



Support for Kids With ADHD During the Coronavirus Crisis

Managing attention (yours and theirs) will help kids thrive

Caroline Miller

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Families everywhere are struggling to care for (and homeschool!) children cut off from their normal routines and activities during the coronavirus crisis. Kids with ADHD may need extra structure and support to manage attention and behavior challenges and keep on track with learning in this challenging situation.

Here are suggestions from ADHD experts for helping kids with ADHD weather this storm:

Communicate with the school

It's important for you to know what supports your child has been getting in the classroom, and how you might maintain continuity at home. Ask teachers and/or school staff how much of a role you should have in keeping your child or teen organized, focused and on task.

All parents, and especially parents of children with ADHD, should feel comfortable asking questions like:

“What has worked for my child in the past when they needed to focus?”

“How much assistance should I be providing during homework?”

“Who is in charge of monitoring assignment completion?”

Frequent and consistent communication with school staff will go a long way in easing this transition for both students and parents.

Structure the day

All kids will benefit from structure in this unsettling time, but those with ADHD need it even more. “A child with ADHD often doesn’t deal well with uncertainty, long delay of gratification, and not knowing when the activities they will find more rewarding are going to occur,” notes David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. “So, especially with the younger kids, it’s important to have a schedule that’s posted somewhere in the home that shows what they’re going to be doing at any given time of the day.”

Think in terms of learning bursts

Instead of thinking of a school day devoted to learning running from 9am to 3pm, it will be good to think in terms of **learning bursts**, as research shows that children can only really focus and work effectively for 45 minutes at the most.

Clinicians sometimes call this “chunking” — engaging kids for a period of time that’s realistic for their attention span, and then giving them a break. Kids with ADHD in particular benefit when parents are able to set clear expectations in advance for how long each chunk will last and what they are to do in that time period, and then follow up to see if they did the work as expected.

Alternate activities

Think about what motivates your kids, our experts suggest, and alternate activities that are less appealing to them – which may include schoolwork — with those they enjoy more. “It will help for parents to stagger the schedule and activities based on less preferred things being followed by highly preferred things,” explains Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute.

So, if they’re expected to do 45 minutes or an hour of work a teacher has sent home, it can be followed by a favorite snack, a walk or playing video games.

“With any kid who has a short attention span, you just want to be thinking, how do I pepper in the stuff that’s going to be reinforcing for them as the reward for getting the other stuff done?” says Dr. Anderson.

Use positive attention — and make it big!

We know that positive attention is the most powerful motivator we have for influencing children’s behavior, and with kids who have ADHD it’s helpful to make that attention as powerful as possible. “Kids with attentional and impulse control difficulties need their feedback **big, bold, immediate and intense**,” explains Dr. Lee.

When we think about attention, she adds, we shouldn’t just be thinking in terms of whether our feedback is negative or positive. We need to think about how long we give the positive attention, how close we are when we give it, how specific we are, and the tone of voice. “When I praise them, it makes a difference whether I say, “Good job” or “GREAT JOB GETTING STARTED ON YOUR ASSIGNMENT SO QUICKLY!”

Use attention as a motivator and reward

When everyone in the family is confined to the home, children are going to be seeking their parents’ attention a lot, which will be a challenge, especially for parents needing to work remotely. So setting kids up to earn parental attention can be an effective way to get them to focus on school work or activities that they can do independently.

As an example, Dr. Lee suggests: “You might let them know, for instance, ‘I’m going to be doing work on the computer while you’re playing with your Magna-Tiles. And when you’re playing with your Magna-Tiles, if you play safely and you don’t interrupt,’ then we can play Magna-Tiles together.”

Dr. Lee recommends making that expectation visual. It might be using two drawings of a traffic light and saying, “When Mom is on red, she is not available. She’s doing work. But when Mom’s on green, it’s her chance to play with you.”

If you have another caregiver in the mix, maybe Dad is on green while Mom is on red, she adds. “It can give parents an opportunity to ration their attention, if you will. Parents often think of a reward as time on the iPad, when what the child really wants most is their attention.”

Be present when you’re present

We know many parents are juggling childcare responsibilities with remote work and, when there are two caregivers, often they’re trying to work in shifts.

Dr. Anderson notes that this strategy only works if kids are convinced that when work time is finished and you step away from the computer that they’re actually going to get your attention. So stick to that boundary and avoid checking your phone or email during the moments when you have promised them your undivided attention. “The goal,” he says, “is that when you go back to work, hopefully their gas tank is full to the point where they can sustain themselves for those periods of time where you need to have that call or you need to work.”

Don’t expect instant success!

It’s going to take time to figure out how to work best with attention-challenged kids to enable them to really be productive in online schooling. So it’s important to manage your own expectations. “It’s good to at least keep the bar low at first to kind of get into a rhythm and figure out how this is going to work for everyone,” suggests Dr. Anderson.

Dr. Anderson also recommends that you think of it as a process of trial and error. If you set an expectation and the child does not meet that expectation, it's good to reframe your goals for the following day to make them a little bit more achievable. You don't want kids to feel like online school is a source of conflict and failure for them — you want them to feel like they are having success.

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