

Managing Inattention and Impulsivity:

Tips for Families

What are inattention and impulsivity?

Inattention means a child often has trouble focusing, is easily distracted, or has a hard time finishing activities. An example of inattention is when a child has trouble sitting still in class and can't pay attention to what the teacher is saying.

Impulsivity means a child tends to react quickly, before thinking things through. An example of impulsivity is when a child blurts out the answer to a question before someone finishes talking.

Inattention and impulsivity are normal for young children. But by the time they're in school, most children can pay attention for a longer time and can think and plan before they act. If your school-aged child behaves more like what you would expect from a younger child, this may be a sign of a problem.

The good news is there are things parents and families can do to help children with inattention and impulsivity manage their behavior and succeed at home and school.



How can I help my child at home?

These tips are good for all children, but they can be especially helpful for children with inattention and impulsivity. Parenting is a busy job, so use your judgment about which tips make the most sense for your family.

Connect with your child.

- **Set aside one-on-one time every day.** Even just 10 minutes each day after dinner can make a big difference. Try taking a walk together, playing a card game, or reading a book out loud.
- **Ask your child about her life.** Make sure your child knows she can come to you if she has any problems, such as being bullied or having trouble making friends at school.
- **Praise your child** and let her know you appreciate her good behavior. For example, "I'm proud of you for working so hard on your homework," or "Thank you for putting away the markers when you were done with them!"



Use positive parenting.

- **Explain rules in a positive way.** For example, instead of saying, “Don’t run,” you could say, “Please walk slowly.”
- **Reward good behavior.** Praise your child or give her small rewards when she behaves in a kind, generous, or positive way. Spending time doing fun activities with a parent is a very powerful reward.
- **Pay less attention to bad behavior.** When your child is misbehaving, try not to pay a lot of attention to her. You can also use a brief time-out as a consequence. Over time, she’ll learn that acting out isn’t a good way to get your attention.



Be consistent and provide structure.

- **Set up family routines.** Follow a regular schedule for playtime, mealtime, and bedtime. Knowing what to expect can help your child feel safe and secure.
- **Set clear rules, limits, and consequences—and stick to them.** Make sure everyone who takes care of your child is on the same page. If you and your family members don’t agree, ask your doctor to help you talk through your differences.
- **Help your child learn to recognize and manage his own behavior.** For example, if your child tends to leave his homework at home, he could make it part of his bedtime routine to put his homework in his backpack.
- **Create a visual schedule** to help your child learn independence and organization. To do this, take pictures of your child doing the tasks on the schedule (or cut pictures out of magazines). This can help your child complete routine tasks that have multiple steps, such as getting ready in the morning or getting ready for bed.

Build healthy habits.

- **Get active!** Encourage your child to be active for at least an hour every day. This can include playing outside, joining a sports team or an activity at the YMCA, biking or walking to school, or dancing at home to favorite music.
- **Eat healthy.** Eat healthy meals every day, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and protein foods. Remember to eat breakfast!
- **Get plenty of sleep.** School-aged children need 9 to 12 hours of sleep every night. Teens need 8 to 10 hours.
- **Limit screen time.** Try for less than 2 hours a day of entertainment screen time. Avoid scary or violent TV shows, video games, and movies.



How can I help my child at school?

Some children act differently at home than they do at school. It's important to talk with your child's teacher regularly so you know what's going on at school.

If your child is having a hard time at school, ask the teacher what strategies she is using to help your child and work with her to come up with other ideas.

These are some strategies you may want to try.

- Ask the teacher to have your child repeat back instructions to check for understanding.
- See if the teacher can move your child to the front of the room.
- Get your child a homework planner and ask the teacher to sign it every day.
- Ask for another set of textbooks to keep at home in case your child forgets them.
- Work with the teacher to break down large assignments into smaller parts.

If the teacher has tried various strategies and your child is still having a hard time, ask the school about testing for special education needs. You can also sign a release form so your child's doctor and teacher can talk with each other.



Remember, you know your child best.

Whether it's at school or the doctor's office, you are your child's biggest advocate. Don't hesitate to speak up on behalf of your child.



When do I need to go back to the doctor?

If it's been a few months and your child's inattention or impulsivity isn't getting better (or it's getting worse), it's a good idea to go back to the doctor. The doctor may ask you and your child's teacher to fill out a questionnaire about what's happening. Then, you and the doctor can make a plan to try new approaches or strategies that may help.

The doctor can also help you decide if seeing a specialist for therapy could help your child.

It's especially important to talk with the doctor if

- Your child's behavior is causing a lot of problems or keeping her from doing normal activities at school, at home, or with friends.

- Your child starts to have other behavior problems, such as feeling very sad, worrying a lot, fighting, or acting out.
- You notice a change in your child’s behavior after a stressful event, such as a divorce or death in the family.

Make time to care for yourself too.



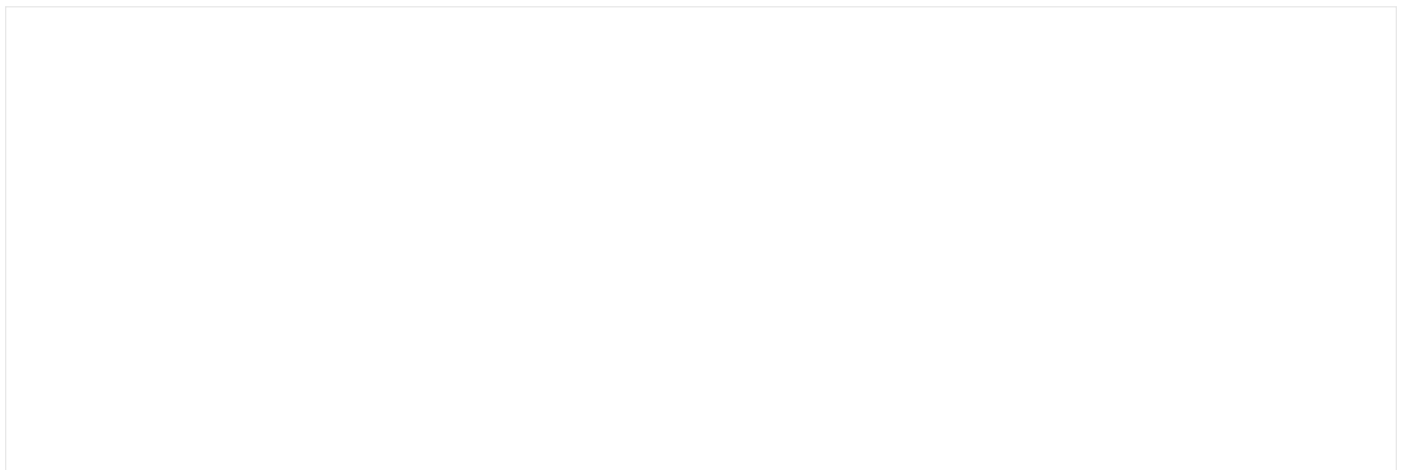
Parenting can be stressful. If you’re feeling overwhelmed, don’t be afraid to ask for support from family, close friends, social services, or your faith community. Children pick up on the stress and worries of adults, so getting support for yourself can help your child too.

To learn more about inattention and impulsivity and what you can do to help your child, visit these Web sites.

- American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org: www.healthychildren.org
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: www.chadd.org
- Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health: www.ffcmh.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org



More resources about inattention and impulsivity



The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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