

Hyperactivity – signs to watch out for and simple advice

Hyperactivity in children is a phenomenon that is becoming more apparent in children as the years go by. This is partially due to the increased understanding of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) by parents, teachers and doctors alike.

ADHD is a medical diagnosis that affects approximately 10% of the South African population and it affects boys more than girls. ADHD is a neurological disorder that needs to be diagnosed by a doctor (preferably a psychiatrist or neurologist) and treatment procedures can vary. ADHD results in ongoing and severe inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. It is however important to realise that not all children who appear hyperactive have ADHD and therefore medication, such as Ritalin, is not always the best course of action. There are several other contributing factors that can lead to hyperactivity, the most common of which are low muscle tone, poor fine motor skills and poor concentration.

So what are the signs of hyperactivity that parents and teachers should look out for?

- Difficulty sitting still, frequently get up out of their seat in class or squirming in their seat
- Often fidgets with hands or feet, always playing with something on their table in class
- Excessive running, climbing or jumping in play times
- Difficulty waiting in line or taking turns
- Avoids play activities that are quiet or solitary (e.g. building a puzzle or colouring in)
- Blurting out answers before the full question is asked

In addition to hyperactivity children often have difficulty paying attention, they can be easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds, make careless mistakes, have difficulty following instructions and are often forgetful and lose personal items such as toys, books or lunch boxes.

As a parent there are several things you can do with your child at home to try to reduce their level of activity.

- Allow your child play time outside where their need for physical activity can be met. Often getting them involved in extramural activities like karate or gymnastics is very helpful.
- Check your child's diet – healthy eating is very important! Cut out all artificial flavourants and food colourings. NEVER send sweets, chocolates or fizzy drinks to school! Make sure your child drinks enough water.
- When doing homework with your child give them sufficient breaks and allow gross motor activity within these breaks (jumping on a trampoline if available is wonderful). Homework should be done at a desk in a quiet environment and should be done in the same place and at the same time everyday. Routine is very important!
- Ensure your child gets adequate sleep. Sleep is often difficult for children who are hyperactive as it is hard for them to calm down sufficiently to fall asleep even though they are often exhausted at the end of the day. Bedtime routine should be established and include a warm bath just before bed. No rough and tumble play or television (including playstation or Wii) for at least an hour before bedtime. It is often helpful to have a bedtime story in your child's bedroom with you lying next to them as this provides quality time with your child as well as the calming environment needed to allow for sleep.

In most cases however intervention is often required. Occupational therapy can successfully treat the symptoms and underlying causes of the hyperactivity and inattention (make sure your therapist is trained in sensory integration) but medication may also be required. To find a qualified occupational therapist in your area contact the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa on 012 365 1317 or email otoffice@uitweb.co.za.