



White Paper
Help for ADHD in Teens and Young Adults

In this white paper, we provide an overview of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in teens and young adults. We focus on helping these individuals through a variety of challenges, including, but not limited to: anxiety, depression, family conflict, self esteem issues, risky/harmful behaviors, school failure, and behavior issues.

This white paper is written for parents, teachers, school counselors, or anyone needing advice on where to turn to help a teen or young adult through ADD or ADHD, and the struggles that accompany these diagnoses.

Help for ADHD in Teens and Young Adults

ADHD is not an uncommon struggle in today's society; approximately 11% of children 4-17 years of age (6.4 million) have been diagnosed with ADHD as of 2011. While many people associate ADHD as a childhood disorder, many individuals struggle through their teenage years, well into, or throughout, adulthood. Today, about 4 percent of American adults over the age of 18 deal with ADHD on a daily basis.

The neurodevelopmental disorder presents individuals with significant hurdles in life, such as executive functioning deficits, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. That being said, a psychological diagnosis does not have to define the course of someone's life. ADHD has particularly manageable symptoms, and when treated properly, does not have to get in the way of your child's success.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to address mental health and developmental issues as they arise. We have seen the cost of delaying treatment or avoiding one's issues; it is vastly wiser to handle problems head-on, as early as possible.

1. Signs of ADHD in Teens and Young Adults
2. ADHD and Anxiety/Depression
3. ADHD and Family Conflict
4. ADHD and School Troubles
5. ADHD and At-Risk Teens
6. Knowing When to Seek Treatment
7. Treatment Options for ADHD
8. How Wilderness Therapy Helps with ADHD
9. Supporting Your Child Through Treatment

Symptoms of ADHD in Teens and Young Adults

Some children with ADHD are diagnosed at a very young age; symptoms such as impulsiveness, hyperactivity, and inattention are usually symptoms parents and teachers pick up on quickly. However, ADHD goes overlooked and undiagnosed in many children, as not everyone displays these symptoms in a disruptive way. For example, some children who sit back, quietly daydreaming in class are overlooked.

The DSM-V now classifies Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder into *predominantly hyperactive-impulsive ADHD* and *predominantly inattentive ADHD*; some individuals display traits of both, known as *combined type*. According to the DSM-V, the individual's symptoms must be "present in multiple settings (e.g., school and home), that can result in performance issues in social, educational, or work settings."

Symptoms of **Hyperactive-Impulsive ADHD** include:

- Often fidgets, squirms, taps feet or hands, etc.
- Running or climbing in inappropriate situations
- Difficulties performing quiet tasks/activities
- Difficulty waiting in lines
- Interrupting others
- Restless feeling
- Excessive talking
- Blurting out answers before hearing the entire question

Inattentive ADHD: This is often referred to as "ADD" by many laymen, including parents and teachers. The term "ADD" was used by professionals until the early 1990's, when it was changed to ADHD. Although "ADD" it is not used in the DSM-V, the term is still widely used outside of the mental health and healthcare communities. These can often be the "daydreamers" whose symptoms are overlooked.

- Not paying close attention to schoolwork or making careless mistakes
- Difficulties sustaining attention for tasks
- Does not seem to listen when spoken to
- Trouble with organization
- Skipping from one uncompleted task to another
- Missing deadlines
- Disorganized schoolwork
- Easily distracted by stimuli
- Loses or forgets things necessary for completing school work (books, assignments, pencils, etc.)

Individuals who display symptoms of both predominantly inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive are diagnosed with **combined type ADHD**. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, this is the most common type of ADHD.

If you notice these symptoms of ADHD, speak to his or her teachers, counselors, and/or coaches to see if they have noticed any similar symptoms. If you suspect your child has ADHD, talking to his or her physician is a logical next step to ensuring your child's success.

ADHD and Anxiety/Depression

It is not uncommon for teens and young adults who have been diagnosed with ADHD to struggle with anxiety or depression. In fact, up to 30% of children and 25-40% of adults with ADHD have a coexisting anxiety disorder.

Another common coexisting condition for individuals with ADHD is depression; according to the National Resource Center on ADHD, "up to 70 percent of those with ADHD will be treated for depression at some point in their lives." The incidence of ADHD and depression in children is attributed to the fact that, individuals with ADHD can become frustrated and overwhelmed by their symptoms, and "may develop feelings of a lack of control over what happens in their environment or become depressed as they experience repeated failures or negative interactions in school, at home, and in other settings. As these negative experiences accumulate, the child with ADHD may begin to feel discouraged."

Since, sometimes ADHD symptoms are congruent with symptoms of depression and anxiety, many young people's depression or anxiety gets overlooked. For example, strained peer relationships, decreased school performance/motivation, and an inability to focus can be symptoms of ADHD, anxiety, or depression.

When a young person has two coexisting conditions, their treatment path becomes a bit more complicated. For example: children with anxiety and ADHD appear to be less responsive to traditional ADHD medication treatments; in addition, there are some anti-depressants that are not approved for children under 18.

While not every adolescent or young adult with ADHD will experience emotional turmoil, disregarding their symptoms as being part of their ADHD will allow anxiety and/or depression to go unresolved. Knowing that your child is at-risk for a coexisting condition makes it easier to watch out for [signs of anxiety](#) or depression in your child.

[Early intervention](#) is critical in helping teens and young adults learn to cope with their symptoms. If you notice [symptoms of depression](#) or anxiety in your child who has ADHD, don't hesitate to reach out to your child's physician or mental healthcare provider. If you suspect that your child has a coexisting condition with their ADHD, it is vital to find a mental healthcare provider who is well versed in treating not only ADHD, but anxiety and/or depression to ensure that your son or daughter receives safe and effective treatment.

ADHD and Family Conflict

Having a child with ADHD can be stressful for the entire family, and can strain relationships, as these families often experience a more behavioral and emotional strain. Living with the symptoms of ADHD can be extremely difficult; impulsivity, difficulties with their social skills and interactions, in addition to a difficulty managing anger; this can cause an additional strain on the family dynamic. In fact, Teens with ADHD report having more parent-teen conflict than teens who do not have ADHD.

Parents of a child who has ADHD are three times as likely to separate or divorce as parents of non-ADHD children. There are many contributing factors: parents may disagree on treatment routes/plans, medications, therapists, etc. In addition, the added stress of parenting a child struggling with ADHD can be overwhelming for parents.

In addition to creating parent-child conflict in the family dynamic, it may cause resentment, jealousy, or tension between siblings as well. Because parents spend extra time managing medications, doctors appointments, school meetings, and/or behavioral therapy sessions, some siblings may resent extra time/attention their sibling with ADHD receives.

The best way for parents to help is to implement a routine and clear rules for all individuals living in the household. In addition, staying positive and focusing on your child's strengths will encourage more positive behavior. When you do need to give your child a correction, remember to reprimand the behavior-- not the child. For example: instead of "You make me so mad when you interrupt me!" try, "It makes me unhappy when you interrupt me, please wait your turn."

ADHD and School Troubles

While some individuals with ADHD also struggle with depression and/or anxiety, other individuals may have an [undiagnosed learning disability](#). Learning disabilities often coincide with ADHD; in fact, an estimated 20 to 30 percent of children with ADHD are diagnosed with a learning disability.

While ADHD is not considered a learning disability, one of the symptoms of ADHD is having academic difficulties, due to an inability to focus. Due to the assumption that it is their ADHD causing the school challenges, some children who have a learning disability coinciding with ADHD will never [have their learning disability diagnosed](#).

When children are having difficulties at school, parents are often the first to notice. If you suspect your child's academic struggles may be stemming from a learning disability, it is important to notify his or her teacher and your family physician.

A learning disability is a lifelong obstacle; while children don't "grow out of it," they can learn skills to compensate for their learning disability. Early recognition, diagnosis, and getting proper help early on is key to your son or daughter's academic success.

If your child is diagnosed with a learning disability, [he or she may be eligible for special education services under one of three federal statutes](#). It is vital that, as a parent, you are an advocate for your son or daughter. In order to become an effective advocate for your son or daughter, you should become informed about their rights under the law and ways to help him or her succeed in school.

Even if your son or daughter is not diagnosed with a learning disability, your child may still be eligible for special services, [accommodations or modifications](#) to the curriculum or coursework, depending on the severity of his or her ADHD symptoms. If your son or daughter is still struggling in school, talk to his or her teacher about [ways you can help at home](#).

ADHD and At-Risk Teens

As teens get older and make their first forays into more adult privileges and responsibilities, there is also a higher (2-4x) risk for car accidents among teens with ADHD. This, in addition to the increased propensity for substance abuse, waning academic performance, and the difficulty maintaining relationships, can make adolescence much more of a struggle than it needs to be.

Part of the higher risk of risky behavior, according to ADDitude Mag, is the fact that "The rate of emotional development for children with ADHD is 30% slower than their non-ADD peers. For example, a 10-year-old with ADHD operates at the maturity level of about a 7-year-old; a 16-year-old beginning driver is using the decision making skills of an 11-year-old." The good news is that teen drivers with ADHD who take their medication are less likely to have an accident

These problematic behavioral patterns can result from the exacerbation of the fact that individuals with ADHD may be more:

- Impulsive
- Risk-taking
- Immature in judgement
- Thrill seeking
- Distracted

Fortunately, these symptoms - and the increased risk for car accidents and substance abuse - can be mitigated by early intervention and by ensuring that individuals receive effective treatment based on their individual needs, strengths, and challenges. Addressing these issues is critical not only because it will make the journey through adolescence easier for your teen with ADHD, but because the treatment that an individual receives in childhood and adolescence is often predictive of their success as an adult.

Treatment Options for ADHD

While some individuals may “outgrow” or be able to overcome their symptoms, others may need counseling, medication, or wellness and lifestyle changes to help manage symptoms. Depending on the individual’s age, diagnosis, and response to treatment, they may receive any combination of the following:

Medication

Stimulants are the most popular form of medication prescribed for ADD/ADHD. Stimulants can alleviate symptoms such as: inability to focus, impulsivity, hyperactivity. Some individuals may not be helped by stimulants, and may be treated with non-stimulant medication to help mitigate symptoms. These non-stimulant drugs come without many of the side effects of stimulants, including: anxiety, irritability, and insomnia.

Behavioral Therapy

It is helpful for individuals with ADHD to set up a structured schedule and routine. Behavioral therapy can also help teens and young adults with address any academic, social, or emotional struggles they may be facing. While talk therapy and behavioral modifications can address these challenges, they are only truly effective if a) your child is invested 100% and b) you coordinate with your child’s therapists and teachers to help keep your child on track.

Parent Education

Parental support and participation plays a pivotal role in the success of treatment for ADHD. Taking the time to understand what your child is going through, and work with your child’s therapist to help establish a structure and routine for your child, can show your child you care, and are supportive of his or her treatment path.

Residential Treatment

Sometimes, even with all the talk therapy, medication and parental support in the world, it just isn’t enough. This is especially true when young people are battling ADHD along with depression, anxiety, or a family conflict. Although it may not be the easy choice, sometimes sending your child to treatment can be the best choice to help him or her learn to cope with their symptoms.

While there are many options to help individuals cope with their symptoms, there is no magic “cure” for ADHD; however, with the proper treatment and support team, children with ADHD can grow into successful and well adjusted young adults.

Knowing When to Seek Treatment

ADHD can affect individuals in a variety of ways; some children with ADHD grow out of the disorder in adolescence. Many will continue to struggle with the condition throughout adulthood. While the symptoms of ADHD in adolescents are similar to the symptoms in children, they often worsen during teenage years due to the hormonal shifts of puberty. Impulsive, irritable, overactive children who have difficulty focusing can evolve into teens who may display a number of issues.

Sometimes talk therapy and medication is not enough to help teens and young adults cope with their symptoms, especially when there are other diagnoses, including: anxiety, depression, a learning disorder, or a behavioral disorder. If your teen’s symptoms go beyond typical struggles with ADHD and borders on risky or violent behavior, it is time to consider seeking more intensive treatment. The following are red flag signs of that your child needs treatment:

- Not taking/refusing their medications
- Reckless driving
- Drug or Alcohol abuse
- Aggressive behavior
- Risky sexual behavior
- Depression/moodiness
- Anxiety symptoms

If you do decide to seek treatment for your son or daughter, make sure that an effective course of treatment is pursued. Everyone has different needs, and each individual with ADHD will respond differently to a variety of treatments. One way to address these issues is through wilderness therapy; allowing for engagement in various experiential activities to learn to manage their ADHD and while receiving clinical treatment. For many individuals, this is the right choice.

How Wilderness Therapy Helps with ADHD

A psychological diagnosis does not have to define the course of someone’s life. ADHD has particularly manageable symptoms, and when treated properly, does not have to get in the way of an individual’s success. That said, it is crucial to address mental health and developmental issues as they arise. We have seen the cost of delaying treatment or avoiding one’s issues; it is vastly wiser to handle problems head-on, as early as possible.

There are a variety of treatment options available for individuals who have ADHD. Every individual is different; depending on your child's age and severity of their symptoms, you may be considering medication alone, medication and behavioral therapy, or in more severe cases, residential treatment. One type of treatment program that has proven extremely effective in helping individuals with ADHD is wilderness therapy. The effectiveness of wilderness therapy in helping these individuals is due to the therapeutic wilderness setting, adventure activities, and positive peer relationships.

Wilderness Setting

Living in the wilderness is an unfamiliar environment and experience for many individuals with ADHD. This allows them to leave the pressure and stress of their everyday lives behind and practice new ways of handling the ADHD. Wilderness therapy programs move with the rhythms of the natural world, which is soothing to humans. According to Taniguchi, Widmer, Duerden, & Draper (2009): *the mere presence of nature and vegetation has significant positive effects on children's:*

- *Self-discipline*
- *Attentional functioning*
- *Stress resilience*
- *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) symptoms*
- *Engagement in creative play*

The wilderness setting also exposes teens to natural consequences. Recognizing and experiencing the natural consequences has a great impact on developing intrinsic motivation. Teens and young adults with ADD/ADHD must understand how the consequence relates to their actions for this to develop. For example, if a student chooses to not build a shelter when the staff tell them it is going to rain, the consequence is they, and their belongings, get wet.

Adventure Activities

Some wilderness therapy programs incorporate adventure therapy activities. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment in multiple settings and with different challenges, of each student's needs, deficits, and challenges. Adventure therapy utilizes a variety of novel environments to push teens and young adults to learn more effective coping skills, executive function skills, and social skills; these are skills that many individuals with ADHD need to improve.

Incorporating adventure therapy activities allows for In Vivo therapy. In Vivo therapy offers the ability for students with ADHD to operate and process what they are learning "in the moment." The In Vivo method allows them to learn more experientially. This helps to teach individuals with attention and executive functioning deficits what they do not typically understand in a way that makes it more "normal," and less like therapy.

Aside from an increased buy-in to participate in therapy due to the variety of appealing activities, the adventure therapy activities provide students with opportunities to confront their challenges. This also helps individuals with ADHD by utilizing overwhelming mastery experiences to increase self efficacy. Self efficacy is the belief in oneself to overcome adversity/difficulties in life. This is vital, as research has shown self efficacy as one of the most influential predictors of behavioral change. (Wells, Widmer, & McCoy 2004)

The more repetitive a treatment program can be with overwhelming mastery experiences, the better. Teens and young adults with ADD/ADHD are more likely to generalize the belief that they can achieve difficult things, and can incorporate this belief into different domains of life: classroom, peers, family, etc.

Positive Peer Relationships

Since many with ADHD have trouble forming meaningful peer relationships and struggle with their social skill deficits, the therapeutic group setting of wilderness therapy is extremely critical for treatment.

Wilderness therapy offers individuals with ADHD the opportunity to form both peer bonds with others and mentor/mentee relationships with wilderness therapy staff. Since wilderness therapy takes place in a group setting, students have the opportunity to learn from others who are overcoming the same obstacles through wilderness therapy. The group setting allows group development processes to facilitate learning.

Supporting Your Child Through their ADHD and Treatment

Struggling with the symptoms of ADHD while going through adolescence or the transition to adulthood can be tough. Knowing you are there for them can help. While no one ever wants to send their child off to treatment, sometimes doing the right thing isn't always easy. Helping your child feel loved, supported, and respected during their treatment is vital to his or her success.

Knowing how to support your loved one in a helpful way during their treatment for ADHD can be difficult, but as they feel your encouragement and faith in their ability to overcome their challenges and your trust in their treatment team, your child's hope for a different life can be strengthened. Learning as much as you can from your child about what the struggle has been like for them can help them feel of your support.

1. Learn More about ADHD

Find out as much as you can about ADHD and any other diagnoses your child receives. Research, read, and learn from the many resources available on ADHD, from blog posts, podcasts and videos, to eBooks. Attend a class or support group for caregivers of children with ADHD.

Understanding his or her struggle is the first step in helping them overcome their obstacles. Learn about what kinds of tasks will be difficult for your son or daughter, and what resources are available to aid him or her in overcoming those obstacles.

2. Foster a Healthy Lifestyle

Regular exercise, a healthy diet, and maintaining healthy sleep hygiene are all part of living a healthy lifestyle.



Diet/Nutrition: Some researchers argue that a restricted diet can actually help improve ADHD symptoms. Others argue that all children can benefit from a healthy, well-balanced diet. Encourage your child to make healthy food choices. Eating several smaller meals throughout the day can minimize blood sugar spikes and keep his or her energy up.



Healthy Sleep Hygiene: Many individuals with ADHD have difficulties sleeping due to the medication(s) they are taking; however, maintaining a healthy sleep hygiene is critical to feeling balanced and well-rested. Teenagers need at least 8 1/2 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Helping your son or daughter maintain a sleep schedule, discouraging tv or electronics in bed, and restricting sugar and caffeine in the evenings can all help.



Exercise: Since some of the major symptoms of ADHD are restless behavior, fidgeting, and impulsivity, regular exercise can be helpful in coping with or minimizing symptoms. Encourage your son or daughter to live an active lifestyle; better yet, make it a family affair. It can be as simple as walking the dog each day after dinner or playing basketball in the driveway.



Medication Schedule: Some medications need to be taken on a schedule, some should be taken with food, and some on an empty stomach; make sure your son or daughter is being diligent about sticking to their schedule and taking their medications at the appropriate times.

3. Encourage a Positive Peer Environment

Encourage your son or daughter to hang out with uplifting and encouraging friends who are positive influences. Many individuals with ADHD struggle with social skills, relating to others, forming meaningful relationships, and making friends. If he or she has difficulties making friends who are positive, uplifting people, offer to enroll him or her in a social activity that he or she would enjoy, such as an art class, sports team, or after school club. It is also vital to watch out for negative influences or a sudden change in peer groups, as these could be detrimental to his or her progress.

4. Get Involved with the Treatment Process

As a parent and caregiver you are a part of the treatment team, along with your child and professionals. Meet with treatment professionals to understand their recommendations, ways you can help and openly discuss any concerns. Encourage the collaboration of professionals by giving permission for each to speak and requesting they do so. If appropriate, join your child's therapy session to learn how you can support your child. Monitor his or her medication and ensure that he or she attends therapy. Be sure to notify your child's healthcare provider or mental health professional if his or her ADHD symptoms do not improve or if they increase.

Conclusion

Young people who receive treatment early are more responsive to treatment. Some individuals with ADHD will grow out of their symptoms, others will continue to grapple with the disorder throughout adulthood. While no parent ever wants to send their child away, it may be worth exploring wilderness therapy as a treatment option for ADHD. The disadvantages - absence from school, separation from family and friends - are short-term, but the benefits hold the potential to last a lifetime.

Statistically, adults with ADHD experience higher incidence of divorce, substance abuse, and unemployment. While this diagnosis does not have to be a life sentence, it is important to give adolescents affected by ADHD the tools to overcome their differences. If someone you care about has been diagnosed with ADHD, don't let them become a statistic.

Resources

Pelsser LM, Frankena K, Toorman J, Savelkoul HF, Dubois AE, Pereira RR, Haagen TA, Rommelse NN, Buitelaar JK. (2011) Effects of a restricted elimination diet on the behaviour of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (INCA study): a randomised controlled trial. *Lancet*. 377:494–503

Taniguchi, S. T., Widmer, M., Duerden, M. D., & Draper, C. (2009). The attributes of effective field staff in wilderness programs: Changing youths' perspectives of being "cool". *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 43(1), 11-26.

Wells, Mary Sarah, Widmer, M., McCoy J.K. (2004). Grubs and Grasshoppers: Challenge-Based Recreation and the Collective Efficacy of Families with At-Risk Yout. *Family Relations*, Vol 3, 326 - 333.

[ADDitude Mag: The Statistics of ADHD](#)

[Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' Fact Sheet on ADHD](#)

[Effective Child Therapy: Attention Defecit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health: Publication on Attention Defecit Hyperactivity Disorder](#)

[National Resource Center on ADIHD, A Program of CHADD: ADHD and Coexisting Conditions: Depression](#)

Additional Resources

For additional resources on helping your child, please visit our website's resource section:

aspiroadventure.com/parent-resources/suggested-reading/



This white paper was sponsored by Aspiro Adventure, the pioneer of Wilderness Adventure Therapy. Aspiro Adventure offers safe, effective, and clinically-sophisticated treatment options for adolescents and young adults.

About Aspiro Adventure

Aspiro Adventure's Wilderness Adventure Therapy program was uniquely crafted to assist students and their families in creating lasting, life-long emotional changes through compassionate, intentional, research backed, and safe outdoor adventure therapy programs. The professionals at Aspiro Adventure understand individuals don't come with instructions, and every student is unique, capable, and amazing in their own right.

Aspiro Adventure focuses on helping adolescents, young adults, and their families through difficulties that occur when various behavioral, cognitive, or developmental issues are present. Research shows that engaging individuals on a personal level with strategic and intentional activities will aid in developing the tools and skills necessary to engage life in a healthy and positive way.