

ADHD—What is Behavioral Therapy?

Most experts recommend using both behavioral therapy and medication to treat ADHD depending on the age of the child. This approach is known as multimodal treatment.

There are many forms of behavioral therapy, but all have a common goal: that caring adults learn to change the child's physical and social environments to help them improve their attention and activity.

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about behavioral therapy for a child with ADHD.

Behavioral therapy has 3 basic principles.

1. **Set specific, doable goals.** Set clear and reasonable goals for your child, such as staying focused on homework for a certain amount of time or sharing toys with friends.
2. **Provide rewards and consequences.** Give your child a specified reward (positive reinforcement) every time they demonstrate the desired behavior. Give your child a consequence (unwanted result or punishment) consistently when they exhibit inappropriate behaviors. Sometimes when you start using a punishment, the behavior may increase before it starts to decrease and disappear.
3. **Keep using the rewards and consequences.** Using the rewards and consequences consistently for a long time will shape your child's behavior in a positive way.

Under this approach, parents, teachers, and other caregivers learn better ways to work with and relate to a child with ADHD. You will learn how to set and enforce rules, help your child understand what they need to do, use discipline effectively, and encourage desired behavior. Your child will learn better ways to control their behavior as a result. You will also learn how to be more consistent.

Table 1 shows specific behavioral therapy techniques that can be effective with children who have ADHD.

How can I help my child improve their attention and activity?

As their child's primary caregivers, parents play a major role in behavioral therapy. Parent training is available to help you learn more about ADHD and specific, positive ways to respond to ADHD-type behaviors. This will help your child improve. In many cases, attending parenting classes with other parents will suffice, but with children who have more challenging behaviors, individual work with a counselor or coach may be needed.

Caring for yourself will also help your child. Being the parent of a child with ADHD can be challenging. It can test the limits of even the best parents. Parent training and support groups made up of other families with children who have ADHD can be a great source of help. Learn stress management techniques to help you respond calmly to your child. Seek your own counseling if you feel overwhelmed or hopeless.

Ask your child's doctor to help you find parent training, counseling, and support groups in your community.

Table 1: Behavioral Therapy Techniques

Technique	Description	Example
Positive reinforcement	Complimenting the child and providing rewards or privileges in response to a desired behavior	The child completes an assignment and is permitted to play on the computer.
Time-out	Removing access to a desired activity because of unwanted behavior	The child hits a sibling and, as a result, must sit for 5 minutes in the corner of the room.
Response cost	Withdrawing rewards or privileges because of unwanted behavior	The child loses free-time privileges for not completing homework.
Token economy	Combining reward and consequence. The child earns rewards and privileges when exhibiting desired behaviors. Rewards and privileges are lost for unwanted behaviors.	The child earns stars or points for completing assignments and loses stars or points for getting out of their seat. Stars or points at the end of the week can be used to get a prize.

Behavioral therapy is designed to help families recognize the limits that having ADHD puts on a child. It focuses on how the important people and places in the child's life can adapt to encourage desired behavior and discourage unwanted behavior. It differs from play therapy or other therapies that focus mainly on the child and their emotions.

What you can do

- **Keep your child on a daily schedule.** Try to keep the times your child wakes up, eats, bathes, leaves for school, and goes to sleep the same each day.
- **Cut down on distractions.** Loud music, computer games, and TV can overstimulate your child. Make it a rule to keep the TV or music turned off during mealtimes and homework. Don't place a TV into your child's bedroom. Whenever possible, avoid taking your child to places that may be too stimulating, such as busy shopping malls.
- **Organize your house.** If your child has specific and logical places to keep their schoolwork, toys, and clothes, they are less likely to lose them. Save a spot near the front door for their school backpack so they can grab it on the way out.
- **Reward desired behavior.** Offer kind words, hugs, or small prizes for achieving goals in a timely manner or for demonstrating desired behavior. Praise and reward your child's efforts to pay attention.
- **Set small, achievable goals.** Aim for slow progress rather than instant results. Be sure that your child understands they can take small steps.
- **Help your child stay "on task."** Use charts and checklists to track progress with homework or chores. Keep instructions brief. Offer frequent, friendly reminders.
- **Limit choices.** Help your child learn to make good decisions by giving them only 2 or 3 options at a time.

- **Find activities at which your child can succeed.** All children need to experience success to feel good about themselves.
- **Use calm discipline.** Use consequences such as calling time-out, removing your child from the situation, or distracting them. Sometimes it is best to simply ignore the behavior. Physical punishment, such as spanking or slapping, is not helpful. Discuss your child's behavior with them when both of you are calm.
- **Reach out to teachers.** Develop a good communication system with your child's teachers.

Visit HealthyChildren.org for more information.

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics patient education booklet, *Understanding ADHD: Information for Parents About Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*.

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