

UNDERSTANDING ADHD

ADHD Resource Series — Guide 1

Purpose

A foundational guide to help ASL teachers understand what ADHD is, how it presents in the classroom, and how to approach students with ADHD with an informed, strengths-based mindset.

What is ADHD?

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects the brain's executive functioning — the systems responsible for regulating attention, impulse control, and activity level. It is not caused by poor parenting, laziness, or lack of intelligence. ADHD typically presents in one of three ways: primarily inattentive, primarily hyperactive-impulsive, or a combined presentation of both. It is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions seen in classrooms, and it affects Deaf and hard-of-hearing students at similar rates as hearing students.

Characteristics

- Difficulty sustaining visual attention during instruction or signing
- Appears restless, fidgety, or in constant motion
- Acts or signs impulsively without waiting to be called on
- Struggles to follow multi-step directions
- Loses or forgets materials, assignments, or instructions
- Shifts quickly between topics or has trouble staying on task

Strengths

- Creative and imaginative
- High energy and enthusiasm
- Strong visual thinker
- Excellent hands-on learner
- Capable of intense focus on topics of interest
- Spontaneous and willing to participate
- Resilient and quick to bounce back

Challenges

- Maintaining attention during longer or less-preferred tasks
- Regulating impulses in group and turn-taking situations
- Organizing materials, time, and multi-step assignments
- Managing transitions between activities
- Sitting still or remaining visually focused for extended periods

Myths vs. Facts

MYTH ADHD is just a lack of discipline or effort.

FACT ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition rooted in brain-based differences in executive functioning, not a character flaw.

MYTH Students with ADHD can't focus on anything.

FACT Many students with ADHD can hyperfocus intensely on topics or activities that genuinely interest them.

MYTH ADHD is caused by bad parenting or too much screen time.

FACT Research points to genetic and neurological factors as the primary contributors to ADHD.

MYTH Only boys have ADHD.

FACT ADHD occurs across all genders, though it often presents differently and is underdiagnosed in girls.

MYTH Students eventually just outgrow ADHD.

FACT Many people carry ADHD traits into adulthood, though skills and coping strategies can improve significantly with support.

Teacher Mindset

- Assume competence — behavior is communication, not defiance
- Separate the behavior from the student's character or effort
- Look for the function behind a behavior before responding to it
- Build a trusting relationship as the foundation for everything else
- Focus on strengths first, and frame challenges as skills still developing
- Practice patience and consistency; progress is rarely linear
- Collaborate with families, IEP/504 teams, and related service providers

Remember

ADHD looks different in every student. Understanding the "why" behind a behavior is the first step toward building an ASL classroom where students with ADHD can succeed and thrive.