

Summer holidays and ADHD... reducing the stress and helping the transition back to school

The summer holidays can be a difficult time for families who have a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The school year provides a predictable routine that can be helpful in managing ADHD symptoms. Transitioning from the school-year routine to summer break can be challenging for children with ADHD, who often find it hard to adapt to change.

Top Tips

1. It is important for all children to fit into a routine type of schedule. With ADHD this is even more important. During the Holidays, it is important for parents and children to adhere to a similar type of schedule that they are accustomed to during the school term. This is because children with ADHD typically do not handle change well, structure and routine are important for creating a calm and safe environment, which can help lessen symptoms. Although your summer schedule may naturally differ somewhat from the school-year schedule, try not to change things up too much. So, keep the weekend bedtime routine going and during the weekdays encourage your child to wake up at a “normal” school time and get dressed.
2. Sticking to a normal routine means continuing to have three meals per day and to eat the proper foods. PLUS, special time is a daily must!
3. Maintaining structured activities are important for ADHD children to avoid leisure time that they find boring and an invitation to get into trouble. As much as possible, plans should be made with children and prior to the holidays as to the types of things they want to do. **We suggest you create a calendar.** Plot a weekly calendar, maybe shopping on Mondays, swimming on Wednesdays. Make plans to fit your family, lifestyle, locality, transport, and financial situation. Prepare your child for these changes and stick to routines as much as possible. Colour-code your plan, highlight what is happening when. Put it on the wall, talk about it, refer to it, and make it familiar for all the family. See weekly planner <https://www.dayoutwiththekids.co.uk/blog/free-summer-holiday-planner>
4. When either visiting family and friends or remaining at home to entertain guests, standards of good behaviour should be discussed with the children. Keep the household rules posted where everyone in the family can see them.
5. Holiday may not mean a holiday from medication. Speak to your GP/paediatrician about if a medication break is required or not. This may be a good time to try a different medication, adjust the dose, or give your child a break from ADHD medications. If children are taking stimulant medication that is working to control Hyperactivity and improve focused attention, they may need that medication during the summer holidays. They are being called upon to be social with visiting friends and family and to behave properly now even though they are not in school.

6. When making plans for the Holidays, it is not only the children who should be included. Too many marriages/relationships are strained because of the stress of handling ADHD children. It is important that parents/partners communicate with one another and have their input about planning.

7. In fact, it is important for parents/partners to find time to be alone with one another during this season. If possible, ask babysitters or visiting family/friends to look after the child/ren while parents/partners take an afternoon, evening or entire day off for one another.

8. During the holidays, children also need time for plenty of exercise. This holds true for all children but particularly for those with ADHD. Exercise helps them calm their impulsiveness and Hyperactivity. **Do not forget to make sure to schedule in time for unstructured play as well.** This unstructured playtime allows children the chance to play on their own, which gives them the opportunity to come up with their own activities for fun.

9. Keep screens to a limit. Screens can be a great calming activity, particularly after a hot, exhausting day. There are some great mindfulness apps with calming meditation. Find some good YouTube videos that are fun and relaxing. Some of the games actually promote problem-solving, team building and creativity. So, it is not dreadful that your child wants to be a screen. Go and sit together whilst they play so you can see what all the fuss is about and use the language so you can talk about it together. During this time, teach your child the perils of the internet and how to keep safe. Unless you have these conversations and spend time together, your child may find themselves in vulnerable scenarios. The time your child spends on a screen should be limited. Agree beforehand when they should come off so that it is not a battle. Ask how long is reasonable. And then they are more likely to stick to the agreement! Use a kitchen timer or a sand timer so they can clearly see time remaining. However, remember that online gaming is a situation where your child feels relaxed, confident and successful so it's highly desirable for them.

10. Continue to work on school skills. Include academic activities in your summer plan. This could include things like tutoring, playing games that require math or reading skills, or choosing books to read over the summer.

11. Praise...praise and praise. Comment on how nicely they put away the toys, got dressed really quickly, was super helpful in the shops, spoke politely to their sister. Notice the small things.

12. Just as it is necessary for parents/partners to find time for one another and each for his or herself, it is also vital that each child be given private time. Children need attention, warmth, and love and this is even more true for these disordered children. Discuss the options with the children but, however you do it, make certain they get lots of personal and positive attention. Have a dedicated space set up that is calming. Fill it with fluffy cushions, low lighting, soft toys, colouring sheets, favourite picture books and lava lamp. Headphones and MP3 player to listen to calm music or audio books. You could buy a small tent or throw a sheet over a couple of chairs.

This could be a place you child could go to if they are feeling overwhelmed, to calm down or just to chill out. To have their own space will make them feel special and safe. You could also use an emotions chart to help them describe how they're feeling or get them to verbalise where they sit on a 1 to 10 scale.

How are you feeling?

It is a good idea to check in with your feelings at least once a day:

5		angry out of control annoyed
4		scared upset anxious
3		worried distracted frustrated
2		OK happy energetic
1		content calm focused

This is useful to help them learn to self-soothe if they begin to feel frustrated or angry. Teach them to recognise the physical signs like sweaty palms, flushed face, and heavy beating heart. Then they can go to the calm space or use other strategies such as counting or deep breathing. You may need to help by giving choices such as 'go to your special space or go and sit in the garden'. Reward with praise if your child manages to self-soothe.

13. When you are out and about, have an "Emergency Pack" – snacks, games, fiddle gadgets, chewy toys, colouring, MP3 player and headphones. Try not to be embarrassed by other people who may criticize or give you funny looks. You know your child can only sit for so long... minutes.... you know your child best. So, you need to adapt things to suit their needs. Quit whilst your ahead. If the day is going well but it looks like they have had enough, then leave and go home. It is always best to end on a high with a smile.

14. Regardless of how you plan your summer holidays, the key word here is PLAN. Unstructured time is the enemy for all children and families. It is more of an enemy when you and your child have ADHD.

Holiday play ideas

- Get arty and make something out of junk, playdough, beads, material.
- Play card games.
- Make up a play, a song, a poem and perform it – write out the script and record and then edit it.
- Design and write a puppet show. Use socks for puppets.
- Make a Lego tower that touches the ceiling.
- Make a collage or paint a picture on a large canvas.
- Go on a colour treasure hunt – how many purple things can you find around the house?
- Cook together.
- Make an indoor obstacle course using cushions, soft balls, cardboard boxes.
- Make a volcano or other science experiment using household materials
- Make a rainwater collector.
- Play memory games.
- Have a picnic – indoors or out. Plan it and make it together.
- Play board games together. Decide the rules before you start so there are no arguments. Better still, design and make your own game.

Have a wonderful summer holiday and we hope it is free of stress as possible 😊