

# Children with mild attention problems 'fall behind their peers at school'

April 29 2016

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Young children with mild attention problems can go unnoticed at primary school and fall behind their peers academically, according to new research published today.

The study by researchers at Nottingham and Durham Universities calls for teachers and parents to work together to identify these children and help them manage their learning better in class.

The findings show that the progress of children with mild attention problems at the age of five could be around three months behind their peers by the time they reach the end of [primary school](#).

In one of the largest studies to date in this field, the attainment and behaviour of 46,369 children from 1,812 primary schools in England was analysed. The research is published in the academic journal

*Learning and Individual Differences.*

Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Kapil Sayal from The University of Nottingham's School of Medicine said: "Inattentive behaviour is one of the features of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is already well known that the academic attainment of children with severe attention problems or those diagnosed with ADHD can suffer but children with mild difficulties in attention may be slipping through the net.

"Inattentive behaviours, such as being easily distracted, not following through instructions and being forgetful, can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint as being specific problems with attention and different to typical behaviours of [young children](#)."

Dr Christine Merrell, Director of Research at the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at Durham University, said: "It is clear from our findings that early detection of these mild attention difficulties is crucial so that teachers and parents can help the child reach their potential. As is so often the case, the earlier we can intervene, the better our chances are of addressing the issues. It is however important to say that not all children with mild attention problems will fall behind academically as each individual child is different."

In the study, children's early reading and mathematics were assessed at the start of school using a baseline assessment, called PIPS, and again at the end of primary school through the Key Stage 2 statutory tests. Teachers' ratings of the children's behaviour were collected at the end of the Reception year using behaviour scales similar to those used to assess for ADHD.

The study also looked at the impact of hyperactivity and impulsivity on children's academic results, two of the other characteristics of ADHD.

Hyperactivity in children did not negatively or positively influence attainment but impulsivity showed as having a small positive impact on academic progress.

Research has already found that early identification and intervention can improve children's progress in reading and maths. The researchers have produced guidance for schools on teaching and classroom management strategies which have shown to help children with [attention problems](#) as well as all children in class.

The strategies, which are often already used by teachers generally in the classroom, include presenting tasks in bite-size chunks, providing visual prompts through wall charts or posters, and letting children work in pairs. However, the researchers recommend using these techniques more often and in a systematic way with this group of children.

The researchers point out that a child's behaviour in the first year of school is likely to change and some children may only behave in certain ways temporarily while they settle into school, and as a result the attainment of these children may not be affected in the long term.

The research team is continuing to track the study's cohort of [children](#) and will analyse their academic attainment in their GCSEs in future.

**More information:** "A longitudinal study of the association between inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity and children's attainment at age 11", by Merrell et al. [DOI: 10.1016/j.lindif.2016.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.04.003). It appears in *Learning and Individual Differences*, Volume 48, Issue x (2016)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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