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The school day: attention, effort and emotions

School asks a pupil to listen, remember, switch, wait, organise materials, tolerate noise, manage time and work with other people, often in quick succession. ADHD can make these executive demands less dependable. A girl may know what she wants to do but lose track of the first step, underestimate the time, forget what comes next or become stuck when instructions are broad. This gap between intention and action is not proof that she does not care.

Attention can vary with interest, clarity, urgency, fatigue and surroundings. A child may focus intently on a compelling activity and still struggle to direct attention towards repetitive or uncertain work. Compare the conditions in which she succeeds with those in which she gets stuck. A written first step, brief check-in or quieter place may change the outcome. This is useful information about access, not evidence that she can simply choose to concentrate in every setting.

Feelings can rise quickly when effort has accumulated. Frustration, worry, shame, rejection sensitivity or overwhelm may appear as tears, sharp words, silence, leaving the task or a need to be alone. These responses are not unique to ADHD, and emotions should not be reduced to a symptom list. Ask what happened just before the change and what the pupil experienced. Offer time to recover before expecting a detailed explanation.

Friendships and group work can add another layer: remembering social cues, handling interruptions, noticing when a joke has gone too far and repairing a misunderstanding. A girl may work hard to fit in while worrying about making a mistake. Check privately how relationships feel rather than assuming that having friends means everything is easy. Notice whether a predictable partner, explicit group roles or a quiet break helps.

Where possible, build recovery and predictability into the day before the pupil reaches overload. A brief check-in after a busy transition, access to a quiet place or a clear preview of a timetable change can reduce the amount she must hold in mind. Give feedback privately and specifically. Instead of 'pay attention', say which part to look at next. If she becomes upset, reduce questions until she is ready to talk. A calm adult can help her name the barrier later and practise a response for next time.

A practical way to support task initiation is to begin beside the pupil, not to repeat the full assignment. Point to the materials, name the first action and check back after a short interval. If she is already engaged, agree how she will know when to switch. For longer work, break the task into small checkpoints and make the deadline visible. Avoid using an unfinished task as proof of low ability or motivation. If work is persistently late, ask whether the task is clear, the workload manageable and the recording method accessible before adding consequences.

IN PRACTICE

Choose one demanding point in the day. Break it into the steps the pupil must manage, then circle the step most likely to get lost. Ask her to choose one cue or support to try.

REFLECT

When does the school day take the most effort, even if the difficulty is not obvious?

Listen, notice patterns and protect dignity

Begin with a concrete example rather than a judgement about character. 'The task was started after the class moved on, and the first step needed repeating' can be checked and acted on. 'She is careless' or 'she is not trying' assumes a reason that may not be true. Record what happened before and after, the classroom conditions, what adults tried and what changed. Use the same brief format across a few situations so patterns are easier to compare.

The pupil's view is essential. Explain why you are asking, who will see the notes and what may be shared. Let her answer aloud, write, point to a prompt or come back later. Ask what she finds hardest, which support feels helpful, and whether any strategy makes her feel singled out. Give her a chance to correct the adult summary. Confidentiality and information sharing should follow school policy and safeguarding duties.

Look at frequency, duration, context and impact across time. One forgotten book, emotional day or unfinished assignment does not prove ADHD. Similar difficulties can also relate to anxiety, sleep, health, learning differences, bullying, grief or circumstances outside school; several needs can overlap. Keep a balanced record that includes interests, successful conditions and the amount of support or recovery involved. A specialist uses developmental history and information from more than one setting as part of a careful assessment. [1]

Avoid turning ordinary classroom moments into tests. Do not deliberately remove support to see whether she fails, or ask her to prove distress in public. Instead, offer a reasonable support and review whether access improves. If adults disagree about what an event means, note the different views and focus on a safe practical step that can be tried. A supportive conversation leaves the young person with more dignity and choice, not a fixed label.

Adults may hold different views because they see the pupil in different settings. Family might observe long homework battles while school sees completed work; the child may report that she is copying others to avoid standing out. These accounts can all be true. Ask what changes across setting, task, time of day and support. Keep disagreement respectful and focus on what the pupil experiences. If she discloses bullying, harm or a safety concern, follow the school's safeguarding procedure and explain what information must be passed on.

Try language that invites her expertise: 'Which part is easiest to lose track of?' 'Would a written first step help?' 'Do you want a quiet check-in or would that feel too public?' Give time for an answer and accept that she may not know yet. An adult can offer a small experiment and ask permission to review it. If she prefers not to use a visible support, explore discreet alternatives. The young person should not have to accept an adjustment that makes her feel exposed in order to receive help.

IN PRACTICE

Use a short record: date and lesson; task; what happened; the pupil's view; support tried; what changed; next question. Review it with her and invite corrections before sharing relevant information with family or clinicians.

REFLECT

How can I make it easier for her to tell me that a strategy is not working?

Classroom support that reduces friction

Make instructions brief, specific and available in more than one form. Say the pupil's name, give one or two steps, show the first action and check understanding privately. A written outline, model answer or checklist can reduce the need to hold a long direction in memory. Break extended work into visible parts with short check-ins and realistic time cues. Tell her what 'finished' looks like, including where to hand work in.

Support organisation by keeping systems simple and close to the action. A visual schedule, labelled tray, equipment list or single planner can help when the pupil can see and use it. Practise how to use the system together, then fade adult prompts gradually when it is reliable. Multiple apps, alarms and colour codes can become another demand. Ask the girl which cue she will notice and whether the routine works when she is tired or rushed.

Offer movement, brief reset time or access to a lower-stimulation space when these address the barrier. Reduce avoidable copying, noise or uncertainty where possible. Give advance warning before transitions and say what is changing and what will stay the same. For overwhelm, lower language demands, allow recovery and agree how she can signal that she needs help. Check that the strategy is discreet enough to protect her privacy and does not remove learning or connection unnecessarily.

For homework, help identify the first step and estimate the time before assuming refusal. Coordinate expectations between home and school so the pupil is not managing conflicting systems. Review support with her: what helped, what felt uncomfortable and what she wants to try next. Reasonable adjustments and school-based support can be discussed while assessment is being considered; follow local SEND arrangements and the young person's existing plan. [2]

Adjustments work best when the pupil understands them and can use them without having to disclose personal information in front of peers. A checklist can be available to everyone; a prompt can be placed discreetly on a desk; movement can be planned rather than granted only after distress. Check whether the support improves access to learning and belonging, not just quiet behaviour. If a strategy makes her feel watched or different, listen and find another way. Record who will provide the adjustment so it does not depend on one adult remembering informally.

Adjustments need enough time and consistency to be evaluated. Agree a short trial and avoid changing many things at once. Ask whether the pupil can access the support when the named adult is away, and what happens during supply cover or timetable changes. If the support reduces distress but makes a lesson inaccessible, revise it. If she continues to struggle, do not keep the same plan only because adults have already invested in it. A review is a chance to learn from her experience and adapt the environment, not to decide whether she is grateful enough.

IN PRACTICE

Pick one adjustment tied to one observed barrier. Name who will provide it, when it will be used and a review date. Ask the pupil to rate whether it helped and whether she wants to keep it.

REFLECT

Which change would reduce effort without lowering the pupil's sense of agency?

Assessment, next steps and a simple plan

If concerns persist and affect learning, relationships or wellbeing, discuss them with the family and the school's SENCO or SENDCo in line with local procedures. A family may speak with a GP or ask about a referral route. In England, the NHS advises families to speak with a GP or SENCO about an ADHD assessment when support at home and school is not helping; support should continue while a child is waiting. Service pathways vary across the UK. [2]

A specialist assessment is not based on one teacher's opinion or a single checklist. It considers developmental history, symptoms, impact, information from relevant settings and other possible or co-occurring needs. School observations can be valuable when they describe real tasks, barriers, supports and outcomes. Share information through agreed channels, explain what is being sent and include the pupil's perspective where appropriate. Do not promise a diagnosis or treatment outcome.

While questions are being explored, keep practical support in place. Agree a small plan with the pupil: one barrier, one action at home or school, one named adult and a review date. Include how she can request help and what happens if the adult is unavailable. If a strategy fails, adjust it rather than treating the outcome as a lack of effort. Celebrate self-advocacy and problem-solving as well as completed work.

Quick check-in: The situation I want to understand is _____. The pupil says _____. We will try _____. The person responsible is _____. We will review on _____. The pupil can ask for help by _____. Record only information needed to support her, and use current professional guidance for assessment, medication or care decisions. This pocket guide is educational information, not an individual assessment or treatment plan.

At a review, ask the pupil what she wants adults to keep, change or stop. A short written summary can include what she notices, what support is being tried, who is responsible and when the group will check back. A referral does not pause the need for classroom support, and school observations do not replace specialist assessment. Keep source links available and confirm current local referral processes with the NHS or education service. If there are urgent concerns about her safety or health, use the appropriate safeguarding or clinical route rather than waiting for a routine review.

When discussing next steps, keep strengths and support needs together. A girl may be imaginative, funny, persistent or compassionate and still need structured help with planning. Strengths do not cancel disability-related barriers; support does not erase her individuality. Let her ask questions about assessment and explain that the purpose is to understand how she experiences daily life. Avoid promising that diagnosis will automatically provide a particular service. Share the current source links with family and confirm local referral arrangements, then agree who will keep classroom support in place while the adults wait for further advice.

QUICK SOURCES

[1] NICE guideline NG87: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng87> · [2] NHS ADHD in children and young people: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/adhd-children-teenagers/>

IN PRACTICE

Before a meeting, bring two or three factual examples, one thing the pupil says helps and one question you want answered. Ask who will coordinate the next action and when you will hear back.

REFLECT

What is one change the pupil could notice by the end of next week?