



How Is ADHD Diagnosed, and What Might Indicate a Misdiagnosis?

By Dr. David Salsberg

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A doctor (including neurologists, psychologists, pediatricians and psychiatrists) is the only professional qualified to formally diagnose ADHD. To qualify for the diagnosis, a child must display symptoms of the disorder for at least six months. It's important to know that there is no single test for ADHD. There are many steps in diagnosing ADHD, first of which is a complete physical exam and discussion of medical history. The doctor will also want to make sure your child doesn't have other medical issues that may look like features of ADHD.



Diagnosing ADHD does not happen during a quick office visit. It's a process that includes both examination and investigation. Doctors will observe your child's behavior and ask that parents fill out questionnaires and share information about the duration, frequency and severity of ADHD symptoms. Specific tests may be recommended to rule out other explanations or contributing factors. Teachers may also be asked to share report cards, work samples and anecdotal information about learning and behavior in school.

If you're concerned your child has been misdiagnosed with ADHD the most important thing you can do as a parent is trust your instincts. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help gauge how you're feeling about the doctor's assessment.

Did the doctor take the time to get to know your child?

Was she thorough about gathering information from you, your child's school team and relevant outside providers?

Did she explain how she arrived at the diagnosis, and did that explanation feel right, given when you know of your child?

Did she consider other factors—such as learning difficulties, anxiety, poor sleep or mismatched school or class placement—that can easily be mislabeled as ADHD?

If you're feeling uneasy about your child's ADHD diagnosis, it's completely appropriate for you to ask your doctor questions or request a second opinion. A diagnosis of ADHD is only useful if it leads to understanding and interventions that can help your child. An improper diagnosis of ADHD can lead to inappropriate treatment recommendations and, if medication is prescribed, unwanted reactions. Attention medication should channel your child's focus in a positive way. If your child is actually struggling with anxiety or depression and has been misdiagnosed with ADHD, ADHD medication may intensify your child's focus on anxiety or sadness. As with any medicine, close monitoring is crucial, and any side effects should be immediately reported to the prescribing doctor.

It's important to remember that most young children and many older students will have problems with learning and attention-related behavior from time to time. And these struggles do not necessarily mean that the person has ADHD. The process of discovering what signs and symptoms are related to LD and which are characteristics of ADHD is rarely easy. For these reasons, it is important to work with your child's physician and educators and make any decisions only after a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary evaluation has been completed.

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Vision specialists will often say that a child may be diagnosed with an attention issue, when in fact there was a vision issue. In our experience, an attention and a vision issue are often present in the same child.

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My son was diagnosed with ADHD via the checklist from teacher and parents and 20 minute psychiatrist visit. We opted for LD testing vice medicine. 8 hours of intelligence and other tests to rule out LD and the psychologist says he is a gifted, healthy, active boy. One year later he is doing great in his new advanced academics classroom and has recently been diagnosed with convergence deficiency which explains to us why he has difficulty and disinterest in reading.

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