

Donatella Arcangeli



# ADHD

• PRIMARY SCHOOL •



QUICK guide  
for teachers



✓ GIVE THEM SHORT TASKS



✓ BE A TEAM PLAYER

✗ DO NOT SCOLD THEM ✗



**H**ave you ever thought about the most effective strategies for managing a child with ADHD at school? This guide, written in the style of a teacher training workbook, provides targeted, 'ready-to-use' instructions for successfully addressing 15 problem behaviours typical of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.



*Because the hyperactive child exhibits problematic behaviours, but is NOT a problematic child.*



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRESENTATION ..... 5  
INTRODUCTION ..... 7

## Hyperactivity

### THE CHILD...

CHAPTER 1 GETS UP *and wanders around the classroom* ..... 24  
CHAPTER 2 LIES DOWN *under the desk* ..... 30  
CHAPTER 3 PLAYS *with the material on the desk* ..... 36  
CHAPTER 4 CHATS *and is disruptive in class* ..... 42  
CHAPTER 5 IS CHAOTIC *and noisy in play* ..... 48

## Impulsivity

### THE CHILD...

CHAPTER 6 DOESN'T TAKE *turns* ..... 56  
CHAPTER 7 INTERRUPTS *and is intrusive* ..... 62  
CHAPTER 8 ALWAYS MAKES *the same mistakes* ..... 68

CHAPTER 9	DOESN'T AVOID <i>danger</i>	74
CHAPTER 10	CAN'T BE <i>patient</i>	80

## Inattention

### THE CHILD...

CHAPTER 11	DOESN'T WRITE DOWN <i>homework</i>	88
CHAPTER 12	DOESN'T COMPLETE <i>school work</i>	94
CHAPTER 13	IS EASILY <i>distracted</i>	100
CHAPTER 14	STRUGGLES <i>to</i> <i>get organised</i>	106
CHAPTER 15	LOSES <i>and</i> <i>forgets things</i>	112

CONCLUSIONS ..... 119

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 121

## Appendix

INFORMATION SHEET	125
OBSERVATION TABLE	126
MONITORING TABLE	127
THE CONTRACT	129
REWARD COLLECTION SHEET	130

# PRESENTATION

## **Dear teachers,**

I have been working in the field of developmental mental health for 20 years: I am a child and adolescent neuropsychiatrist.

My first task, being a doctor, is to make a diagnosis: I am asked to understand why a child exhibits difficulties in their development.

I have always been convinced that the first therapeutic action is diagnosis: only when we know can we treat.

It is only when we understand why a child behaves in a certain way that we can adopt targeted therapeutic (rehabilitative, psychotherapeutic, educational or even psycho-pharmacological) interventions to help the child.

Since 2008, I have been involved in teacher training, i.e., individual and group training of teachers in Italian, German, and Latin schools in the province of Bozen/Bolzano (Italy); a valuable experience for me, which has strengthened my conviction that only a 'multimodal' treatment of the most severe developmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorders or ADHD) can be effective in addressing the special educational needs of these pupils.<sup>1</sup>

Teacher training represents an indirect therapeutic intervention on the pupil: the aim is for teachers to acquire knowledge of the cognitive functioning of individuals with a disorder (whether developmental, behavioural or psychiatric), so that they can apply specific and therefore more effective educational and teach-

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<sup>1</sup> For further information and the FAQs that emerged during the Teacher Training in South Tyrol (Italy), see the materials in the Online Resources.

## Presentation

ing techniques and develop a common language with childcare clinicians.

But teacher training without teaching continuity at school is useless: very often I had to repeat from scratch for the same pupil the same basic concepts that had been lost with the change of teachers.

Hence the idea of this teacher training workbook: a quick, ready-to-use guide for primary school teachers who have pupils with ADHD, and one which can help them learn more about the disorder and apply simple but effective strategies to deal with it and manage it in the best possible way.



# INTRODUCTION

ADHD refers to attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder typical of those children who exhibit difficulties in maintaining attention and controlling impulsivity and movement.

First of all, it should be underlined that a child with ADHD is a child with special educational needs with whom a lot of patience is needed, but also a lot of determination and above all a lot of authoritativeness. This is a child with a fragility, even if, at the beginning they can be considered only as rude, overbearing and lazy children. That is why they need to be 'understood' before being 'managed'.

The more you know about their cognitive functioning, the more you will understand them. The sooner you understand why they are the way they are and why they do what they do, the more easily you will really get to know them and be able to make them respect you. As a result, you will be able to educate them more easily, to 'guide' them in life, and to 'bring out' all their great potential.

Try to imagine your pupil with ADHD as a child with an extra gear, with batteries that never run out: this is a child with a lot of energy, who is easily bored, always active, constantly attracted by new experiences, unable to control themselves if there is an exciting novelty, but also if, on the contrary, they are faced with a boring activity.

Why is it difficult to manage a child with ADHD at school? Because this is a child who behaves inappropriately, so the first thought is that their behavioural and learning difficulties depend on them or the family behind them.

When they do not respect the rules, we naturally think that they can do whatever they want at home, or when they come to

school without the required materials and without having done their homework, we think that nobody monitors them at home.

In reality, behind a child with ADHD there can be a more or less problematic family situation just like for any other child with difficulties.

### ADHD disorder

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, congenital in nature and with a multifactorial (genetic, neurobiochemical, anatomical, and environmental) aetiology, which begins by the age of 12 years and affects males more than females.

The incidence is about 3-4 cases per 100 children.

The cognitive level is variable, as in the general population, but children with ADHD are more at risk of exhibiting learning disorders, behavioural disorders (oppositional defiant disorder - ODD), and mood and anxiety disorders: the so-called 'comorbidities' that make the clinical picture more severe.

ADHD has precise characteristics that need to be recognised and that may be more or less pronounced within the disorder. They are:<sup>2</sup>

• **HYPERACTIVITY:** hyperactive children are always fidgeting. They find it hard to be quiet and sit still. They are very lively. They need to be engaged in activities (especially physical ones) that are stimulating, new, fun and exciting.

→ Hyperactivity leads to behavioural problems.

The problem is not so much the liveliness itself, but the often-excessive liveliness that makes them unmanageable.

• **IMPULSIVITY:** impulsive children are disruptive, volcanic, impatient, adventurous, risk-takers, exaggerated in their actions and reactions, and sometimes even overbearing.

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<sup>2</sup> Hyperactivity and impulsivity are considered a single criterion for diagnosis, but they can be usefully broken down in the perspective of this volume to better identify problem behaviour.

- ➔ Impulsivity leads to problems in social interaction.
- INATTENTION: inattentive children are a bit lost in their own thoughts, they are distracted, disorganised, messy and inconclusive.
- ➔ Inattention leads to problems in school performance.

The common characteristic is intolerance to boredom. Typically, the child with ADHD gets bored when an activity is proposed to them and they:

- do not know what to do
- cannot do it
- do not like it
- cannot find any meaning in it
- do not know how long it lasts
- do not know why they have to do it.

It is up to you as teachers, in the classroom, to guide them with authoritativeness and kindness in the world of school, learning and living together with their peers.

## The structure of the book

The book is divided into 15 chapters grouped into the 3 macro-sections *Hyperactivity*, *Impulsivity* and *Inattention*, in which the typical problem behaviours of pupils with ADHD are addressed.

*Problem behaviour refers to behaviour that creates a difficulty for teachers, a problem in handling the child in the classroom and at school.*

In this book, those typically found in school-aged children (6-11) with ADHD are analysed:

- Problem behaviour: HYPERACTIVITY. The child...
  1. Gets up and wanders around the classroom
  2. Lies down under the desk
  3. Plays with the material on the desk

## Introduction

4. Chats and is disruptive in class
5. Is chaotic and noisy in play
- ❖ Problem behaviour: IMPULSIVITY. The child...
  6. Doesn't take turns
  7. Interrupts and is intrusive
  8. Always makes the same mistakes
  9. Doesn't avoid danger
  10. Cannot be patient
- ❖ Problem behaviour: INATTENTION. The child...
  11. Doesn't write down the homework
  12. Doesn't complete school work
  13. Is easily distracted
  14. Struggles to get organised
  15. Loses and forgets things.

The reason for each problem behaviour is initially explained in a few concise sentences (*Why do they behave like this?*), followed by simple and clear instructions for the teacher on what to do and what to avoid (*What to do, What to avoid*).

This is followed by an in-depth analysis (*Problem Behaviour Analysis*) and tools and strategies are provided on *How to intervene* with regard to some crucial aspects.

- ❖ The *rules* of behaviour directed at the child
- ❖ The *structuring* of activities and class work
- ❖ The *monitoring* of problem behaviours
- ❖ The *positive reinforcement* of good behaviour
- ❖ The *educational pact* with the family.

Concluding each chapter is *The Expert's Advice*, a short summary paragraph with practical tips that can be put into practice immediately. In the Appendix there are worksheets.

### Rules

Usually, especially if the child arrives at primary school without a diagnosis of ADHD, teachers grant them time to understand the

rules of behaviour and they tolerate problematic behaviours for the first three months. Subsequently, if a child still cannot sit still, it is clear that they have difficulties that should be discussed with the family as soon as possible.

The rules of social behaviour to be followed in class and at school should be clearly explained, and if possible visually illustrated, in a calm but authoritative manner to all children from the first days of school. They should be repeated regularly to help children remember them.

First of all, explain what socially inappropriate behaviour is and why. To help you understand better, give concrete examples by asking: “In your opinion, is it OK to stand up during the lesson? If everyone did it, what would happen?”

Remember, too, that while it is important to curb socially inappropriate behaviour, it is even more important to stop socially unacceptable behaviour, in order to prevent it from becoming the ‘label’ of the child with ADHD in the long run.

*The hyperactive child has problematic behaviour, but IS NOT a problematic child.*

You have to set the rules, because you are in charge of the class.

Rules need to be simple, understandable, but above all they need to make sense. They must be well defined, shared and not simply imposed. Make sure they are clear to everyone.

At the beginning of the school year, share them with the parents and ask them to adopt them at home as well (better management of a child with ADHD requires teamwork with the family). Bear in mind that there are situations in which this will be more difficult because the family is not cooperative, but try anyway.

Enforcing the rules and being respected as a class leader require authoritativeness, therefore:

- make sure the rules are easy to understand and follow

- do not be pedantic, instead be flexible and non-judgmental.

Especially in first grade, but certainly up to third grade, children really like paradoxes and remember things better if you make them laugh or smile with some funny examples or witty jokes.

### **Structuring**

For all children, but especially for children with ADHD, the instructions for each task or action must always be precise and answer the questions: what do I do now, where, for how long, how, and with whom?

First of all, try to analyse attention spans. They are likely to vary between 5 and 20 minutes, especially in the first three years of school. Class work must therefore be organised taking into account attention span and maintaining a 'work-break-work-break' alternation.

Also in your teaching unit, propose alternating work (reading, writing, listening, drawing, playing, singing, jumping, or running etc.) and breaks.

For children with ADHD, breaks are crucial precisely because of their short attention spans. You must plan for them beforehand: it is inadvisable to make a child take a break when they seem tired or when they have gone over their limit. You risk them adopting unmanageable behaviour just to avoid work.

It is also advisable to give structure to all moments of unstructured activity (e.g. playtime): the more the times and spaces are diluted, the more you are at risk of children losing their sense of proportion.

### **How to organise breaks**

The break after a work unit is a short pause during which the child can relax and have a rest. Depending on their characteristics (more or less lively, more or less oppositional) and age, the length and type of the break may vary.

I recommend breaks of no more than 10 minutes and only so long for those children who really need to move.

If you can, organise a relaxation corner in the classroom or outside it (even just outside the door): for example, place a bean bag where they can lie down for five minutes. Mark the time with a timer or an hourglass and remember the social positive reinforcement at the end of the break, when the child starts working again.

## Work units

Work units always need to be adapted to the child's abilities. Do not propose tasks that are out of their reach.

When you have to work on new or difficult topics, warn them that there will be a training unit first: the training unit is more challenging and deserves more positive reinforcement, which you can decide on.

*Example:*

- 🍌 Training unit: worth 2 green stickers<sup>3</sup>
- 🍌 Work unit: worth 1 green sticker
- 🍌 Break unit: social positive reinforcement (Well done! You can do it! Keep it up!).

Question: Is it useful to interrupt a training or work unit to take a scheduled break when the child is working well?

In such cases, it is suggested, when the timer rings or the hourglass runs out, that you stop the activity in progress and say: "Excellent, you're doing really well! Shall we have a break or skip it and restart the timer? Let's try to earn an extra green sticker!".

Remember that coercive methods do not work with children with ADHD; on the contrary, they trigger anger and oppositionality, increasing provocative behaviour.

## Monitoring

Observe how many times a problem behaviour you have decided to intervene on occurs in the lesson or school morning/day, using

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<sup>3</sup> For the awarding of stickers and the reinforcement, see the following paragraphs.

the Monitoring Table in the Appendix (and in the Online Resources). Assign a *coloured sticker* for each episode (as described specifically in each chapter), evaluating it qualitatively using colours:

BLACK STICKER	very bad
RED STICKER	bad
YELLOW STICKER	pretty good
GREEN STICKER	good
LIGHT BLUE STICKER*	very good

\* The light blue sticker is a wild card that is used as an additional sticker for more serious problem behaviour, as specified in the chapters.

Once you have monitored the problem behaviour for at least a week (the longer you observe it, the more credible you will be when discussing it with parents), start working with the *positive reinforcement* technique, using the educational strategies described in the next paragraph or other customised strategies that seem effective to you.

→ **Remember:** anything you do which works in managing the problem behaviour is fine (except of course mistreating the child!). If the same behaviour also occurs at home, it will be easier to activate teamwork with the family.

After observing the same problem behaviour three times (e.g., ‘they lie down under the desk’), on the fourth occasion call the child aside and try to talk to them.

For example, tell them nicely: “I noticed that you sometimes lie down on the floor in the classroom. Are you perhaps tired or bored? Do you know that children have to sit in their seats in the classroom? Is that too tiring for you?”

Observe and note down at what time they lie down, for how long, with which teachers and during which subjects: a structured and detailed analysis of the problem will help you to better understand what is setting them off.

CHAPTER 4 THE CHILD CHATS *and is disruptive in class*



## WHY DOES THE CHILD BEHAVE LIKE THIS?

Because they are hyper-verbal and 'hyper-social', they love to talk and communicate with others, they do not realise that they can be 'overpowering' and become excessive.

Because they want to be likeable and like to be considered by the group, also attracting attention with sometimes exaggerated or inappropriate topics.

Because they are easily distracted and bored.

## WHAT TO DO

- ✓ Always keep *an eye on* them
- ✓ **Make eye contact** with them often and with a wink invite them to be quiet
- ✓ Use gestural recall: the *gesture of silence*
- ✓ Take scheduled *breaks*
- ✓ Remind them of the metaphor that *mosquitoes* are annoying

## WHAT TO AVOID

- ✗ **DO NOT** demand absolute silence
- ✗ **DO NOT** let them sit near lively children
- ✗ **DO NOT** let them sit near very quiet children
- ✗ **DO NOT** let them sit in the last row

## Analysis of the problem behaviour

Hyperactive children, if they are happy children, are usually cheerful, sociable and therefore talkative.

Hyperverbality is the difficulty in inhibiting one's impulse to speak: in the same way they cannot keep still, they cannot keep quiet.

Very often the child with ADHD is 'clowning around' because they like to entertain and are happy when the atmosphere gets 'animated' and there is general excitement.

As a matter of fact, silence for them is BOREDOM, and BOREDOM is discontent (their worst enemy!).

→ Trust me: it is harder to deal with a child with ADHD who is in a bad mood than one who is chatty.

They usually speak very quickly, almost like 'a motor mouth', loudly and about topics that they consider interesting.

Speaking in a hurry and wanting to be heard or attract the attention of the interlocutor, it is easy for them to lose control of their tone of voice and almost to shout (which annoys others, even if they are not aware of it at all).

Remember: a chatty child is not a rude child, but just an enthusiastic child who has not yet managed to learn the rules of social behaviour.

Chatting is a behaviour that is socially inappropriate in some contexts and situations, but certainly not unacceptable.



## How to intervene

Give the child the following

### Rules

- ❖ I have to be quiet in class while working, while the teacher is talking and while we read or write.
- ❖ I have to remind myself not to be like a mosquito, which ‘buzzes’ all the time and annoys everyone.

### Structuring

- ❖ Establish seating arrangements in a studied and structured way. A hyperactive child cannot sit close to other lively children, but nor to quiet ones, because they easily distract the latter.
- ❖ Change seats often, but always choose pairs of classmates (perhaps you can make a ‘wish list’ together with the children and decide what conditions apply for sitting next to a friend).
- ❖ Start the first lesson of the morning with a relaxation ritual: 5 minutes of free or theme-based chatting while sitting, and then start the school activity with everyone fully focused.
- ❖ Define a time frame for the activities in the classroom: for example, establish that for 20-30 minutes they will work and then they can take a 5-minute break for chatting while sitting at their desks. Time them with an hourglass.



**Please note:** 20-30 minutes of intensive work are worth more and are more successful than 60 minutes interrupted by frequent reminders to keep quiet.

### Monitoring

BLACK STICKER	if they keep chatting despite 3 reprimands
RED STICKER	if they chat and interrupt the lesson frequently
YELLOW STICKER	if they disturb their deskmate
GREEN STICKER	if they do not chat during the lesson and do not disturb their deskmates

### Positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement can also be the chat break, but theme-based: “Today, if you work well, in our chat breaks we will talk about...”. You can ask them if they would like to propose a topic for discussion in turn or make a list of topics of common interest to speak about each week.

The importance of keeping quiet when learning something new or finishing a task should be emphasised, respecting everyone’s time.

### The educational pact

When it comes to controlling hyperverbal, parents can do little: you certainly cannot put a plaster over the child’s mouth to prevent them from speaking! It is indeed unnatural to inhibit their sociability and joviality. In any case, parents can certainly be your valuable allies by reminding the child at home of the rules you provide, which, suitably adapted, can also be applied in the family context (e.g., at the dinner table).

## The expert's advice

Never expect that children with ADHD will become quiet: that would be demanding the impossible!

Neither should you be convinced that only in silence does one work well: silence in order to concentrate serves most people, but it often has the opposite effect on the hyperactive child.

For them, as mentioned above, silence is boredom, boredom is inner restlessness and restlessness prevents concentration.

When the child receives a black sticker, do not use punishments but the 'timeout' approach. Then say: "Go to the relaxation corner and be quiet for 10 minutes".

# OBSERVATION TABLE

black = very bad

red = bad

yellow = pretty good

green = good

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Week from \_\_\_\_\_  
to \_\_\_\_\_

**Problem behaviours**

Hyperactivity — The child...

Gets up and wanders around the classroom





Lies down under the desk





Plays with the material on the desk





Chats and is disruptive in class





Is chaotic and noisy in play





Impulsivity — The child...

Does not take turns





Interrupts and is intrusive





Always makes the same mistakes





Does not avoid danger





Cannot be patient





Inattention — The child...

Does not write down the homework





Does not complete school work





Is easily distracted





Struggles to get organised





Loses and forgets things

