

If medication is prescribed, it's a good idea for parents to ask questions like: How will medication help? How will I know the medication is working? Are there any side effects of the medication? How long will he or she need to take the medication? Are there any alternatives to medication?

For more information, contact Learning Links, 12-14 Pindari Road, Peakhurst NSW 2210. Tel: (02) 9534 1710.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

Helping children with concentration problems

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It's normal for children to be easily distracted and have trouble concentrating - like many other things, the ability to concentrate and pay attention is a skill that improves with time.

But some children have more difficulty concentrating than others - compared to other children they're more easily distracted from homework and other tasks, for instance. There can be many reasons for this. A child might be anxious or upset about something, or be having difficulty adjusting to a change in their life like a new school, a new house or a change in their family. Children who have had traumatic experiences in the past may also have concentration problems.

But sometimes the cause may be a problem known as Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD, which affects both boys and girls. The cause of ADD (sometimes called Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD) isn't known, but it's thought to affect between three and five per cent of people. ADD isn't a disease, but a term which describes a group of learning and behaviour problems. It's a very complex problem involving emotional as well as physical factors - a person's ability to concentrate can be strongly affected by their emotions.

According to Tracey Hawthorne Said, an education counsellor with Learning Links (The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities) there are many signs that may suggest ADD. These include when a child can't concentrate on one task or game for a reasonable length of time or can't listen carefully to what others are saying, especially if the other person is using long or complex sentences. Children with ADD are often very impulsive. They say or do things without stopping and thinking first. They may have difficulty waiting their turn in games or group activities. Sometimes they're unusually overactive - they

can't sit still without fidgeting or squirming, and find it hard to sit or stand in one place without moving around. Children with ADD may also find it hard to get on with children their own age, and to do as well as they could at school. They may also find it hard to feel good about themselves - especially if their behaviour often gets them into trouble at home and school.

It's important to remember that all children can show some of these signs some of the time, but when a child has many of these characteristics - and if they interfere with his or her ability to learn - it's a good idea to get professional advice. Your GP can refer you to a paediatrician or psychiatrist specialising in diagnosing and treating ADD.

Although treatment may involve medication to improve some of the symptoms, this isn't a cure for ADD. Medication alone won't make difficult behaviour disappear, solve family problems or make children better at reading or maths. But it may help children concentrate better, which may help them with schoolwork. However, it's also very important for parents to become involved in helping children improve their behaviour. In fact many experts on ADD believe it's better to first try and teach children skills to control their behaviour and see if that works - and then use medication only if other methods fail.

Because ADD can easily be confused with other problems, including other learning disabilities, it's important to get a correct diagnosis. A paediatrician or psychiatrist should check a child's symptoms thoroughly with both the school and the parents. He or she should also ask the parents if there are particular things, which seem to trigger the child's behaviour, and ask how the parents react to this behaviour. These are all important steps to take before medication is prescribed.