

Deciphering Dual Diagnosis:

Insights and Strategies
for Supporting Students
With ASD & ADHD

For children with learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders, like ADHD and ASD, early diagnosis and intervention can have a huge impact on developmental outcomes and success in the classroom and beyond.

Educators are likely familiar with students who have [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) or [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#). As a result, they typically understand how these disorders can individually affect how students learn and how they can effectively accommodate students who have ASD or ADHD.

But what is the right approach if a student has ASD *and* ADHD?

According to research, between [50 and 70% of students](#) with ASD also present with ADHD. The co-occurrence of these two disorders can significantly impact academic achievement, social interactions and behavioral regulation. However, it can be more challenging for practitioners to determine a co-occurrence and for educators to support students who have been identified as having both disorders.

How can schools and districts prepare to support diverse learning needs — particularly for students with a dual diagnosis? Read on to explore the intersection of ASD and ADHD and discover practical strategies for creating effective learning environments.



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Source: National Library of Medicine, *ASD and ADHD Comorbidity: What Are We Talking About?*



1 in 36

Current estimated prevalence of ASD in children in the United States. Up from one in 150 children in 2000.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Data and Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder*

The prevalence puzzle at a glance

While there's been a dramatic increase in ASD and ADHD over the past few decades, there was a pronounced surge during and after the pandemic-driven school closures. In 2023, [the current estimated prevalence of ASD](#) in the United States was one in 36 children, up from one in 150 children in 2000. ADHD diagnoses grew too, from [6.9% in 2000](#) to [11.4% today](#).

“While people might assume this increase stems from overdiagnosis, we know that’s largely not the case,” says Kathleen Woodward, a nationally certified school psychologist and regional manager, West U.S., Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean for Pearson. In fact, there are several factors underlying this trend, such as heightened awareness.

“The increase in awareness isn’t just among practitioners,” Woodward notes. “As a community, in general, there’s less stigma associated with these diagnoses.” Contributing to both the destigmatization and the increase in diagnoses is social media. “Social media platforms like TikTok are raising awareness of mental health conditions, prompting viewers to recognize similar symptoms and seek professional diagnoses,” explains Woodward.

“It’s important to note that there’s also a lot of misinformation on these platforms,” she adds. “So seeking a professional evaluation is essential to determining a true diagnosis.”



Another key factor contributing to heightened co-occurrence diagnoses relates to a change in criteria. Previously, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) didn't allow for simultaneous diagnoses of ASD and ADHD. However, the most current DSM-5, [released in 2013](#), allows for dual diagnoses — thus, practitioners can now diagnose a child with both ASD and ADHD, if applicable, instead of just one or the other as they had to before despite overlapping symptoms.

“We also have better diagnostic practices and assessment tools today,” Woodward adds. Access to these has led to more accurate and timely diagnosis, so students can get the supports they need quicker.

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Key differences between ASD, ADHD, and co-occurring ASD and ADHD

According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#), “ADHD is marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.” The organization defines [ASD](#) as “a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn and behave.”

When the two disorders co-occur, they can [share many of the same symptoms](#) as depicted in the chart, to the right.

It’s important to note that children with ADHD or ASD may exhibit symptoms that resemble those commonly associated with the other disorder, but it does not necessarily mean they have both. For example, someone with ADHD may have trouble reading social cues, but this could be caused by their difficulties with attention, hyperactiveness and/or impulsiveness — all of which can hinder peer interaction.

ASD vs. ADHD Symptoms

| Symptoms | ASD | ADHD |
|--|-----|------|
| Easily distracted / impacted by processing delay | ✓ | ✓ |
| Quickly jumps from task to task / grows bored with tasks | | ✓ |
| Unresponsive to common stimuli / over-responsive to sensory stimuli | ✓ | ✓ |
| Difficulty focusing / concentrating and narrowing attention to a single task | | ✓ |
| Intense focus and concentration on a single item / task | ✓ | |
| Talks nonstop / blurts things out | | ✓ |
| Hyperactive | | ✓ |
| Trouble sitting still | | ✓ |
| Interrupts activities / conversations | | ✓ |
| Lacks concern for / unable to react to other’s emotions and feelings | ✓ | ✓ |
| Performs repetitive movements (i.e., rocking) | ✓ | |
| Avoids eye contact | ✓ | |
| Exhibits withdrawn behavior | ✓ | |
| Demonstrates impaired social interaction | ✓ | ✓ |
| Experiences delayed development milestones | ✓ | |

The impact of co-occurring ASD and ADHD on student experience and learning

Students with co-occurring ASD and ADHD often face distinct hurdles that significantly impact their educational experience, which can be broadly categorized into three central areas:

Academics

Students with ASD and ADHD typically experience focus- and attention-related challenges and difficulty with organization and time management.

Behavioral regulation

Students with ASD and ADHD are prone to experiencing intense emotions — like feeling overwhelmed by academic and social demands or changes in routine — which can lead to meltdowns or explosive outbursts.

Social interactions

Students with ASD and ADHD often have impaired relational skills, which can make it difficult to form and maintain interpersonal relationships.





How diagnosis can transform lives

All educators share a common goal: for students to enjoy a positive, rewarding academic journey. An accurate, early diagnosis is imperative for providing comprehensive support.

“Differential diagnosis tools allow us to identify concerns all the way down to the pre-K level so we can tailor educational strategies,” says Woodward. “When we know more, we can provide interventions that support appropriate classroom behavior practices to significantly improve outcomes on all levels: social skills, executive functions, communication and, of course, academics.”

This could include an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or, if a student is not eligible for special education or the family chooses not to go that route, a 504 Plan that might offer accommodations such as additional time for testing or alternative seating arrangements, for example.

The risk of underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis can be severe. “If we fail to diagnose for a number of years and don’t address any related issues early on, students can experience adverse effects such as the impacts of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety,” Woodward indicates.



To ensure students are accurately and quickly diagnosed, a team approach is vital, says Elizabeth Shanley, a clinical assessment consultant at Pearson with nearly a decade of teaching experience in public elementary schools. “We encourage everyone in the school community to be vigilant to where students might exhibit symptoms — recognizing that these conditions exist along a continuum of severity.”

Professional development is particularly helpful to shed light on potential behaviors and can empower educators at all levels. Upon being given the proper information, “we often see that teachers are able to identify how a student’s classroom behavior differs from that of their same-aged peers. Knowing which behaviors to look for supports a teacher’s ability to make appropriate referrals for evaluation,” Shanley says.

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Elizabeth Shanley

Former educator and clinical assessment consultant at Pearson

Building a better classroom for students living with co-occurring ASD and ADHD

As Woodward notes, schools have made considerable progress in providing an inclusive environment for all students. “You notice it when you walk into a school building, where you see classrooms with dim lights, quiet corners and posted visual cues,” she says. “It’s encouraging to see the growth in awareness, and we just need to continue to focus on professional development that underscores the critical nature of providing these interventions early and consistently.”

Here are some actions you can try in your classroom. While some of the examples do not directly benefit all students, they can be beneficial for all students indirectly. By ensuring students who need intervention are supported, they can help the classroom as a whole run more smoothly.

1 Track individualized support plans.

As the day-to-day point of contact, classroom teachers are instrumental in ensuring support plans are being actively monitored and followed. This typically entails collaborating with special education staff so there is a universal awareness of the objectives for a specific student. “Teachers should understand not only how to implement the agreed-upon interventions, but really understand how the plan will help this particular student,” says Woodward.

2 Implement flexible instructional strategies.

While adaptable approaches are particularly important for those with ASD and ADHD, making classroom modifications can support an improved experience for all students. For example:

- **Visual supports**, such as schedules depicting daily routines and color-coded folders and binders.
- **Cooperative learning activities**, like group projects that allow all students to practice communication skills in a structured environment.
- **Brain breaks** that incorporate movement such as stretching or energizing exercises.
- **Sensory-friendly classrooms** that have soft lighting, minimal clutter, sensory objects and designated quiet areas.

3 Track individualized support plans.

A safe, respectful and empathetic environment where diversity is valued and celebrated is critical to affirming not just students with ASD and ADHD but all students. By promoting activities that include social-emotional learning (SEL), encouraging open communication and addressing bullying, teachers can cultivate a sense of belonging and community.

4 Implement flexible instructional strategies.

Deciphering social interactions and developing meaningful relationships can be universally complicated, which is why all students can use practice in conversational skills, active listening, empathy, problem-solving and conflict resolution. For example, both structured role-playing and open-ended roundtable discussions allow students to hone their skills in perceiving social cues and relating to others. Mix up grouping arrangements regularly to provide opportunities for students to work with a range of peers.

5 Get caregivers on board.

Interventions will be more successful when families truly understand their child's unique needs. "You want to garner their support in the home environment, which will also help them be successful at school," points out Woodward. "The gold standard is consistent communication with families, along with the external professionals who may provide related services outside of the school, like mental health providers or speech-language pathologists."

Essential resources for expert guidance

Effective assessment, accompanied by insightful measurement and reporting, is the cornerstone of accurate evaluation. Pearson offers a library of options designed to help schools make informed diagnoses. Woodward highlights two that are particularly useful:

BASC™ –3

"We frequently use this instrument as an initial broadband assessment of behavior to help tease out whether or not there's risk for ADHD or ASD."

Brown Executive Function/Attention Scales™

"This helps us pinpoint executive function areas that are impacted — and at what severity — to determine the intensity with which we will provide interventions. The different profiles also help determine whether there's a co-occurring disorder."

Navigating a path forward

As school communities promise to offer the best possible experiences and opportunities for students, the key is to address a child holistically, considering everything from their academic success to the mental health implications of conditions like ADHD and ASD.

“There are such dire long-term implications if we don’t address this early on or don’t give an accurate diagnosis, especially if we don’t have tools that allow us to differentially diagnose,” says Woodward. “I think it’s critical to consider on multiple levels — educators, families and society as a whole — as we weigh the effects of a late or misdiagnosis. By starting interventions early, we can dramatically reduce or even prevent many setbacks that could otherwise arise.”

For more information on co-occurring conditions, related assessments and other helpful tools, visit Pearson’s [Mental Health](#), [ADHD](#) and [Autism](#) Resource Centers.





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