

Advice for parents of children with ADHD when schools are closed



Focus on the big goal, forget the small stuff

The big goal is for you all to get along as well as you can whilst the children are at home for longer. Aim to show them with your behavior how you want them to behave, as children learn a lot from copying adults around them. This means remaining as calm as you can and not letting your own emotions get the better of you. Be the adult: step away from a difficult situation to give yourself time to calm down if you feel anger and frustration building in you. If you are dysregulated, then your kids will be too. But remember to be realistic about this: emotions are going to bubble over at times so don't be too hard on yourself: say sorry (showing your kids how you want them to behave when they get things wrong) and forgive yourself and each other, you are all dealing with a lot right now. The aim here is to be "good enough", so letting some things slide is fine. There is going to be more screen time and less fruit. Forget the small stuff. The big goal is to all get along well enough.

Work out a space in your home where you can each choose to go when you need time alone or time away from others to calm down. This is not a time out or naughty step place, but a place to choose to retreat to when it's all too much. You need a place too.

Maintain Wake Up and Bed Times

Keeping to a consistent wake up and bed time will really help children to maintain as good a sleep pattern as possible. Whilst the time you expect your child to wake up and get up might be a bit different from when schools were open, get into a new routine and stick to it. The really important bit is getting up each morning at the same time. This helps to ensure the child is feeling tired and ready for sleep at night.

Carve out chunks of time for different activities

All children benefit from routine, but especially children with ADHD. Developing a new routine is going to really help but don't make this too complicated or rigid or you will never stick to it – and some variety is important too. Create a schedule with time slots for a range of different activities each day:

- Focused time: for tasks such as home learning, your own working-from-home responsibilities and household chores
- Relaxation time: play and TV time, hobbies, games, gaming and reading
- Alone time: so each of you has a chunk of undisturbed time each day, probably not all at the same time
- Social time: connecting with friends (virtually if needs be), chatting or playing with each of your children for even just 10 minutes a day, calling or messaging friends and family
- Exercise time: most importantly for children with ADHD, exercise and movement time. Little and often will be most successful for children with ADHD, so this could be ten minute exercise breaks every hour. This could be with doing dance or exercise you tube videos, circuit training apps, playing in the garden if you have one eg, skipping, trampolene, hide and seek, Simon Says.

Set New Screen Time Limits

Decide how much 'fun' screen time they can have each day as a given and what they can earn through cooperation. It's reasonable to allow your child more time than your usual limits on screens right now, especially if it means they can interact with their friends online. However, make sure to explain to your kids that this is an exception not the new normal. One of the reasons children love gaming is that the game structures their time for them. When they come off the game, they may need help to work out what to do instead so help them to manage this transition. Having a plan for what will happen next can help eg meal time, doing something together.

Collaborate with Your Child

Make a time to talk with your kids about their ideas for organizing their days. Brainstorm together how to co-create a structure that makes sense for everyone. When kids, especially those with ADHD, are included in the process of figuring things out, they are far more likely to cooperate. Once you have a good structure for the day, try to keep to this for a few days before reviewing it together and thinking about what has worked and what has happened. Ask the children for their ideas for what could work better: children with ADHD can be really good at coming up with solutions for problems so use!

Motivate with rewards and incentives

Instead of using punishments or threats to force your kids to cooperate with the new routine, focus on using praise and rewards that the child receives quickly to increase their motivation. Simple and free rewards you might use immediately include: a hug, a sticker, points on a chart, choosing a game to play; playing with a pet; choosing a snack; choosing music to play or to dance to; reading together. Bigger incentives that could happen soon (rather than immediately) might be include choosing a film to watch; choosing or cooking a meal with you; having extra time to do something they enjoy eg gaming; having extra time with you to do something your child enjoys doing with you eg manicure; doing something ordinary in an extraordinary way: sleeping in a different room, eating in a different room; cooking or art projects.

Focused Time for Learning/Working

Have a plan: Set up focused school learning periods, using incentives that matter to your child or teen, with timed breaks with appropriate activities, and earned rewards when the period is over or the task is completed.

Work together: Consider working alongside your child, doing something focused that you need to do. This sends a message that everyone is taking this plan seriously and it's time to settle down and be focused. If you are doing chores, try to be near enough to help them stay on task or answer any possible questions. Younger children could have TV time so they are quieter too.

Choose the right place: children with ADHD will find working at home more difficult because there are so many more distractions. You might need to move things about a bit to create a corner or area of the house that is less visually distracting and quieter for them to work in. Headphones could help. Moving other children further away might help.

Be realistic: Ask your son or daughter how long they think they can concentrate before needing a break. This might be a very short time, depending on factors such as their attention span, level of interest, the challenge of the work and any

distractions around them. It could last 5 to 20 minutes for primary school kids. For secondary school students, it varies between 15 and 45 minutes.

Set benchmarks: Create short 5 minute break times between study periods with a clear list of acceptable activities such as movement, bathroom, snacks, petting the dog, etc.

Home Chores

Talk about team effort: This is a time when everybody needs to chip in. Talk to your kids about coming together for the collective well-being of the family and the reality of having to do more chores because the house will get dirtier than usual since everybody's around. Your ADHD child's energy could really come in handy here.

Choose chores they can tackle: Keep chores for your kids simple and manageable. If they weren't doing them before, this isn't the time to add something new. Instead, link the completion of their chores to some of the incentives as well. Talk about how many reminders they need and in what form. Support and supervise them as they learn what to do if necessary.

Motivate with praise: Give lots of praise, including praise for effort even if the results are not quite there yet. This is a chance to develop life skills that school can't help with and feeling capable can be a big boost to your child's self-esteem.

Relaxation Time

Give support: children with ADHD can find free time hard as they struggle to organize and structure their own time. Help them to manage this by giving ideas and options, then help them to decide and to get started, then step back for a while. There are lots of ideas on line to get you thinking:

Prioritize social time: The advice is clear: stay home and avoid playdates. But kids aren't used to being alone. If your child is really struggling with social isolation, arrange for FaceTime sessions or interactive gaming sessions with friends.

Create a menu of non-screen choices: think with your child about this menu, they will have some really great ideas you wouldn't have thought of – making movies, rearranging furniture, putting on a play, using apps to learn new skills like languages, how to play the piano...

Game-ify mundane things: Let each child pick a family movie for two nights a week and pretend you are going to the cinema. Make popcorn or other treats. Set it up like an event. Make lunch as a picnic in your living room instead of at the kitchen table. Have breakfast for dinner. Play dance music while doing the dishes.

Nurture their interests: This is a great opportunity to cultivate those non-school activities that no one ever seems to have enough time to pursue.

Know that down time is healthy: Everybody needs and wants time to do whatever they want. Save some screen time allocations for this and let everyone chill.

Keep Going

Whatever routines you create during this unusual time will need tweaking as you go, but that doesn't mean the plan isn't working. If your son or daughter isn't cooperating, work with their desire to avoid conflict and see their struggles as part of their frustration about how life has changed. Expect inevitable meltdowns and make an arrangement for structured time apart to cool off before pivoting to another activity.

Remember that kids are struggling right now and may neither fully understand the severity of the situation nor be able to explain how they feel. Share relevant facts without scaring them and be careful of what you are saying on the phone to friends and family that's within earshot of your youngster.

Look after yourself

Give yourself regular breaks, fresh air and exercise. Talk to people, watch or do things that make you laugh. Keeping a diary can be a way to process your own feelings; try to notice positives or things you are grateful for or proud of within this.

Get Support

There are lots of online ADHD support websites and groups that you can check out. Also, support lines for parents more generally. Here are some to try:

www.adhdfoundation.org.uk

www.leedsadhd.com

www.youngminds.org.uk – they have a parent support line: 0808 802 5544

www.familylives.org.uk – they have a parent support line: 0808 800 2222

West Yorkshire ADHD support group on Facebook

Dani Donovan on instagram and twitter – for wonderful insight in to living with ADHD