

Summary

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition, which is characterised by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. Children who have high intelligence alongside another neurological condition are considered “dual or multiple exceptional” (DME). This term is used in the UK to describe children who have both high learning potential and other additional needs. DME means the same thing as “twice exceptional”, or “2e”, terms used in other parts of the world. This advice sheet aims to indicate how ADHD may present in children with high learning potential and may be helpful for those seeking strategies to support a neurodivergent child’s strengths and needs.

What is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity that impacts on an individual’s day-to-day functioning or development.

The DSM-V states that, in order to qualify for a diagnosis of ADHD, symptoms must:

- Be present before 12 years of age.
- Occur in two or more settings, such as at home and at school.
- Have been present for at least 6 months prior to diagnosis.
- Clearly interfere with, or reduce the quality of social, academic or occupational functioning.
- Not have exclusively occurred during the course of a psychotic disorder and are not better explained by another disorder, although it can coexist with others.

Symptoms and referral

The three main areas of diagnostic characteristics of ADHD are:

- **Inattention** – Wandering off task, lacking persistence, disorganisation and difficulty sustaining focus.
- **Hyperactivity** – Excessive motor activity, such as excessive fidgeting, tapping, or talkativeness.
- **Impulsivity** – refers to hasty actions that occur in the moment without forethought and that have high potential for harm to the individual. Impulsive behaviour may also manifest as social intrusiveness, such as interrupting; and/or making important decisions without considering the long-term consequences.

Diagnosis and treatment requires referral to a specialist, who may be a paediatrician, child psychiatrist, neurologist, clinical social worker, or to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), dependent on age and local service provisions.

Beyond the medical definitions

It is widely recognised that the name attention deficit hyperactivity disorder provides an inaccurate description which is unhelpful for raising awareness and gaining appropriate accommodations. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder implies that an ADHD person does not have enough attention to stay focused; in many cases however, it may be more accurate to describe it as an inability to consciously choose or control where to channel attention and focus.

Hyperactivity is not always outwardly obvious; many ADHD individuals experience internalised hyperactivity and are prone to rumination or overthinking. Your child may ruminate on their feelings of being misunderstood by others and the negative feedback received from others; your child may feel frustrated by their executive functioning differences or face barriers in regulating their emotions and impulse control.

Is it HLP, ADHD or both?

As with other Dual or Multiple Exceptionality (DME) profiles, asynchronous development and overlapping characteristics in your child's profile may make it difficult to differentiate between ADHD and high learning potential. Many characteristics and behavioural traits of ADHD are similar to some of the characteristics of high learning potential. An ADHD and HLP/DME child may show mixed characteristics such as, but not limited to:

- high creativity in a range of topics (including STEM subjects)
- being an early reader, having an early understanding of numeracy and/or having a large vocabulary
- showing divergent thinking, having original ideas, being able to see unusual connections
- showing compassion and empathy for others, sometimes becoming upset themselves when confronted with suffering
- being concerned with fairness and justice
- being observant and curious about the world but showing heightened feelings of worry around world events
- requiring intellectual stimulation
- having high levels of enthusiasm and curiosity when learning about something new or an area of special interest.
- facing social challenges relating to similar aged peers
- experiencing 'fear of failure', or persistent low self-esteem
- showing emotional intensity.

According to Lovecky, D.V. in her 2023 book referenced below, and during a 2024 online conference for SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children)¹, compared to high learning potential children with no additional needs, ADHD DME children:

- often show more variability in test scores, requiring greater stimulation and levels of novelty to maintain interest
- may have a higher need for executive function and impulsivity support
- tend to be more creative and utilise divergent thinking skills more frequently
- may struggle to finish projects due to unrealistic plans or expectations for a given timeframe, impulsivity and sustaining required levels of motivation and interest.
- may experience obstacles when engaging with peers, seek out risk-takers as friends and may be at increased risk of succumbing to peer pressure
- are more likely to have co-existing mental health conditions

¹ SENG Authors Online Session, April 2024 <https://www.sengifted.org/events/sengauthors-different-minds-gifted-children-with-adhd-asd-and-other-dual-exceptionalities-second-edition>

- have lower self-concept and levels of happiness
- may demonstrate less mature emotional regulation skills
- tend to be more irritable, sensitive, and intense which may lead to more conflicts with parents and peers
- often describe themselves in extremes, both positively and negatively
- may demonstrate an immature perspective on morality and be more sensitive to issues concerning themselves
- lie impulsively or because they believe it will help them to avoid getting in trouble.

These differences highlight the nuanced challenges that face gifted children with ADHD, emphasising the importance of *tailored support and understanding* of their unique needs across various domains.

How can I help my ADHD HLP child?

To effectively support your ADHD DME child, it is important to understand their individual experience, strengths, needs and challenges as a whole rather than try to attribute individual aspects of their personality to either high learning potential or ADHD.

Acceptance and Understanding

Parenting an ADHD DME child can be stressful and challenging at times. The fluctuation between your child's 'hyperfocus', impulsivity, inattentiveness, and hyperactivity; combined with supporting your child's mental wellbeing using strategies that avoid your child feeling criticised and misunderstood, can be exhausting.

As a parent to an ADHD child, it may also be worth considering whether you too meet the criteria² for an ADHD diagnosis due to the genetic link. If this is the case, it might be very hard to regulate your own emotions and take care of your individual needs alongside those of your child. This can be especially difficult if this possibility has not yet been explored or identified.

There are many complexities within an ADHD DME child's profile that may require long term support, learning, trialling of multiple strategies, or potentially medication. However, understanding and acceptance of your child's *differently wired brain* is the foundation to emotional wellbeing and expression of potential.

Working with School

It is common for children with HLP or ADHD to encounter barriers in school settings. HLP children, whose ADHD has not been recognised, may be met with unrealistic expectations. By the time an ADHD child is 12, they are likely to have received 20,000 more negative comments on their behaviour than their neurotypical peers³. It is easy to understand why ADHD children may be prone to developing a negative self-image and may experience low self-esteem when their strengths remain unidentified.

² National Institute for Health and Care Excellence <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder/#!scenario>

³ CHADD: The ADHD Blog, Prioritise Praising Your Child with ADHD
<https://chadd.org/prioritize-praising-your-child-with-adhd/>

ADHD DME children may feel unsure of where they belong within social and educational settings depending on the specific combination of strengths and challenges of their profile. It is necessary that all teachers and support staff utilise your child's strengths to support the challenges that come with some aspects of their multiple exceptional profile. Encouraging self-acceptance in their educational setting as well as at home can increase your child's self-esteem and support them to reach their potential.

Building an open and positive dynamic with your child's teaching staff will help support your ADHD HLP child's academic performance, social skills and emotional wellbeing. Our Advice Sheets, PA307 Working in Positive Partnership with Schools and PA315 Meeting with the School, offer guidance on how to build a collaborative relationship with your child's school setting and teachers.

Adaptations at Home

To provide a safe and secure environment for your ADHD DME child, it is imperative they feel understood, validated, and accepted. They need to be parented without judgement or censorship of their differences. Creating a safe and secure environment includes understanding your child's triggers, working through challenges together and openly discussing the support your child feels they may need.

You may need to consider adjusting your home environment to support your child; some factors to look at when trying to make your family home more ADHD friendly may include:

- Reducing the clutter: by simplifying your living spaces it can help reduce distractions and "visual noise" which may impact on your child's capacity to focus or engage.
- Having specific areas for certain activities: Homework at a desk with pens etc. to hand at all times or if homework is done at the dining table, making sure all plates or any items not needed for their homework are cleared from the table before homework is started.
- Creating organisation systems that work for your family: would having a hook by the front door where their school bag and coat are hung when they get home every day reduce the time they spend looking for things the next morning?
- Working together at the end of each day to reset rooms or prepare things for the next day: this can help to create and reinforce daily habits but also show your child that you are there to support them.
- Ensuring that your child's space and family home is sensory friendly: consider how sensory adaptations could help reduce overwhelm and emotional dysregulation. Would your child benefit from a weighted blanket? Could having dimmer switches on lights help signal the start of your bedtime routine? Do they have a specific drawer or basket filled with sensory toys or items that calm them whenever they need them?

Adaptations for Parenting

By adopting parenting techniques that encourage and emphasise your child's strengths, you can empower them to reach their potential. Understanding the difference between whether you are reacting or responding to your child, can be helpful; reactions are often made without forethought and may have a negative impact on your child; responses are usually carefully considered and are not critical of your child, but do, when necessary, demonstrate consequences.

Approaches and techniques you may want to trial or include in your parenting style and family life to support your ADHD HLP child may include:

- Rewarding and positively reinforcing positive actions and choices in a way that works for them.
- Considering your child's triggers and understanding the reason behind them.
- Anticipating, planning and reviewing actions with your child. Wait until your child is in a regulated mindset before reviewing actions that caused emotional dysregulation.
- Calmly and openly discussing actions which resulted in dangerous, harmful, or negative consequences without being critical or judgemental of your child.
- Avoiding comparing your child's moments of 'hyperfocus' to those of inattentiveness.
- Talking to your child as positively as possible.
- Providing challenging, creative, and physical activities. Aim to provide an alternative and appropriate outlet for any potential physical and intellectual hyperactivity/need for stimulation.
- Communicating regularly with the school and working positively alongside them.

These techniques can help ensure that your child feels respected and understood and reaffirms the relationship between them and you as their parent, which further develops trust. The use of positive reinforcement helps to ensure that most of the focus is placed on their strengths, this enables them to develop increased self-esteem and perform to their best, as they develop awareness of how to accept and manage their ADHD.

Strategies for Supporting Your Child's Executive Functioning and Mental Wellbeing

Emotional Regulation- Due to the differences in how an ADHD brain is structured and develops, people with ADHD may face barriers in regulating their own emotions as well as processing emotional cues in themselves and others. Helping your ADHD HLP or DME? child to develop their emotional literacy (understanding of their feelings) and grounding strategies can help them feel more in control of their feelings and enable them to more effectively communicate the support they require when they are emotionally overwhelmed.

Positive Reinforcement- Many HLP children experience low self-esteem at some point during their childhood but if your child also has a diagnosis of ADHD the risk of them experiencing low self-esteem is increased. When using positive reinforcement with your HLP DME child it is important to avoid bribery, focus on praising effort and discuss natural consequences. The use of positive reinforcement can help build confidence, nurture resilience whilst limiting the potential negative impact of perfectionism and low self-esteem which is common in ADHD DME children.

Understanding and Supporting Social Barriers- Some children with high learning potential may feel they encounter barriers when forming friendships. This could be attributed to the depth of knowledge they have on a particular topic, the level of intricacy in their imaginative play being beyond the understanding or interest of peers, or not sharing interests and hobbies aligned with their chronological aged peers. Some HLP children may seem more sensitive or emotionally dysregulated than their peers which may lead to them being perceived as immature.

If your child also has an ADHD diagnosis, their DME profile may mean they experience additional barriers in their social interactions. Due to impulsivity or hyperactivity your ADHD HLP child may say something without considering the implications of their words, may struggle to wait their turn or seem overbearing in a group project as they have many ideas they want to share. Their inattentiveness may mean they aren't as aware of someone talking to them, they may forget to text a friend back or may be so focused a chosen project that they are late to meet a friend. These are just examples of a few barriers your DME child may experience. It is important to listen to your child's perception of their friendships or social experiences and validate their concerns while trying to support them.

Encouraging Social Interactions- It is important that parents, carers and teachers of ADHD HLP children nurture their social and emotional development through teaching and modelling positive social interactions and emotional regulation strategies. Depending on their age, your DME child may enjoy role playing as a way of developing their social skills or social stories that show characters who have overcome similar barriers.

Finding 'safe' friends for your ADHD HLP child to express their feelings to without fear of judgement is an important step towards self-acceptance and will help your child learn how to build and maintain deeper connections. Encourage your child to join clubs or groups centred around their interests whilst reminding them that building friendships is a gradual process so not to feel discouraged if they don't instantly form that deeper connection. Encouraging playdates with one friend at a time can help your child feel less overwhelmed.

Support Executive Function

ADHD children benefit from their environment being structured; this includes building consistent routines to help develop their executive functioning skills and helping scaffold new skills to become automatic.

It's important that when establishing new routines, the process is collaborative. Your child should feel included and that their input is valued. When you consider daily routines, consider a structured timetable or schedule; ADHD HLP brains require an element of flexibility within their daily routines so it may be beneficial to think of 'routines' as a sequence that leads to a particular event rather than a strict timetable. Strategies you could try include:

- Preparing for the next day the day/night before i.e.: getting uniform out, checking school bag and preparing PE kit etc.
- Using a visual routine or written checklist where tasks like "getting ready for school" are broken down into smaller chunks i.e.: -have breakfast -brush teeth -wash face -get dressed -brush hair -put shoes on -coat and bag -leave.
- Colour coding subjects or activities and ensuring all associated resources or equipment are also colour coded somehow with a sticker, folder or tag so they can be grabbed easily without having to consider what is needed.
- It's important to include downtime or free time in your child's day, some parents feel that time chunking or blocking can be useful when planning weekends or family time.
- Having a consistent routine or sequence of events to regulate before bedtime.
- Planning for active or physical time, this could just be time on a trampoline or a trip to the

play park after school but it's important to consider how you can incorporate this time into each day.

Supporting Your Own Mental Wellbeing

Parenting your HLP ADHD child may feel overwhelming and finding time to take care of your own mental wellbeing may fall to the bottom of your to-do list. Setting time aside to look after yourself is not only essential for your own mental health and wellbeing but enables you to parent more effectively. Give yourself permission to rest; by taking small but regular steps to recharge you can increase your capacity to responding with patience, help to managing stress, have more energy, and ultimately set a positive example for your child.

Further Information

PA315 Meeting with the School	This advice sheet has been written by Potential Plus UK to help parents to prepare for school meetings. Meeting with the school to ensure that your child's needs are met is an essential part of supporting your child with high learning potential. With this in mind, we have put together some useful guidance to help achieve a positive meeting with the school.
PA307 Working in Positive Partnership with Schools	Potential Plus UK Advice Sheet giving information and advice about supporting your child's education in school by working with the school positively.
PA517 Supporting DME Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support a DME profile high learning potential child.
PA318 Proprioception Activities	This advice sheet aims to explain how proprioceptive activities can be used if your child is over-responsive, under-responsive or sensory seeking to provide sensory feedback about where the body is in space.
PA608 Helping High Learning Potential Children with Emotional Regulation	This advice sheet is for parents who would like to understand how to support their children develop emotional regulation skills.
PA522 Executive Function Skills	This advice sheet explores the topic and suggests ways to help children to mature their executive function skills.
ADHD Foundation https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/	The ADHD Foundation Neurodiversity Charity, based in Liverpool, supports parents and carers so they can understand and meet the needs of their child.

Understood: What is ADHD? https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-adhd	Webpage from Understood.org outlining ADHD, characteristics and treatment.
CHADD: The ADHD Blog, Prioritise Praising Your Child with ADHD https://chadd.org/prioritize-praising-your-child-with-adhd/	Blog article from CHADD website outline the importance of praise for an ADHD child.
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder/#!scenario	NICE Clinical Knowledge Summary Site ADHD
Additude Magazine: What Does Twice Exceptional Mean? Identifying and Nurturing Gifted Children with ADHD https://www.additudemag.com/twice-exceptional-adhd-signs/	Article from Additude online magazine discussing twice exceptionality and also links to this article looking at unlocking potential of gifted ADHD children.
<i>Parenting Dual Exceptional Children: Supporting a Child who has High Learning Potential and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities</i> by Denise Yates	A book looking at a strengths-based approach towards helping parents recognise and focus on their child's areas of potential and support them towards better attainment and self-esteem, whilst addressing areas of difficulty. It provides an understanding of the mixed learning profiles of DME children, explaining why they may excel in some areas but not others and how to work positively with schools in support of their DME child.
<i>Twice-Exceptional Gifted Children: Understanding, Teaching, and Counselling Gifted Students</i> by Beverly A Trail	By offering a thorough discussion of twice exceptional (DME) students based on the research into how gifted children learn, the author helps teachers develop a broad understanding of the complex issues of gifted students with disabilities.
<i>Different Minds: Gifted Children with ADHD, ASD, and Other Dual Exceptionalities, Second Edition</i> by Deirdre V. Lovecky Ph.D	This book provides an insight into the challenges and benefits specific to gifted children with dual exceptionalities. Recognising the different kinds and levels of giftedness, and how giftedness manifests in children with ADHD, Autism and other dual exceptionalities.
<i>Raising Twice Exceptional Children: A handbook for parents of neurodivergent gifted kids</i> by Emily Kircher-Morris	A book helping parents to understand their child's profile, social-emotional needs and build self-regulation skills, goal setting and self-advocacy.
<i>If This is a Gift, Can I Send it Back? Surviving in the Land of the Gifted and Twice Exceptional</i> by Jen Merrill	Anecdotal style book where the author takes the reader on her journey through discovery, understanding, and acceptance, as she copes with the challenges that only the gifted and twice exceptional can create.
<i>How to Parent Children with ADHD: 48 Techniques & Strategies to Understand and Support your Neurodivergent Child</i> by Krissa Lane	Book written for parents of ADHD children, aiming to provide understanding of ADHD and suggestions of strategies to support children develop their executive function and emotional regulation skills.