

## An **ADDitude** Guide



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# ADHD Ages & Stages

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A timeline of developmental milestones and overlapping ADHD challenges, plus targeted strategies for each life stage.

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**E**VERY LIFE STAGE—CHILDHOOD, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood—is defined by developmental milestones that are shaped or complicated in some way by symptoms of ADHD. Here is a timeline of essential skills at each phase of life, plus parallel ADHD-related challenges and strategies from experts that apply to academics, relationships, emotions, organization, and beyond. *(Continued)*

## Childhood (6 to 12 Years)

### Developmental Milestones in Childhood

**I**N GRADES 1 THROUGH 6, STUDENTS work to build a rock-solid academic, social, and emotional foundation in the following areas:

> **Reading acquisition and comprehension require sitting still and focusing consistently**, a hurdle for hyperactive and/or inattentive children.

> **Learning math facts and operations may be thrown off track by distractibility and boredom.** This results in careless mistakes like missing digits or skipping steps. Frustration follows.

> **Understanding and following**

**social contracts are harder with emotional dysregulation** and poor perspective-taking skills. Children with ADHD often interrupt teachers and classmates, find it hard to keep friends, and act out in anger.

> **Learning to follow multi-step directions—from morning routines to homework assignments—calls on a child's executive functions**, which are weak in the ADHD brain.

> **Building organization skills happens through observation and practice**, often a challenge in households where one or more parent has ADHD.



### Strategies for ADHD in Childhood

**P**OSITIVE REINFORCEMENT IS PARTICULARLY POWERFUL at this stage of life. When elementary students constantly face punishment and disappointment from parents and teachers, their confidence and self-concept are destroyed. Set a time to discuss undesirable behavior after the immediate, stressful moment has passed. Clear, consistent goals and rewards make a world of difference at this age. Try these strategies:

**1 To boost early language skills**, align your child's reading material with his passions and interests. Use graphic novels and audio texts to build a love of

books, and engage in the material by asking questions to build his critical-thinking and comprehension skills. Watch the film version of a just-finished book and discuss the differences.

**2 Create flashcards using yellow index cards and black ink.** This color combination is easily processed by the brain and will trigger memory. Students can use the flashcards for reading acquisition or any type of studying. This tool helps them learn and memorize facts. When they see good results, their engagement and interest will inevitably increase.

“Identify and avoid your child’s triggers when it’s possible, and use calming strategies when it’s not.”

## Treating ADHD in Childhood

**T**he American Academy of Pediatrics recommends behavior therapy in conjunction with medication to treat ADHD symptoms in children ages 6 to 12. Behavior therapy reinforces desired behaviors with parenting strategies that focus on consistency, clarity, and incentives. The first-line ADHD medication prescribed to children is typically a stimulant—methylphenidate or amphetamine—available as a tablet, capsule, liquid, patch, or disintegrating tablet. Work carefully with your child’s prescribing healthcare provider to identify the best medication and calibrate the dose for maximum effectiveness

and fewest side effects. Choose a formulation that your child can tolerate. Liquid formulations or flavored tablets that dissolve in saliva may be best for children who have difficulty swallowing pills. Children who do not respond to or tolerate stimulants may be prescribed non-stimulants or off-label medications.

Children with ADHD, roughly half of whom also have a learning disability, usually benefit from IEPs or 504 Plans that outline classroom accommodations and/or academic services. Behavior intervention plans help some students replace interfering behaviors with appropriate alternative actions.

**3 Post a big, bright list of classroom or family expectations in a prominent location.** Place a stop-sign sticker on each student’s desk. The teacher can silently point to this to adjust behavior with minimal interruption or embarrassment.

**4 To grow math competence and confidence, keep a step-by-step sample problem nearby** for easy reference during homework. Draw attention to operation signs and important information with highlighters, and check for accuracy at each step of the problem to curb frustration.

**5 To build organization skills, divide your child’s routines and chores into smaller steps** to avoid overwhelming him. Create reminders and guides, like an illustrated timeline of his morning routine or a series of “clean bedroom” checklists (for the closet, dresser, bed) with a photo of the ideal result for each chore.

**6 Identify and avoid your child’s triggers when possible,** and use calming strategies when not. Teach your child coping skills, and role-play when and where to use them. Remain calm, validate her feelings, and praise your child’s efforts at emotional control.

## Adolescence (13 to 17 Years)

### Developmental Milestones in Adolescence

**I**N MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL, STUDENTS' thirst for independence grows much faster than their executive function skills.

> **Independent organization skills and systems become more important** as students begin navigating complex schedules, using lockers, changing classrooms, and logging (and completing! and handing in!) homework for several subjects.

> **Conducting and organizing research in order to write long academic papers** is a task that requires sustained attention, prioritization skills, and the ability to estimate time accurately to meet a deadline.

> **Self-motivation and self-regulation are necessary** to strike a healthy balance

between academics, activities, and friendships—and to resist the temptation to stay up late texting or gaming.

> **Metacognition**, or the ability to reflect on one's past experiences and strongest principles to plan and make smart choices. This skill may be derailed or delayed by impulsivity, which leads to risky behaviors involving cars, substances, and sex.

> **Students need self-advocacy skills** to effectively communicate with their teachers about accommodations, with their clinicians about treatment successes and challenges, and with their caregivers about mental and emotional health issues.

“When a teen feels shame over not finishing a task, draw attention to his strengths and gifts.”

### Strategies for ADHD in Adolescence

**1** **Ask your teen to make a to-do list**, estimate the time needed for each task, then track the actual time required to complete it. This helps students learn to estimate and budget their time more effectively. Have your teen keep her to-do list and time allotments in the world's most universally useful organization tool: a paper planner.

**2** **Ask, “Are you procrastinating or are you avoiding?”** Then, talk it through to figure

out what your teen is avoiding and why. When shame gets in the way, acknowledge your child's feelings and draw attention to his strengths and gifts. Research famous people and role models with ADHD, and continue to praise effort, not outcomes.

**3** **To stem procrastination, it is important to have a defined space for work.** Students must learn to find a quiet place in the house, and to create a get-started process with a list that breaks down the tasks ahead.

**4** **Teach your child how to create a mind map**, using sticky notes or flashcards to log and organize the main ideas or topics of a big writing assignment. Explain how to edit a first draft, and how to move sentences and paragraphs around, instead of scrapping a draft. This is an important skill set to have in middle and high school.

**5** **Work with your teen to devise a system** for recording and prioritizing assignments. Even if

## Treating ADHD in Adolescence

**T**he natural desire for independence sometimes throws ADHD medication adherence into a tailspin. At this stage, monitor your child's medication schedule closely, and discuss her concerns openly. If your teen begins "cheeking" her pills (not swallowing them), ask your clinician about switching to a liquid formulation. Also discuss whether adjusting your child's medication type or dosage is needed with the onset of puberty. To encourage autonomous medication management, see that your teen works closely with his clinician on these changes.

The transitions to middle and high school stress executive functions. Students need strong brain skills for planning, organizing, prioritizing, and executing work. School accommodations should be re-evaluated and revised annually (or twice annually) to ensure they're meeting the demands of higher education.



the homework is listed on a school website, the physical task of writing it down makes it real. An orderly approach improves executive functions, and provides an opportunity for positive reinforcement when he completes a task and crosses it off his list. Paper planners are proven tools, but digital systems are OK if they work for your child's brain.

**6 Create a collaborative plan for screen use** by first agreeing on a baseline amount of screen time.

Your teen may earn more screen time as he completes chores, homework, and other tasks. Provide reminders to ease the transition off screens, and don't allow tablets, phones, or computers in his bedroom at night. They interfere with sleep, which is critical at this age, and encourage a dependence on screens at all hours.

**7 Explain the concept of pills and skills.** Medication helps a student focus on the task in front of

him, but he must use that focus boost to put in the work and practice skills. By the same token, do not give up on medication if the first prescription doesn't work; it rarely does. Describe the value of nutrition, exercise, sleep hygiene, and structure. Balanced meals, 30 minutes of exercise, and taking medication at the right time make a big difference in cognitive ability.

## Young Adulthood (18 to 24 Years)

### Developmental Milestones in Young Adulthood

**L**EAVING HOME FOR COLLEGE. ORGANIZING A GAP year, applying and interviewing for a first job, adulting—young adulthood is one big life event after another, each one needing these developmental skills:

> **Advocating for oneself.** College students must communicate their needs (a quiet testing area, a class notetaker, etc.) to sometimes reluctant professors. New employees must be able to request performance-enhancing modifications, like frequent progress check-ins or telecommuting options.

> **Juggling academics, work, and social**

**obligations.** This is hard for many young adults, who are tempted to hang out with friends rather than study or get to bed early.

> **Taking responsibility for your physical and mental health.** Young adults must develop a consistent daily medication routine, exercise regularly, practice self-care, and eat healthy meals and snacks. This requires self-discipline.

> **Making thoughtful decisions.** Which college to attend, which career to pursue, and how to nurture (or end) relationships—answering all of these important questions requires listing, considering, and measuring alternatives in a meaningful way.

### Strategies for ADHD in Young Adulthood

**I**T IS THE NORM FOR COLLEGE students with ADHD to have academic, organizational, and social challenges. Heavy course loads, a new independence, and a more complex social scene all bring their problems. Many young adults don't realize how much they have relied on external supports through the years. To build independence, try these strategies:

**1 Find the best college fit for your student.** This doesn't mean pursuing the highest-ranked or most prestigious schools. It means researching course offerings, requirements, and available waivers. It also means contacting the disabilities office and discussing accommodations such as:

> **Using a student note taker**

> **Getting a copy of the professor's notes** ahead of class, so they can be reviewed in advance

> **Getting help to identify content,** professors, and assignment types that are a good fit for a student

> **Breaking testing** into shorter sections

> **Recording lectures** to listen to while studying.

**2 At the outset of each semester, gather your syllabi,** lay out assignments on a master calendar, and look at the entire semester. When are the major tests? When is the midterm? When are papers due? How to fit in parties and the social aspects of college? It all goes back to that basic advice—make a plan.

**3 Structure is crucial** for maintaining control of one's time and life. Avoid an all-or-nothing approach; lay out achievable daily intentions instead. Try external motivators, like using a "body double" when studying or working at household chores, to boost productivity.

**4 Daunting or uninteresting tasks** will be difficult to initiate. This challenge is tied to weak emotional regulation—a core ADHD issue—not just poor time management. Admit your discomfort and be honest about why you're avoiding the task. Divide large projects into small, doable steps with allotted times. Take breaks and reward yourself along the way.



## Treating ADHD in Young Adulthood

**A**DHD medication, psychotherapy, and environmental accommodations comprise the treatment plan for many young adults with ADHD. Medication needs may change as focus shifts from a college schedule to a work schedule. This may require an extended release stimulant formulation that works for longer periods. In college, an ADHD coach can help young adults discover tools to combat procrastination and poor time management and prioritization skills.

**5 To develop a regular routine for taking ADHD medication,** set up a check-in system with your family, clinician, or your college's health center. Target your medication to be effective when you need it most, and consider that your dosage may need to be adjusted by your doctor. Set reminders for refills. If shame gets in the way, remember that medication is an important tool for bringing out your strengths.

**6 Aim for balanced meals** or, at least, balanced days. Stick to set bed and wake-up times, and participate in movement-based activities. Notice what makes you feel good, and add more of it into your day. Use apps and reminders to build new habits.

# Adulthood (25 Years+)

## Developmental Milestones in Adulthood

**M**AJOR LIFE CHANGES—GETTING MARRIED, STARTING A family, moving up the career ladder or changing jobs, and managing a home—require the developmental skills of adulthood:

> **Harnessing focus and attention on demand** is necessary to productivity at work and at home, where there are many distractions to undercut your efforts.

> **Building reminder and scheduling systems** helps adults keep track of doctor's appointments, school events, work deadlines, and all of life's nagging to-do items. Without a system, the information rattling around in an ADHD brain can (and often does) cause overload.

> **Estimating and managing time** for not only yourself but also your children becomes a daily chore in adulthood. Mastering schedules makes the difference between catching the bus or ruining your whole day.

> **Mastering emotional regulation**—learning how to recognize and deal with out-of-proportion irritability, anger, sadness, and excitement—is a key to relationship health and longevity.

> **Devising physical organizational skills** for managing bills, mail, clutter, and life's other "stuff" is not easy, but it can mean the difference between wasting a Saturday searching for an overdue bill or using the slush in your budget for a well-deserved treat. *(Continued)*





## Adulthood (25 Years+)

### Strategies for ADHD in Adulthood

**A**DHD SYMPTOMS THAT HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVELY managed for decades can flare out of control with major life changes, like starting a family or changing jobs. To manage the ADHD effect on an aging brain and a complicated life, use these practical strategies:

**1 Work in 25-minute bursts** with short breaks in between. When random thoughts sidetrack your focus, write them down in a separate document for later. Use fidget tools or chewing gum to boost focus.

**2 To compensate for working memory deficits, put relevant information in calendars, planners, sticky notes, apps, emails, and other tools.** Automate tasks and bill paying as much as possible, and set reminders for recurring events.

**3 To create a simple budget, note your take-home pay and subtract monthly expenses—**rent or mortgage, electricity, cable, heat, water, and groceries. Schedule payment due dates or, better yet, set up automatic payments. Manage the remaining income by using tracking apps, and curb impulse shopping by carrying minimal cash.

**4 To chip away at piles of stuff, categorize items and create rules for them** (e.g., recycle all magazines and catalogs). Set a timer and limit your work to small areas, using baskets or clear containers for easy, sustainable organization. Consider hiring an ADHD coach or a professional organizer to help you stay organized.

**5 Combat emotional dysregulation by anticipating stressors and practicing self-regulation** when they are unavoidable. For example, pause and name your feelings, or practice a two-minute deep-breathing exercise when you feel anger or frustration welling up. Many adults with ADHD use cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help them identify distorted, unreasonable thoughts and provide productive tools for dealing with emotions.

**6 When tensions run high in your relationships, remove yourself from the situation by taking a walk or drive** and return when you've calmed down. Practice accountability—talk openly about your difficulties with your partner when appropriate, and apologize for mistakes. Above all, communicate.

### Treating ADHD in Adulthood

**O**utsmarting ADHD is a life-long balancing and fine-tuning act that often uses medication, but almost never medication alone. Most effective treatment plans include behavior interventions, ADHD coaching, exercise and healthy eating, and school and/or workplace accommodations.

To aid all-day focus at work, adults with ADHD may consider extended-release formulations and/or revisit their stimulant medication choice, dosage, and timing. Talk to your doctor about making mid-life medication adjustments, and consider augmenting your meds with cognitive behavioral therapy

or dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which work to disarm and replace the negative thinking patterns that cause chronic problems at work, at home, and in relationships. **A**

Treatment summaries medically reviewed by ROBERTO OLIVARDIA, PH.D.