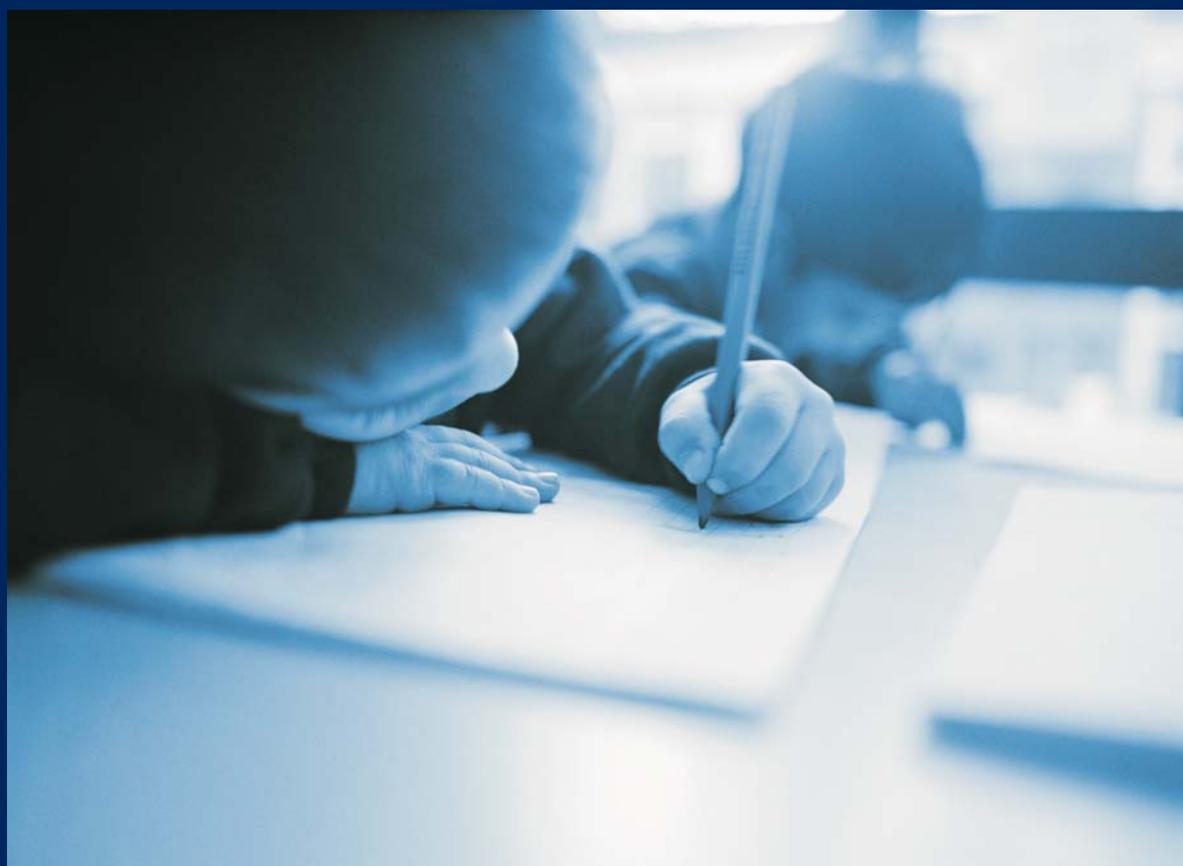


# Working with Difficult Children in Primary Schools: A Guide for Teachers - 2nd Edition

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A research-based guide for teachers, produced by the CEM Centre, University of Durham

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# Introduction

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Some children can be very difficult to teach during their first few years at school. Some seem not to take notice of what is going into the classroom, others seem to behave spontaneously in unhelpful ways and yet others are hyperactive. This booklet is intended to help teachers with those sorts of children in their care. It starts by describing the research project, which gave rise to this advice. It then moves on to look at the reasons why children behave as they do and the ways in which teachers can use those insights to help them improve the concentration and behaviour of such children. There is also a reference card, which summarises the main points of the booklet.

All children at some time or other ignore what is going on around them or get very excited. Young children in particular tend to be less attentive than older children, although some are exceptionally inattentive even when age is taken into account. Some children are so inattentive that their learning is severely delayed. Similarly, the learning of children who are impulsive in their behaviour and hyperactive is delayed and they can also be a problem in the classroom, and even a problem for other children. This booklet concerns the child with persistent and severe inattentive, hyperactive or impulsive behavioural features. They are fairly rare but a typical teacher will have one of them in his or her classroom about once every year. This means that in some years the teacher won't have any children like that, and in other years they might have two children. Occasionally they might have three children, and it is at times like that that things can become really quite problematic.

Children who behave in this way at home as well as at school and who have been like this for a long time as well as with different teachers might have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). But only "might". We need to be very careful about jumping to conclusions in this area and a medical diagnosis is the only firm way to be sure.

The syndrome has been studied quite extensively and a lot is known about it. Fortunately, the techniques used to help children who are so extreme as to have ADHD can be used to help children who are not quite so extreme. In studies of children in this kind of category, the three main areas of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity come to the fore, and children can have various combinations of these types of behaviour. In extreme cases it can lead to anti-social behaviour in adolescence with under-achievement in school and even into delinquent behaviour in later life.

For some years now, the PIPS project, at Durham University has been tracking children from their entry to school with a baseline assessment, right through to the end of primary school. At the end of the first year teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their pupils attentiveness, impulsivity and activity levels. We have now been able to study children whose teachers picked them out as having particularly unusual behavioural patterns. What we have found is that those children make less progress than we would expect right through to age 11 years. This is an issue because it means that at an early stage we can identify children who are likely not to make the progress that we would expect of children with similar developmental levels at the start of school.

The question is: what do we do about it? This booklet is designed to help. In other words, this is advice to teachers to help children with behavioural characteristics that are indicative of future under-achievement in mathematics and reading.

The PIPS Project recently completed a study in which two thousand schools were split into two different halves at random. One half was sent a first edition copy of this booklet and the other half was sent nothing. For this particular research project we focused on children in their first three years at school. They were assessed at the start and end of their first year at school and then again when they were age 7 years. We collected information about their behaviour, attainment, the kinds of interventions that teachers had used to help these children and how the teachers felt about life.

The result was that in schools that had received the booklet, the attitudes of the severely inattentive and/or hyperactive/impulsive children were more positive, their behaviour had improved, and the class teachers rated their own quality of life more positively. We saw no shift in the attainment that would be expected from those children by the end of that second year, but attainment is hard to impact on and we hope to be able to do something about that in the future.

We know that in the research project few teachers actually used the booklet and so what we want to do is find ways to encourage increased use. Over the next few years the way we will encourage this is to set up in-service courses for teachers and also encourage teachers to go into other people's classrooms to find out how they deal with such children. This process will be done on a systematic basis and be properly evaluated so that, once again, we can make recommendations based on sound evidence. We wish you luck with using the booklet and with helping the children with these particular issues.

# How can you be sure that your children are particularly inattentive, hyperactive or impulsive?

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Think of a child in your class who you feel has behavioural difficulties. Then go down the three lists below. Put a tick beside each item which, in your opinion, applies to that child when compared with other children of similar age and similar developmental level at a far more extreme frequency and level than you would expect.

## Inattentiveness

- Makes careless mistakes in school work or other activities.
- Has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities.
- Does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.
- Does not follow through instructions, fails to finish work.
- Has difficulty organising tasks and activities.
- Is reluctant to engage in tasks which require sustained mental activity.
- Loses equipment necessary for activity e.g. pencils, books.
- Is distracted by extraneous stimuli.
- Forgetful in daily activities.

## Hyperactivity and Impulsiveness

### *Hyperactivity*

- Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat.
- Leaves seat in classroom or in other situations where remaining seated is expected.
- Often runs about excessively in situations in which it is inappropriate.
- Has difficulty in playing quietly.
- Is always 'on the go'.
- Talks excessively.

### *Impulsivity*

- Blurts out answers before questions have been completed.
- Has difficulty awaiting turn.
- Interrupts or intrudes on others e.g. pushes into conversations or games.

Now count up how many ticks there were in each category then look at the table on the next page.

Children with a high number of ticks on both the inattentiveness and the hyperactive/impulsive list are very rare. Only 3% of children have 6 or more ticks on both lists.

Number of ticks	Inattentiveness	Hyperactivity and impulsiveness
Fewer than 4	This is quite normal. About 80% of children are like this.	This is quite normal. About 88% of children are like this.
Between 4 and 6	This is high. Only 15% of children have this many ticks.	This is high. Only 8% of children have this many ticks.
7 or 8	This is very high. Only 5% of children have this many ticks.	This is very high. Only 3% of children have this many ticks.
9	This is rare. Approximately one child in a hundred has this score.	This is rare. Approximately one child in a hundred has this score.

The table should give you some idea about how unusual the pupil is that you were thinking about. If you have one or more children in the shaded boxes then you should find some of the ideas in this booklet useful. Even if you don't have such children you might find that there are some interesting ideas.

A lot is made in the newspapers of the differences between boys and girls. Many of the differences are exaggerated but produce interesting headlines. However, behaviour is one area where there really are large differences. If the score was really high then the chances are that it is a boy. About three times as many boys as girls come into the shaded

# Why do some children have these

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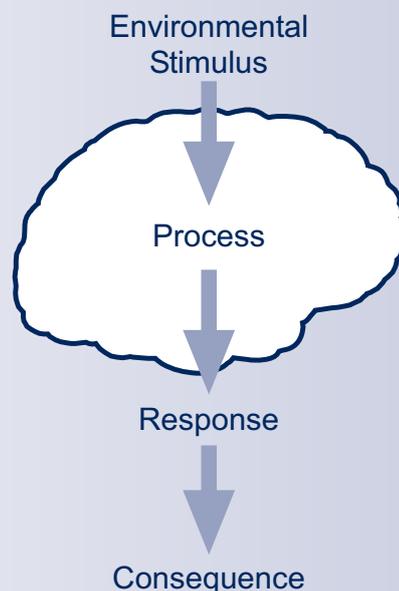
There are many straightforward explanations for why children behave in certain ways. Some of these are given in the bullet points that follow. Later we will consider the deeper causes that may need different approaches on the part of the teacher.

## Straightforward causes of inattention, impulsivity or hyperactivity

- Some children are simply young or immature and as they get older their inattentiveness or other behavioural problems will disappear. They grow out of it.
- Some children arrive at school having had little chance to mix with other children; they may have had little pre-school experience with few siblings at home and so they may not have had time to practice or learn social skills. Such children will continue to grow and learn as they pick up different ways of behaving at school.
- Other children will arrive at school and find it difficult to communicate because their first language is not English, although in some schools there is a common language which is not English. Where a child does not speak English it will take him or her a while to discover what is happening but they can be expected to learn English rapidly. Initially they are likely to appear inattentive simply because they have not caught on to what is happening, what the teacher is saying and what the other children are talking about.
- Other children have a hearing loss or visual impairment making them appear inattentive, impulsive or hyperactive.
- Then there is the possibility that the home background of the child, or the group of children that the child happens to be with can influence behaviour.
- Personality interactions between the teacher and a child can also be important and this can mean that the child behaves in one way with one teacher and in a quite different way with another teacher.

# Deep causes of inattention, impulsivity or hyperactivity

We live and work in a world where we pick up information from around us. We hear people talking, see things happening, watch the television, smell things and so on. That information goes to our brain where we work on it either consciously or subconsciously and then we take action on it or not, as the case may be. For example when someone says something to us we absorb it and then either carry on as we were or we do something because of it. Sometimes our reaction can be dramatic. If a car unexpectedly drives onto the pavement and towards us we will try to get out of the way. We take the information, we process it and then we react to it.



The way that we process information before taking action uses an aspect of the brain workings called executive functions. Now if our executive functions are not working properly then we might react inappropriately to what is happening. For example, one of our executive functions is a part called the working memory. Information comes in and we hold that information for a little while in our short-term memory. We process it and react to it. If our working memory is not efficient we might lose our trail of thought and be unable to react to the stimulus. We have simply forgotten it. In that kind of situation we might be seen to be inattentive. In fact, we would actually be inattentive not just seem to be so. It is because one part of the brain – the working memory – is not doing its job properly. That kind of deficit would also result in us having poor organisational skills. We would not be able to deal with complex instructions. We would have a problem with putting things in order and remembering what is happening. These kinds of behaviours are what we see in children with persistent problems with inattention.

Another kind of executive function problem can result in hyperactivity and impulsivity. We can all react instinctively to stimuli. A puff of air in the eye will make us blink. But sometimes the reflex action is inappropriate. A child has to be able to stop a reflex reaction in order to let the working memory process information. This action of stopping an immediate response in order to let the working memory process information is known as 'behavioural

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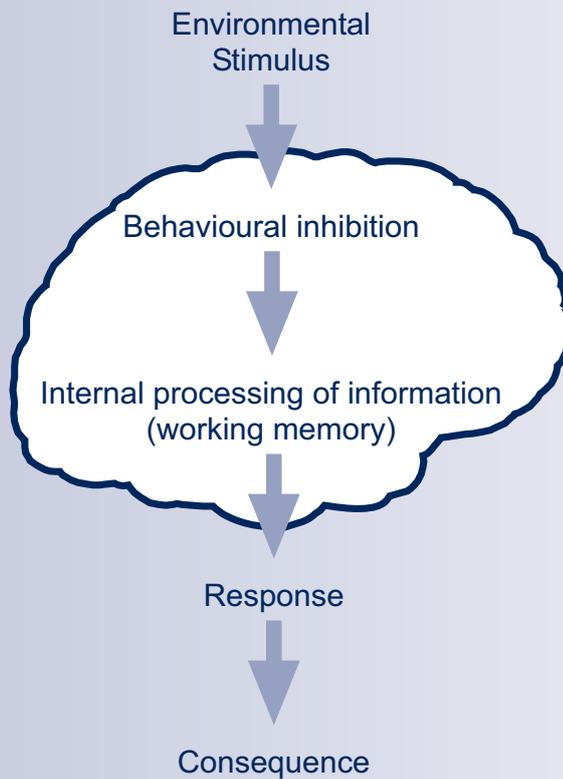
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Our purpose is to try to help the child who has got problems with executive functions. This booklet sets out ways that might help. They are tried and tested methods and the subject of the next section.

# How to help

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We have broken down this section into two parts. In the first we look at tactics that might be useful when a child is meant to be sitting down and working on a task; the kind of things that the teacher might do on an individual basis during normal classroom management.

The second section concerns strategies to manage behaviour more generally and looks at ways in which the teacher or a group of adults might organise ways of working with particular children.

Every child is, of course, an individual and whilst these tactics have been shown to work in general, they have not been shown to work with your particular children in England in the 21st Century. It is, therefore, most important that this advice is simply treated as an additional string to the bow of the busy teacher working in the busy classroom.

## Tactics to help a child work on set tasks

### 1. *Position the child close to the teacher.*

This has the obvious advantage that the teacher can keep a regular check on what the child is actually doing and be able to react, encourage, reinforce, motivate and also redirect to the task on hand, explaining things a little further. It is also advantageous that if the child is at the front and the teacher makes sure the child is facing in a particular direction it can decrease the number of possible distractors. This last point could be a separate point in its own right. Making sure that distractions are kept to a minimum can help to keep a child on task.

### 2. *Present tasks in bite-size chunks.*

As we have seen, children with problems of impaired executive functions have difficulty holding things in their mind for any length of time. This means that a complex task is going to be particularly difficult for the child because his or her working memory cannot deal with a series of instructions without a break. If an activity is broken down into easily manageable stages so that a small amount of information can be presented at one time, the whole task can be managed more easily. Any instructions or requests should be concise and avoid excess detail. If the tasks are short and time-limited they can also be reinforced and linked to the time on the wall clock.



If there is an interactive whiteboard available then it can be enlisted to help or maybe individual worksheets provide a way forward. If there is something that has to be done repeatedly then a poster could set out the sub-tasks involved.



#### 4. Working in pairs

This one has to be treated with some care and picking the right partner is certainly going to be important. Nevertheless by working in a pair the two children can motivate each other and provide feedback. They can discuss the problem and help to take it outside an individual's personality. One individual child won't have to rely on their working memory. The partner can help to take that over. It is also good if one makes notes. Again that externalises the problem and can generate a source that can be referred to later.

#### 5. Peer tutoring

Peer tutoring, where one child teaches another child, and in particular cross-age tutoring where an older child teaches a younger child, is one of the most successful ways of helping children to learn. The greatest benefit being for the one who does the tutoring. This has been found to work in many situations and specifically for children of the type being discussed here. Being given the role of helping a younger child can help their motivation, and harness their thoughts.



#### 6. Working on the computer



This helps because the computer can provide information, can be a motivator and repeatedly give stimuli to bring the focus of attention back to the task in hand. It can provide stimulation when the teacher is not available and it is a successful way of maintaining a child's concentration. On the other hand, as with all things, it is important that the appropriate task is chosen and with computers this comes down to choosing good software. There is clearly some software that is inappropriate with particular age groups and it may also be inappropriate with individual children.

Children who are inattentive, hyperactive or impulsive are likely to benefit from an environment which is well structured and predictable. It is good for them to know what is going to come next. Unexpected events, movements between lessons and anything where there are unexpected happenings can be difficult to cope with. It therefore makes sense to start the day by explaining what is going to happen. If there is some imminent transition explain what is going to happen, even to write out the different stages of what is going to happen. Advanced warning is the name of the game.

## Strategies to encourage better behaviour

It is important to remember that it is sometimes difficult for inattentive, impulsive or hyperactive children to think ahead. Therefore knowing that completing the task is going to be an end in itself and getting the satisfaction through that is itself useful. Having the motivation coming from other people is necessary and therefore frequent praise and frequent rewards are valuable. The types and times of rewards, or the reverse of rewards, (punishments), have to be carefully thought through.

### 1. Rewards

A simple reward is praise. Teachers' praise is always important for children and of course for other members of staff. But for children who have behavioural problems it is particularly valuable in keeping them motivated and on task. Simply to say 'That's good' or 'It's great to see you working on that' can be an important way forward. Praise should only be given for behaviour that wants to be encouraged.

The idea of reinforcing desirable behaviour can be extended and in particular cases, rewards such as stars on a chart, or in the child's book, or maybe some tokens that can be exchanged later for a treat, can be particularly effective. It might be that if you collected 5 stars then this could trigger some other reward. Or maybe marbles into a jar and when a certain number is reached a new reward is earned.

These are concrete positive rewards and an external reminder to the child of how well he or she is doing. There is a danger to this approach and one worries that the intrinsic motivation of young children might be undermined. This cannot happen if the child is not motivated already and it is unlikely to happen with verbal praise from the teacher. But one always wants to be careful that the rewards given are appropriate. Of course it is possible if one has something like marbles in a jar to actually take them out. This is termed a response-cost tactic and can be particularly effective. Undesirable behaviour can be followed by tokens being taken back and then the child has to earn them again before the final reward is given.

### 2. Mild reprimands

Mild reprimands have been shown to be effective if a child is not attending to a particular task, and it has also been shown that they can improve the work of children. However, it is important that any reprimand is given exactly at the time when the incident happens.

Delay such as when a child is told off an hour after something that happened is far less effective. It is also important to explain what it is the child is being asked to do. In a class discussion for example instead of saying 'Stop shouting out the answers', it would be better to say 'Please put your hand up if you know the answer'.

If we think of a child with poor working memory, a long reprimand is not likely to be valuable since it will simply be forgotten as the new bit of the reprimand goes on. So a short quick reprimand and then straight on to the next thing at the time of the incident is the best way.

We must also recognise that giving a pupil attention can, in itself be seen as a reward. This opens up a trap for the unwary. If bad behaviour draws attention from the teacher it can reinforce the bad behaviour!

### 3. Time out

It has been shown that when there is inappropriate behaviour, a good tactic is simply to take the child away from the circumstance for some period. If a child is impulsive or reacts inappropriately simply stop that child and say 'No, sit down here'. Later 'We are going to move on to something else now'. In the classroom this can sometimes be difficult

time. It can also be difficult and dangerous to leave a class of young children unsupervised while dealing with a frustrated individual. A compromise might simply be to allow a child to change the activity if he or she becomes frustrated and return to the original task at a later date.

#### 4. *Plan-do-review*

Ground-breaking work with young children in the 1960s suggested that cooperatively planning activities, then doing them and then reviewing the results can be beneficial. The main idea being that some people do not link the actions to the consequences.

#### 5. *Productive physical movement*

Children who are hyperactive really find it very difficult to sit still and some people have suggested that in our evolution it makes sense for some children to be naturally physically active and even hyperactive. Perhaps school is not such a good place for those children and we can make it a happier place by capitalising on their need to be moving around. Something like delivering a message, taking the register to the school office or sharpening a pencil may be useful. Watering the plants, feeding the classroom pets or simply standing at a desk while completing class work seems to be appropriate for many children and helpful for classroom management.

Alternating activities that require the child to be seated with other activities that allow for movement is recommended. It is also important to note that on some days it could be more difficult for the child to sit still than others and teachers need to be flexible and modify instructional demands accordingly. Productive physical movement needs to be carefully structured and managed to eliminate opportunities for misbehaviour. Productive physical movement could also be used for children with predominantly inattentive symptoms. Instruction introducing a change of activity or position might enable them to return to the original task with renewed focus.

# Finding out more

If you would like to find out more about the kinds of things mentioned in this booklet or if you would like to get more help with particular children then the annotated list below should help.

## Help with particular children

*From Parents:* Talking about classroom/school issues might well help to shed light on issues and could even solve a problem. Working together with parents to try to understand what is going on and even to coordinate approaches could be helpful.

*From Colleagues:* We should not underestimate the professional expertise of teachers who have had experience of difficult children in the past. It is well worth asking others what they have tried and what their advice is. Some behaviour is so unusual that a teacher only experiences it a few times in a career and sharing such experiences can only be to the good.

*From Psychologists:* Over and above the standard procedures laid down by the DfES for children with special needs it might be that you could get help from a local educational psychologist. They are trained to help with behaviour difficulties and will be able to draw on a broad range of experience and knowledge. The local education authority will be able to put you in touch with the appropriate person.

*From Organisations:* There are a number of organisations that provide support and/or help to parents with difficult children. It might be that the parents would like to know about this and some of the relevant organisations are listed below:

[www.behaviourchange.com](http://www.behaviourchange.com) (Support and ideas for helping children with behavioural difficulties.)

[www.patient.co.uk/child\\_health](http://www.patient.co.uk/child_health) (Directory of health related websites.)

[www.iuns.org/features/child-development](http://www.iuns.org/features/child-development) (Interventions for young children.)

## Learning more about these issues

If you would like to learn more about the kinds of issues discussed in this booklet then there are really four ways forward.

Read about the issues: One recent book that might be helpful is:

Cooper, P. and Ideus, K. Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: A practical guide for teachers Pub. David Fulton, London.

Attend seminars/conferences/workshops. Quite a number of these are available around the country and adverts are put out from time to time.

Search the web. You might want to look at the numerous web sites that are increasingly available with material of very variable quality. Some is excellent and some is dubious – you will have to act as your own quality control! Probably the best way to start is by going to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). This is a search engine and you simply put in the words that you want to find information about. For example you might put in 'attentiveness behaviour school resources', you will get a list of many sites, which you can then sift. Two that you might find helpful are:

[www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk) (ADHD information and support.)

[www.dundee.ac.uk/fedsoc/centres/cpl/](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/fedsoc/centres/cpl/) (Information on peer tutoring.)

Register for a course. You might like to check with your local universities to see if they offer a course in your area of interest. Most of the courses are listed on web sites and you can usually get brochures by snail mail.

