

Autism and ADHD together

Sometimes called AuDHD: what it means and how tutoring can help

When a child is both autistic and has ADHD · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Many children are both autistic and have ADHD. Families and the autistic community often call this **AuDHD**. It is not a separate diagnosis: each condition is assessed and diagnosed in its own right. Until 2013 the main diagnostic manual did not allow both to be diagnosed together, so many children were only ever given one label. Studies commonly estimate that between **a third and over half** of autistic children also meet the criteria for ADHD. This sheet is best read alongside our separate guides to autism and to ADHD.

Two conditions pulling in opposite

directions

What makes the combination different is that the two conditions often want opposite things. A child can be living with both pulls at once:

Autism often wants... ADHD often wants...

Routine and sameness	Novelty and variety
To know exactly what happens next	Spontaneity; repetition is boring
Deep focus on one interest	To jump between ideas
Calm, quiet, low stimulation	Movement and stimulation
Time to process before answering	To answer immediately

What it can look like

- Needs a routine, but finds it very hard to keep to one.
- Bored by repetition, yet upset by any change.
- Absorbed for hours in an interest, but unable to start anything else.
- Seeks noise and movement one minute, overwhelmed by them the next.
- Very inconsistent days: brilliant on Tuesday, unable to cope on Wednesday.
- Big feelings that arrive fast and take a long time to settle.

Why it is often missed

Each condition can hide the other. The restlessness of ADHD can mask autistic traits, and the need for routine can hide ADHD. Often one diagnosis comes first and the second follows years later. Girls are especially likely to be missed, because many mask their difficulties well at school.

Masking and burnout

Holding both sets of difficulties together all day is exhausting. A child who seems fine at school may come home and fall apart. Over time, constant masking can lead to **burnout**: a period of exhaustion when skills that were there before seem to disappear. Rest and lower demands, not more pressure, are what help.

Strengths worth noticing

Original, creative thinking combined with deep knowledge; energy and enthusiasm; honesty; humour; and the ability to become a real expert in the things they love.

“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Structure outside, variety inside

This is the key idea. The **shape** of every session stays the same: the same opening, the same visual plan, the same way of finishing. That meets the autistic need for predictability. **Inside** that shape the activities change, keeping the ADHD brain engaged. Your child knows exactly what is coming without being bored by it.

What sessions look like

- **A visual plan** with a fixed start and finish, and any change flagged in advance.
- **Short, varied tasks** of around 10 to 15 minutes, with movement in between.
- **Choice within limits**: “which of these two shall we do first?” gives control without chaos.
- **Calming movement** such as carrying, pushing or stretching, which suits both sensory profiles.
- **Interests used as a way in**, and time to go deep on them as a reward.
- **Clear, literal language** and one instruction at a time, with time to process.
- **Flexibility on hard days**: a lighter session that keeps the routine beats a battle.

Working together

Because days vary so much, Nicola will keep a simple note of what went well and what did not, which often reveals patterns around sleep, school events or sensory load. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child’s teacher or SENCo.

Being realistic

Tutoring does not treat either condition, and it should not aim to make your child less autistic. Progress may be uneven, with good weeks and setbacks. **Consistency matters most**: the same day and time each week is itself part of the support.

Small things that help at home

- Plan the week visually, but build in choices so it does not feel rigid.
- Allow recovery time after school before homework or questions.
- Offer movement that calms: trampolining, swinging, carrying the shopping.
- Reduce demands on hard days; a calm evening is not a lost one.
- Protect sleep, which affects both conditions.
- Separate behaviour from overwhelm: ask what your child needed, not what they did.

If you suspect both

If your child has one diagnosis and you see signs of the other, talk to your GP or SENCo and ask whether a further assessment is appropriate. **Your child does not need either diagnosis to receive SEN support at school**; support should be based on need.

Where to find out more

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk

ADHD Foundation: adhdfoundation.org.uk

NHS: nhs.uk, search “autism” or “ADHD”

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search “SENDIASS” with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups.