

What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. ADHD used to be known as attention deficit disorder, or ADD. In 1994, it was renamed ADHD. The term ADD is sometimes still used, though, to describe a type of ADHD that doesn't involve hyperactivity.

ADHD is a medical condition that affects how well someone can sit still, focus, and pay attention. People with ADHD have differences in the parts of their brains that control attention and activity. This means that they may have trouble focusing on certain tasks and subjects, or they may seem "wired," act impulsively, and get into trouble.

However at Journeys Academy we tend to focus on the Gifts of ADHD!

The Gifts of ADHD: Seeing the Big Picture

Children with ADHD are excellent at getting the big picture, in and out of the classroom. Students with ADHD may miss the little details, but they are masters at understanding the importance and meaning of material. For example, children with ADHD may be struck with wonder and awe at the miraculous workings of nature as they learn about photosynthesis and how plants take in sunlight to grow. They may wonder what happens in cloud-covered regions of the world and start to generate ideas for how to get sunlight to plants on cloudy days. As this example illustrates, children with ADHD are often deeply engaged in material in creative and novel ways. They may not remember any of the details about the roles of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the process of photosynthesis, but they are very curious and interested and typically try to create solutions to problems in creative ways.

Typical modes of assessment in the academic world involve being able to repeat small details of abstract processes. This is the most difficult way of learning for children with ADHD. There are few courses of study in the educational system that reward the startling gifts your child has to offer. The good news is that if your child can emerge unscathed from his education, he can find his niche in the real world that will reward him highly for his ardent curiosity, creativity, and ability to solve problems in innovative ways.

The Energy of Impulse

To think daringly original thoughts and to create new ideas or perspectives requires impulsiveness. Impulsiveness is the urge to do things or think things that are new and daring, that fall outside the boring grind of the everyday humdrum. Impulsiveness is the urge to forge ahead into new areas of thought and includes a tendency to be bored with whatever everyone else is doing or thinking. It is a necessary ingredient for forging new ground in any area of study or thought.

Distractibility is the tendency to shift one's attention to other arenas. It is the opposite of a horse with blinders plodding along carefully in the path determined by his master. In contrast, people who are distractible will pay attention to thoughts, feelings, or events in the environment that seem to call out to them. They cannot focus because they are enchanted with other aspects of their experience. This is also an essential aspect of creativity, which often manifests in the mixing together of ideas from different domains that seem separate or irrelevant to each other.

In Thom Hartmann's book *Attention Deficit Disorder: A Different Perception* (1997), he describes how Thomas Alva Edison, who invented the lightbulb and about a thousand other things, was characterized by an easy distractibility. He was known to have forty different inventions in progress at one time. He would work on one until he got bored with it and move on to another one as inspiration hit. Another word for distractibility is "flexibility," and it can be put to use in groundbreaking innovation and productivity

Naturally Creative

Your child is truly gifted to have been given the natural ability to engage in reverie or imaginative thought, to be bold and daring in wanting to bring his imagination into the world, and to be sensitive to inspiration from his thoughts, emotions, or the outside world. In spite of these gifts, he may struggle in school. This is because, in the early years, educational systems focus on a "regurgitation" model. Children are expected to focus attentively, take in material presented in a rigid format, and "regurgitate" it back to the teacher to prove they were listening attentively. This style of learning is contrary to the great gifts your child has been given.

However, it's almost impossible to teach or train people to be creative -- a gift with which your child is naturally endowed. It is much easier to train someone who is creative to be disciplined than it is to teach someone who is focused and disciplined to be creative. Your child has the potential for excellence if he can learn to apply discipline to paying attention to details and following through in translating his imaginative flights into completed projects.

Finding Creativity

Without paying careful attention to your child's inner process, it is easy to miss his creativity in everyday life. While the teacher complains that he is spacing out during her presentation on the structure of our government, your child may be generating possible solutions for eliminating wasteful governmental spending. While your child appears to be trying to get out of going to his music lessons, he may be singing Broadway show tunes in his mind with perfect tempo and memory for all the words. If a child isn't doing what he's supposed to be doing, we commonly think he is misbehaving. In fact, he may be exploring and expressing his own unique gifts that do not match up with your tight schedules and plans for him.

For example, what adults often think of as goofing off can be one of the most important activities for any child, but particularly a creative child. If your child is diagnosed with ADHD, you may recognize that he does not have the same attention span and focus of other children, but you must also acknowledge his superior creativity that, as a parent, you are entrusted to nourish and nurture. You do not do this by getting him to conform to the demands of traditional ideas of achievement. You nurture his creativity by making allowances for his differences and unstructuring his life accordingly.

Goofing Off Is Not Giving Up

Creativity requires goofing off. Goofing off is play, experimentation, trying out new ideas, and adjusting them to see what fits, what works, and what is more fun. As a parent, you may have observed your child engaging in an activity for a small amount of time and then after some time of practice the child starts to goof off. For example, one parent complained that her daughter asked to take lessons to learn to play the clarinet. She would practice her lessons at home for only fifteen minutes, then she would put her clarinet down and dance wildly, running around the house like a Tasmanian devil. Her mother considered this giving up. But it can also be viewed as another form of creativity or a strategy for discharging all of her excitement about playing music. It might be her boredom with practicing lessons, which contrasts with her desire to add her own daring and impulsive energy to the practice of the clarinet. Goofing off is not giving up. Parents often get frustrated with children, thinking of how much it costs to buy the clarinet and pay for lessons. In reframing this goofing off as a form of creativity, the child's wild energy can be channeled into creative musical abilities.

Music coach and psychologist Dr. Lane Arye has written in his book *Unintentional Music: Releasing Your Deepest Creativity* about how goofing off can feed one's deepest creativity. As an example, he describes one music lesson with a classical guitarist in which the teacher asked a student to amplify a particular hand gesture that was irrelevant to the music being played. The student amplified his gesture until he was making wild bodily movements and screaming with delight. While this might look beside the point, the teacher writes that after the apparent derailment of the music lesson, "I asked him whether he could express this ecstatic wildness in his music. Franz grabbed his guitar and played the same piece as before. But this time he played it with incredible energy. He said, with an irrepressible smile, that he had never thought it was allowable to play like that" (2001, 109). This interaction can be viewed as a model for parents interacting with their children diagnosed with ADHD parent-"symptoms" represent creativity or could be channeled to enhance your child's creative expression.

On the Importance of Being Confused

In a similar way, confusion can be reframed as an appreciation for the mysterious, as a humility in the face of the complexity of the world. Your child may get into trouble in school for looking or acting confused when called on or when participating in classroom exercises. Their confusion or apparent disorientation may give the impression that they are not paying any attention at all. It may make them look less intelligent and provoke harsh comments from teachers and students alike. However, this sense of confusion can be reframed as reflecting a higher intellectual sophistication in that it can result from an appreciation of the deeper complexity of the topic being discussed.

Confusion is an admission that one does not fully understand the material being covered. Creativity requires that a person acknowledge that there is more to what is being taught than is covered in the simplifications being presented. Therefore, confusion can also be thought to be a necessary component of creativity. Confusion can represent an experience of the mystery of what is being taught. For example, in reflecting on photosynthesis, a child with ADHD might be awed by the order and harmony in the universe that allows for the sun to nurture plant growth, which in turn nurtures the human environment. A child with ADHD might get derailed in the experience of awe and get confused about the detailed aspects of the biology of photosynthesis. Confusion is essential to creativity but gets a bad rap in our culture, which makes a virtue of being sharp and quick at all times.

These cultural demands overlook the value of being slow and uncomprehending. Often, the constructed explanations offered to students by teachers are oversimplifications. In pretending to know it all, students and teachers gloss over the complexity and mystery of the world. Admitting or experiencing not knowing can be a liberating experience. In fact, the struggle to always have the right answer actually prevents a person from learning. If we think we have the answers, we are not open to a deeper understanding or exploring other ways of seeing the world.

At Journeys, we try to make our learning environment with children like this in mind.