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ONLINE LEARNING

# 5 Ways to Support Kids With ADHD During Remote Learning

Without the rules and structure of the classroom, students with ADHD are struggling. Here's how teachers can help.

By [Katy Reckdahl](#)

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Tears and tantrums—popular words among parents who've taken to social media to describe remote learning for their kids with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Without the usual support from teachers or the familiarity of classroom rules and structure, the struggle to stay organized and keep up with lessons and homework has suddenly become overwhelming.

“My son needs to be hands-on,” says New Orleans mother Sydney Ray, whose sixth-grade son has ADHD and anxiety. Because of the frustration he's experiencing during online classes, he's begun blurting things out unexpectedly, interrupting both his peers and Ray's meetings as she works from home.

“School from home plus ADHD is complete, ahem...hell,” writes Ray via text message.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [estimates](#) that about 6.1 million children in the United States between the ages of 2 and 17 have an [ADHD](#) diagnosis. It’s considered one of the most common childhood neurodevelopmental disorders, and by mid-elementary and middle school, [symptoms](#) can include difficulty starting and completing tasks, restlessness when not engaged in an activity, rushed and messy work, and trouble following multistep directions.

“ADHD affects the entire brain,” says Adiaha Spinks-Franklin, MD, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and an associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine. “Your brain does not make enough dopamine or epinephrine—chemicals that are important for self-control and self-regulation. So students with ADHD can’t regulate their impulses, their attention, their emotions. They struggle with being disorganized and with time and money management.”

Remote classrooms pose special problems. Researchers [recently found](#) that 31 percent of parents of kids with ADHD described remote learning as “very challenging” and struggled to support

their children at home. Educators and students can be at a disadvantage, too. In the physical classroom, teachers can generally see when students with ADHD are confused, fidgety, and in need of a quick refocus prompt—but many of these signals are lost in translation during Zoom instruction. And because learning from home is generally more independent, it requires more focus and organization, two qualities that are often in short supply for students with ADHD.

To support kids with ADHD in elementary and middle school, the educators we spoke with said they're focusing on the fundamentals of [smart online teaching](#): brain and body breaks, chunking lessons into shorter units, and connecting with and soliciting feedback from their students—but especially those with ADHD—as often as possible. “In regular classrooms, the whole first quarter is about understanding students’ learning styles and creating partnerships with them to learn what I might do to help them,” says New Orleans elementary school educator Sari Levy. “We can’t forget that point when we’re teaching digitally.”

Here’s a breakdown of what we found teachers are doing for their kids with ADHD:

**FIND OUT HOW STUDENTS LEARN BEST—AND SUPPORT THAT**

Lessons that are repetitive and long, requiring sustained mental effort, are difficult for most kids, says Sydney Zentall, a professor emerita of educational studies at Purdue University—but they are especially tough for students with ADHD who tend to get **bored and distracted easily**. Intentionally incorporating an element of choice can engage students with ADHD and enable them to sustain attention longer. There's also research showing that when another activity is introduced that draws on a different sense—say, standing up for a few minutes during a virtual lesson or listening to **white noise or soft background music** while working through math problems—it can help focus kids' brains on the primary task.

Allen Jefferson, a 15-year-old student in New Orleans with ADHD, prefers to log into his online classes on his cell phone because this allows him to move around the house or stroll out into the backyard without missing a moment of class. Keeping his body busy helps him stay focused—the phone is just for convenience: “It's harder to walk around with a laptop,” he explains.

To help students with ADHD create their optimal learning environment, Levy suggests a private check-in with students to discuss how they learn best and brainstorm ways to improve their home learning setup. She asks questions like “Tell me a little bit about where you learn” and “Does that feel calm for you?”

Finally, when students with ADHD are [allowed to fidget](#), they're able to concentrate better. Annie Preziosi, a special education administrator in a New Orleans K–8 school, likes to remind students that [fidgets](#) don't necessarily need to be expensive, and many items can easily be found at home and are quiet, so they don't bother other kids: pipe cleaners, rubber bands, beaded bracelets, clay, a small handball, or paper clips, for example. All these items can help keep kids' hands busy while they learn.

## **SUPPORT KEEPING TRACK OF TIME AND SCHEDULES**

Students with ADHD can [struggle to keep track of time](#). Setting reminders on their phones about class start times, due dates, and other tasks can help. Sometimes, a simple kitchen timer can help them break up tasks and stay focused for chunks of time.

Visual timers, battery-operated units that replicate analog clocks and allow students to see the passage of time via a colored disk that disappears as minutes pass—like this [one](#) and this [smaller one](#)—allow them to track the passage of time and provide helpful external cues that boost focus. During independent periods when kids are learning from home, time management techniques like the [Pomodoro Technique](#)—essentially, setting a timer and focusing on a specific task for 25 minutes, then taking a

five-minute break, then returning to the task—can help kids stay steadily productive.

Because organization can be a challenge—and because many schools continue to adjust their remote and hybrid schedules, requiring students to keep track of evolving schedules—kids need clear, easy-to-read schedules. Post daily schedules in a single, predictable space in your learning management system (LMS), and try not to vary that routine. If possible, include links to any resources you'll use, including all Zoom meeting IDs and passwords. Ask students who need extra scaffolding to tape the daily schedule at eye level in their learning space—or if it's a digital schedule with links, ask them to keep it on their laptop or iPad homepage.

Those kinds of strategies will help limit anxiety when students are late or don't know their next move, says Levy. "If any child starts off class in a panic, they won't do well in class," she says, and they won't be ready to learn. "Nobody should feel that way." If she sees students logging in late and feeling anxious, she offers calming words to help her students self-regulate: "Take a breath. You're here. Whatever happened before you got here, let it go."

**START WITH THE BIG PICTURE—THEN BREAK IT DOWN**

Children with ADHD commonly struggle with executive function. Executive functions are the brain's self-control capacities; they allow us to sustain action and problem-solving toward a goal. Russell Barkley, PhD, clinical professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina and a leading expert on ADHD, [describes](#) executive function as “goal-directed problem-solving, and goal-directed persistence.”

One of these executive functions is the ability to tap into what Barkley calls “nonverbal working memory” to create mental maps to guide behavior so that we can meet a goal—and remember the sequence of steps required to do that. A complex, multistep homework assignment without the appropriate scaffolding, for example, can be a major barrier for a child with ADHD.

During remote instruction, says Sydney Zentall, it's especially important for kids with ADHD to start with the big picture and then move to the small pieces. “They need to see the forest, then the trees,” she says. According to Zentall's [research](#), students with ADHD learn best when teachers present a new topic by teaching the big idea first—the ocean is warming, for example—instead of giving detailed descriptions of how warming oceans may be affecting animals. “Start with the biggest idea first, then specifics,” Zentall says. Starting with too much detail, she says, is overwhelming for kids with ADHD.

## ADAPT STRATEGIES THAT KIDS ALREADY USE ONLINE

Poor working memory is common for people with ADHD, which can make reading comprehension and retention difficult. When students are reading text on a screen, says Annie Preziosi, they tend to skim rather than read closely—making it even more difficult for kids with ADHD to understand and retain what they’ve read. But when she asks students to slow down and summarize each paragraph, it makes information “sticky for them, so they can remember it better,” she says.

When students are reading text online, Preziosi uses an [active reading strategy](#) whereby she numbers key paragraphs of the reading material and asks students to write down the main idea for each. And she uses a simple trick to help her students engage with the strategy: She asks them to write hashtags for the paragraphs. So, for example, students might hashtag a paragraph with #DerrickLovesFootball or #PrincessLovesTheColorGreen.

## BUILD IN BRAIN AND BODY BREAKS

All kids benefit from quick breaks during the school day, but for kids with ADHD, taking [regular breaks](#) away from Zoom lessons is critical for maintaining focus.



To break up her lessons, Levy builds in regular movement breaks for her students with ADHD by asking them to complete specific tasks like gathering lesson materials and tools, using the bathroom, or getting a drink. Preziosi limits class time to 30-minute chunks broken up by regular breaks “to get that extra energy out.” She’s found that beyond the half-hour mark, “younger children can’t absorb information, in my experience,” Preziosi says. When kids return to her online class, she gets them back into the flow with breathing exercises, helping them settle down and prepare for learning.

And because kids learning from home are missing critical opportunities to socialize with their peers, Spinks-Franklin recommends scheduling unstructured Zoom breaks specifically for children to “goof around and talk, unscheduled,” with each other. “They need that social interaction,” she says.