

Preschoolers aren't meant to be easy

But they shouldn't feel impossible



Recognising children who may need more support

Uniting

 **ADHD**
AUSTRALIA



All children have their moments

Every preschooler forgets, fidgets, gets upset or struggles to listen sometimes.

This is typical preschool behaviour and what makes the preschool classroom so challenging.

Some do it more than others. Most grow out of it.

Some don't.



Some more so than others

Some children stand out as:

- more active
- more impulsive
- more emotional
- more reactive

The question is not whether these behaviours happen.

It's whether they happen more often, more intensely and make preschool harder for the child.



Support comes before diagnosis

Diagnosis of ADHD in preschoolers is only considered:

- when support strategies have not met the child's needs
- the child's challenging behaviour impacts participation
- attention difficulties are affecting learning and skill development

Your approach should not be to identify ADHD, but to recognise children who may benefit from extra support.



Support can make the difference

First help the child develop the skills they find difficult.

Providing the support a child needs to develop their skills is where you can make a real and immediate difference.

Most children will respond.



Look beyond disruption

Some children – especially girls – may not draw attention to themselves. Instead, they struggle quietly.

They may copy their peers, hide their confusion, rely on prompts or work hard to appear to be coping.

Consider how much effort a child uses to manage everyday life compared with their peers.



Look for patterns, not a label

The behaviour patterns on the following pages are commonly seen in children with ADHD.

Exhibiting the behaviour patterns does not mean a child has ADHD.

Rather, they are examples that can help you recognise children who may need additional support.

More Active Than Peers

Hyperactivity

- **Constant movement**
- **Difficulty remaining seated**
- **High intensity physical play**
- **Appears physically uncomfortable when still**

Support Strategies

Hyperactivity



- **Build movement into the day rather than expecting long periods of sitting**
- **Support regulation with planned physical activity and sensory play**
- **Provide an environment that supports safety**

Acts First, Thinks Later

Impulsivity

- 
- Unpredictable
 - Grabs or interrupts
 - Impatient
 - Blurting out
 - Acts impulsively

Support Strategies

Impulsivity



- **Provide closer supervision during higher-risk play**
- **Intervene early by creating conditions that support safe behaviour**
- **Collaborate with families to ensure consistent strategies**

Hears The Words, Misses The Message

Difficulty absorbing instructions

- Looks attentive but does something different
- Needs instructions repeated
- Appears surprised by correction
- Struggles with multi-step directions

Support Strategies

Difficulty absorbing instructions



- Check that the child can hear
- Check that they can understand
- Give one simple step at a time
- Scaffold understanding using visual supports

Big Feelings Come Fast

Emotional dysregulation

- Easily frustrated
- Anger escalates quickly
- Reactions seem bigger than peers
- Mood shifts rapidly

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Support Strategies

Emotional dysregulation



- **Learn the child's triggers and intervene early**
- **Redirect the child with a calming activity**
- **Create a safe space for the child to calm down**
- **Supervise closely if the behaviour becomes unsafe**

Attention That Quietly Slips Away

Inattention

- Shorter attention span
- Gets distracted mid-task
- Leaves work unfinished
- Day-dreams frequently

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Support Strategies

Inattention



- **Provide extra support to stay engaged with activities**
- **Support perseverance by pairing with a peer**
- **Provide individual support when needed**

Unpredictable From Moment To Moment

Variability

- Calm one moment, reactive the next
- Behaviour shifts across the day
- Hard to anticipate responses

Support Strategies

Variability



- **Look for patterns rather than isolated incidents**
- **Support friendships and positive peer interactions**
- **Support regulation first, then learning**
- **Supervise closely if the behaviour becomes unsafe**

Struggles with Structure

Low tolerance for structured tasks

- Avoids table-based work
- Finds it hard to sit quietly in a group
- Prefers movement-based activities

Support Strategies

Low tolerance for structured tasks



- **Provide extra support with the daily routines**
- **Break structured activities into smaller steps**
- **Focus on engagement and perseverance over outcome**

When To Seek Extra Support

The usual strategies don't work

- Participation, relationships and learning are impacted
- Similar patterns reported at home
- Support needs require input beyond the expertise of the education team

When to seek extra support

The usual strategies don't work



Raise your concerns with the child's family if:

- progress does not occur over time with support
- behaviour is difficult to manage despite appropriate strategies
- it affects learning, participation or relationships

The child's family may seek further support from their Child Health Nurse, GP, paediatrician or psychologist.

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Project Coordinator



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Clinical Adviser



Dr Alison (Sally) Poulton is a Paediatrician at Nepean Hospital Penrith, a Senior Lecturer in Paediatrics at the University of Sydney, and an Adviser to the Board of ADHD Australia.

Produced by Andrew Thompson for ADHD Australia



ADHD Australia is the national peak body for ADHD, aiming to improve the lives of people with ADHD through advocacy, education, support and evidence-informed resources.