



**I**f there's a reason to walk away from his homework, Donald "Doc" Moreland will find it. Bathroom breaks. Pencil sharpening. Snack time.

"Homework's a challenge with Doc," says Jeanne Tobia, the 9-year-old's mother. "He will find 25 different reasons to go do something else."

But that's not because the Crofton Elementary School student dislikes his assignments. Doc has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a common condition where children have a range of challenges, including difficulty staying focused and paying attention, impulsive behavior and hyperactivity.

Homework is especially difficult for children with ADHD, says Dr. Mark Mahone, director of the Department of Neuropsychology at Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore. At the end of the school day, most of them are exhausted, he says.

"Doing the things you do in school is difficult enough," he says. "Imagine having to lift weights all day. But the child with ADHD has to lift more weights."

Cindy Ward Sandler, a psychologist who specializes in educational testing and founded Columbia-based Sandler and Associates, agrees.

"They physically or mentally get more fatigued than a lot of kids because they've been sitting or working all day, trying to stay focused," she says. "Even if a child is hyper, it doesn't mean they are not mentally fatigued. By the time they get home, they're done."

After school, Doc comes home, puts his backpack down and grabs a snack. Then, it's off to the kitchen table for homework.

Despite his best intentions, Doc can get easily frustrated during homework time, his parents say. It takes him longer than children without ADHD to solve problems. He also needs to take frequent breaks to stay focused. "We tell him to 'take five,'"



## Could it be ADHD?

Mahone recommends parents observe their preschool aged children, watching for the following signs that are associated with ADHD diagnosis when children reach school age:

- Dislikes or avoids activities that require paying attention for more than one or two minutes.
- Loses interest and starts doing something else after engaging in an activity for a few moments.
- Talks a lot more and makes more noise than other children of the same age.
- Climbs on things when instructed not to do so.
- Cannot hop on one foot by age 4.
- Nearly always restless—wants to constantly kick or jiggle feet or twist around in his/her seat. Insists that he/she "must" get up after being seated for more than a few minutes.
- Gets into dangerous situations because of fearlessness.
- Warms up too quickly to strangers.
- Frequently aggressive with playmates; has been removed from preschool/day care for aggression.
- Has been injured (e.g., received stitches) because of moving too fast or running when instructed not to do so.

says his stepfather, Matt Tobia.

During that break, Doc can walk away from his homework and ride his bike or scooter.

"Something we would almost consider a mindless activity," Matt Tobia says. "After 10 to 15 minutes, we normally can bring him back around."

As a result, it can take Doc anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half to finish his homework—almost twice as long as it would take most children his age without ADHD, Matt Tobia says.

Sticking to a routine seems to help. When Doc follows the pattern of school, home, snack and then homework, he knows there is order to his activities—and an end in sight, his parents say.

But finding a successful homework strategy can take time, Jeanne Tobia says, adding what works for one child may not work for another.

"You have to go slow," she says. "You can't push, and it takes a lot of patience. Parents need to work closely with their child's teacher and pediatrician to find the right strategy."

Parents, ADHD experts and ADHD

## Is It Typical Toddler Behavior or ADHD?

Many young children have trouble paying attention or concentrating. So how can parents recognize if their children are just typical toddlers, or if there are more serious reasons for concern?

"Research shows that children with ADHD have abnormal brain development, meaning that ADHD has a biological basis that often makes it a lifelong condition," says Dr. Mark Mahone, director of the Department of Neuropsychology at Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore. "We want to catch ADHD early because it has such a profound effect on learning and academic development. Children whose symptoms begin in early childhood are at the highest risk for academic failure and grade repetition."

children offer the following tips for making homework time a little easier for those with the disorder.

## 1 – Maintain Order

Sandler says one of the best techniques, regardless of age, is to have children do their homework in the same order, every day.

For example, if a child enjoys reading the most of all her subjects, make it the first one she tackles for homework. Follow it with math or another subject.

Write the homework subject order down on a piece of paper the child can see.

"So when they come home, and it's homework time, they know what to start with," Sandler says.

The brain's frontal lobe is the primary area responsible for attention, she says. By having a pre-established order, children use less frontal lobe energy deciding what to do next and have more attention energy for actual homework.

## 2 – Change the Scenery

Try doing each subject's assignments in different locations, Sandler says. For example, do math homework at the kitchen table and spelling homework at a desk or dining room table.

"It starts to condition the brain," Sandler says. "What should I be thinking about now because of where I am?"

And, not all homework needs to be done sitting at a table or desk, she says.

For Nick Innella, 17, an Elkridge resident and student at Mount Saint Joseph High School in Baltimore, the chairs near his backyard pond are ideal for reading homework.

"It's less noise and distractions in terms of getting pulled away from a book," he says.

Even removing the chair can make a difference, especially for fidgety children, says Stephanie Turnbach, founder of Severna-Park based Rapid Success Tutoring, which provides tutors for children with and without ADHD.

"It's OK to stand up and do their homework or sit on an exercise ball," she says.

## 3 – Take Breaks

For every hour of homework, give children a few one-minute breaks, Mahone says. That gives them a chance to grab a drink or snack or use the bathroom, he says.

In addition, Sandler recommends giving breaks after homework for each subject.

## Resources for kids with ADHD

According to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 11 school-aged children are diagnosed with ADHD.

For more information on the disorder or tools that can help, check out the following links:

**kennedykrieger.org** – Kennedy Krieger Institute's web site offers an overview of ADHD, as well as information about faculty members who specialize in ADHD and ongoing ADHD research initiatives.

**chadd.org** – Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD) is a non-profit organization that serves people with ADHD and their families.

**help4adhd.org** – The National Resource Center on ADHD, a program of CHADD, is a clearinghouse for science-based information about ADHD.

**nrsi.com** – The National Reading Styles Institute's online store offers tools like colored overlays or transparencies that can help children maintain focus while reading.

**therapyschoppe.com** – The Therapy Shoppe offers FitBall seating discs that provide children with movement and tactile stimulation without needing to leave their seats.

For younger children, physical breaks are best, she says.

Activities like running or jumping on a trampoline energize their brain, helping it shift more easily to the next thing, she says.

For Doc, riding a bike for 15 minutes is enough to help him refocus on his next assignment, his parents say.

For older children and teens, 10-minute breaks to text or check e-mail may be all it takes to help them regain focus, Sandler says. But, she warns, don't allow the phones to stick around during homework time. They then become more of a distraction.

## 4 – Find Purposeful Distractors

Purposeful distractors like quiet classical music, timers or even sugar-free chewing gum can help children with ADHD narrow their focus, Sandler says. By playing classical music in the background, a child's brain can focus on the music and the homework and not on what to wear tomorrow or how to get to school, Sandler says.

Children can also use timers. For example, by setting the timer for 20 minutes, children have a visual timeframe to work from. In some cases, the closer the timer gets to zero, the more the child's brain focuses on the homework, Sandler says.

## 5 – Spark the Frontal Lobe

Supportive aids like color transparencies

can turn on the frontal lobe when a child is reading, Sandler says.

Find colors the child likes and then place the transparencies over the page. This allows the child to read through the color, keeping his brain stimulated.

"Color helps activate the attention," Sandler says. "There's a reason why brake lights are red."

Sandler suggests alternating colors with each page to keep the child's attention.

## 6 – Hire a tutor

Even with modifications in place, some children still need extra help.

Patti Kuhlman of Severna Park found tutors from Rapid Success Tutoring helped her son, JP, pass and even excel in his more difficult classes like math and chemistry. Throughout high school, specially trained tutors worked with JP on homework two to three nights a week.

One tutor even used sports and cars – two topics JP enjoyed – to illustrate chemistry and keep JP focused, Kuhlman says.

"She understood his mind and the way it worked," she says.

Having one-on-one help from someone other than a parent can make a tremendous difference for children and teens with ADHD, Kuhlman says.

"It helps build their confidence that with the right person, they can get it," she says.