

How can you support kids with ADHD to learn? Parents said these three things help

August 10 2022, by Emma Sciberras, Anna Jackson, Glenn Melvin and Louise Brown



Credit: Simeon Frank/Unsplash

COVID lockdowns and home schooling seemed never-ending for a lot of families. But there were some silver linings.

Our [new research](#) published in [two papers](#) looked at children with attention-deficit/[hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADHD) during lockdowns to understand what home learning was like for them.

We surveyed more than 100 Australian parents of children with ADHD, asking them about the benefits, challenges and strategies they used.

While this provided insights into pandemic schooling, there are lessons here for learning beyond lockdowns.

As COVID cases remain high, so too does the potential for more home learning. But parents can also use our findings to help with homework and teachers can apply them in their primary and high school classrooms.

This comes amid [calls from parents](#) to better support children with ADHD at school.

Remind me, what is ADHD?

ADHD begins in childhood and occurs in [about 5%](#) of children and adolescents worldwide.

Symptoms can include difficulty maintaining concentration, controlling impulses (including being able to pause and think), planning and organizing tasks, and managing time and belongings.

Children with ADHD experience [greater school and learning difficulties](#), compared to their peers without ADHD.

Medication can help with reducing inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity difficulties. But to succeed at school, children with ADHD also require other supports.

Our findings

Our research found Australian parents experienced challenges during lockdowns.

Of those surveyed, 25% reported difficulty keeping children on task during home learning. Similar numbers also reported children lacking motivation (22%) and difficulty with the format, structure, and delivery of online learning (19%). If a child had trouble paying attention and anxiety symptoms, these were [most likely](#) to make home learning difficult.

But there were also benefits.

Of those surveyed, 20% of parents reported their child had lower anxiety and stress. Similar numbers also reported they got a better understanding of their child's learning style and needs (20%) and greater flexibility around how and when their child did [school work](#) (19%).

These benefits may be due to children receiving more one-on-one support and more ability to personalize learning for their child.

What strategies helped?

According to our study, the most common helpful strategies used during home learning for Australian children with ADHD were:

1. having routines/organization and time management, including waking up at a set time each day and then following a schedule
2. parents being actively involved in their child's work—keeping track of what work needed to be done and what work had been done
3. having a suitable space for children to work, that was quiet and free from distractions.

Tips for parents of children with ADHD

Our suggestions can be used during any future home learning or for parents helping their children with homework. They can also be easily adapted by classroom teachers.

The key thing to remember is children with ADHD are not intentionally trying to be naughty, impulsive or distracted. For that reason, discipline will not be effective but the following strategies may help:

- focus on your child's strengths and positive attributes—this is essential for them to build and maintain [self-esteem](#)
- give plenty of praise and encouragement
- ask your child about their struggles and then listen to their responses, acknowledge their feelings and don't judge or just leap to give advice. You could say, "I can see that you're really upset. Do you feel like talking about it?" Recent research [shows children](#) with ADHD want to have positive social connections.
- provide gentle redirection if your child gets distracted—you could say, "Wow! What a great job you've done so far. Keep going!" instead of "Back to work!"
- limit distractions—turn off TVs, silence phones and have siblings work or play elsewhere
- work with your child from the start of an activity to ensure they understand it and to help them plan the next steps
- give your child one to two instructions at a time
- provide time management assistance—this could include a visual schedule of the steps/tasks required
- enable your child to expend energy whilst listening—this could include fidgets, doodling or bouncing on a Pilates ball—to assist with their concentration
- ensure your child takes regular learning breaks. The frequency of these will depend on your child, it could be helpful to start with

more frequent breaks, then adjust as needed.

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