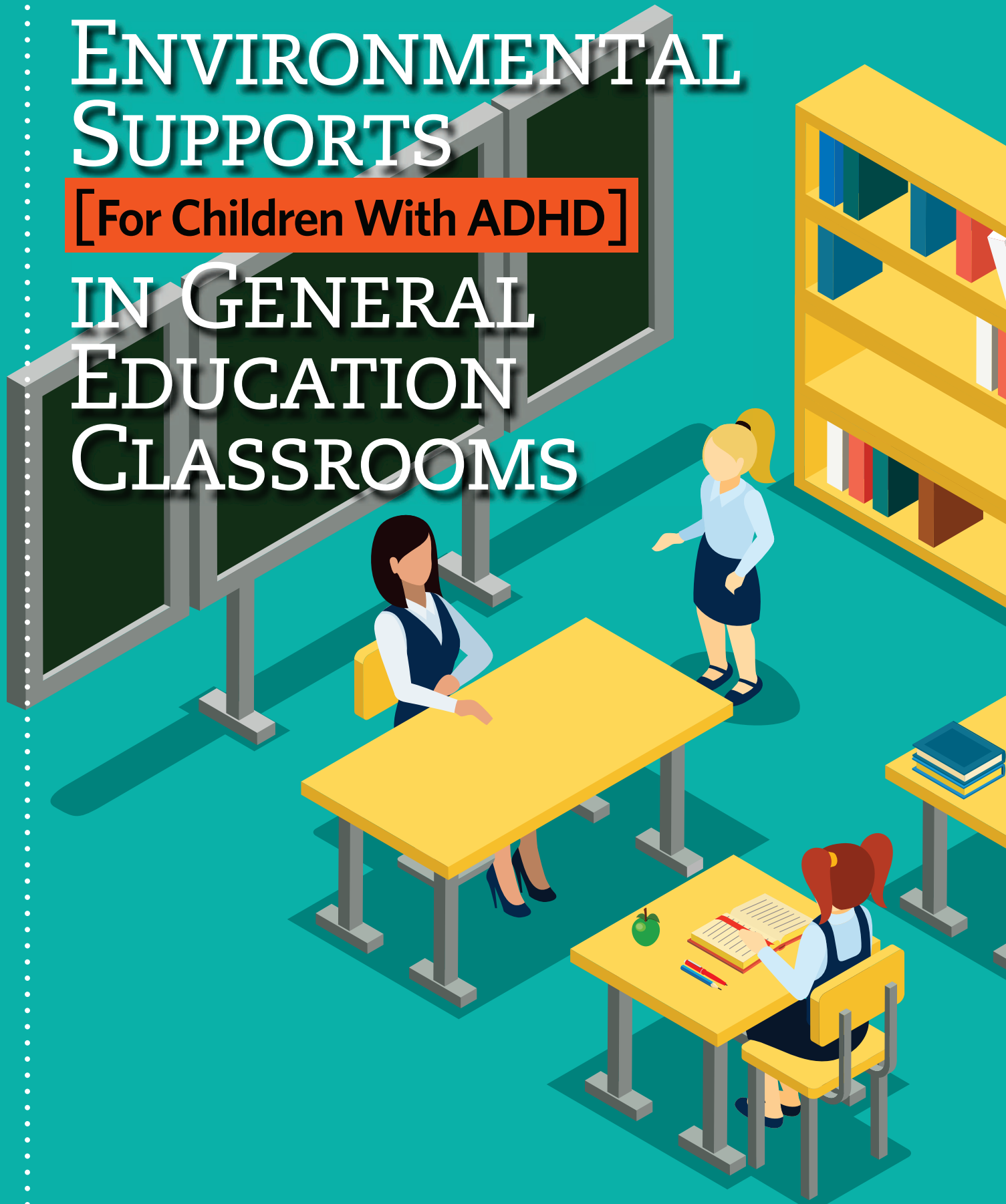


# ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORTS

[For Children With ADHD]

# IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS



An isometric illustration of a person with dark hair, wearing a light blue shirt and dark pants, sitting at a yellow desk. They are holding a red pencil and looking towards a large yellow bookshelf filled with colorful books. The background is a solid teal color with a white dotted line near the top.

by Christopher Doyle, MEd

**A** CHILD'S ABILITY TO PAY ATTENTION requires a complex brain process. It involves selecting and interpreting incoming information, identifying information that is and is not important, thinking deeply about multiple details, connecting this information with what is already known, and then sustaining this thinking for a prolonged period of time (even if it is something that does not inspire curiosity). Children with ADHD struggle with attentiveness, and in some cases with impulsivity and hyperactivity.

It is important to recognize that ADHD is not a learning disability and therefore not a reflection of a student's capacity to actually learn. The behaviors associated with ADHD are what potentially make learning challenging and these behaviors look different in each child who has ADHD. Some children may be predominantly inattentive and have trouble sustaining focus on a task or remembering misplaced items. Others may be predominantly hyperactive or impulsive and tend to be fidgety, have difficulty sitting for long lengths or taking turns, or move between tasks without finishing. Since these behaviors can look different in all children with ADHD, a teacher's response to a child with ADHD should be an individualized process.

There are two approaches to designing a classroom that is accessible. Accommodations can be provided that either benefit all students or target the individual learner. These suggested supports are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather experimental. In other words, try different things. What works for one child may not work for another.

## WORK SPACES

Classroom design is a very thoughtful and intentional process. Quiet independent workspaces should be available in the room. The purpose of these spaces is to mitigate the social and visual stimuli in the room. This is not the same as a “cool off” space where children go to calm down after a conflict. This is designed as a workspace, and keep in mind that less is actually more.

Avoid cluttering this workspace with distracting items (for example, too much visual text and too many tactile objects). This should not be a place that overwhelms the senses. Consider either a single desk with a comfortable chair, or perhaps a beanbag chair with a small clipboard. Standing podium desks are also seen more and more in classrooms. Remember, it is a place to work, not withdraw.

In classrooms that use group tables, it may be helpful to put down a plastic or rubberized mat to designate a specific work area. Using blue painter’s tape (less adhesive and easier to remove than masking tape), outline an actual space on the table as a designated work area. This creates a concrete boundary that can be seen, making it easier for them to define personal space between students. When passing

out materials for activities, use small baskets or folders that contain all the papers or objects students will need for an activity. This will make it clear to see which materials belong to the students, and it also give these materials a designated place when it is time to clean up.



## WALL SPACE

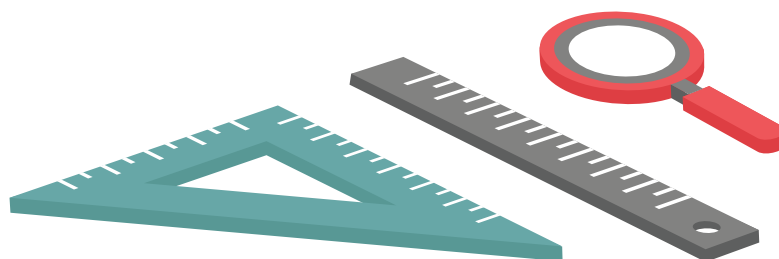
If you’ve ever walked around Times Square in New York City, you may have experienced sensory overload with the dizzying swarm of sights and sounds. Having cluttered, busy walls in the classroom can have the same effect on a child with ADHD. Anchor charts should be child-friendly and directly related to the content. These should be visual references for strategies that have been taught in class or related to the content covered in the curriculum. Make sure that what is posted on the walls has a purpose and students are aware of why it is there. Otherwise, ask yourself, why is it there?

Clearly posting the daily schedule offers structure to the day. It can also be referenced when reminding students about upcoming activities. Before beginning a lesson, review the schedule and remind students of what is to be expected. Posting recent and relevant student work also shows that you value their effort and gives them a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

## ORGANIZATION

To support organization skills, there should be designated spaces for classroom and student materials. Not only should bins be labeled for markers, crayon, scissors, glue, and rulers, but also a corresponding label on the shelf where they should be returned. It may also be helpful to have bins for lined, plain, or construction paper, and also for complete and incomplete work.

Students should have a place in the class where they can store their own supplies, too. Assign a color for each subject. When it is math time, students can remember, “Red is math, so I need my red folder.” They can also see that their neighbor has their green folder and recognize, “I need my green folder too.” If it has an assigned home in the classroom, students will learn to help it live there. These systems for organization should be clearly and explicitly taught at the very beginning of the school year, and reinforced throughout the school year.





Clearly defined locations for backpacks and coats (labeled with names for younger children) help identify personal space. For backpacks that often seem cluttered, consider getting a binder or a folder to keep papers in one place. These should be labeled reminding where certain papers belong (stay at home, or return to school). Within backpacks, plastic inserts or spacers can help create separate compartments to maintain order. Photographs of how these spaces look when organized can be helpful. In the classroom, mailboxes are helpful for receiving homework assignments, returning classwork, and sending out notices. Mailboxes are also predictably in the same place in the room, and can be built into daily routines easily. There should be times during the day for students to manage organization routines.

### STRUCTURED BREAKS

It can take students with ADHD a lot more mental energy to maintain focus. There are also times when their bodies are telling them they need to move. Be vigilant. Excessive fidgeting, calling out, prolonged sitting may indicate a need for a break. A structured break is a break that has a purpose. It is not avoidance or playtime.

For older students, talk with them and explain when, why and how breaks work. Explain that this is something that helps refocus the brain. This may include getting a drink of water in the hallway. While in the hallway, setup a space for wall push-ups or another physical activity. Place a figure eight pattern on the wall and have students trace this with their finger switching direc-

tions and switching hands. These techniques are often used by occupational therapists and can easily be incorporated in the classroom. Finally, allow time during transitions (the time in between classroom lessons) for movement activities. Involve the whole class in a group game that requires moving around, all students will enjoy it.

### UNIQUE LEARNERS

All children are unique learners. Regardless of how a classroom is designed, the most important place to start is with developing relationships. Knowing the child is such a crucial element in teaching. Relationships help develop an awareness and understanding of why children behave the way they do.

Talk to children about ADHD. Explain what it is and how it may impact learning. Normalize this difference and emphasize how they may have different needs in school. Some students need glasses to see, just as other students need strategies to help them focus and stay on task.

As they become older or more aware of their needs, encourage children to regulate on their own. This will help them become more independent and demonstrate more confidence in their capacity to advocate for themselves and feel successful. And of course, throughout the process be open, be patient, and be understanding. 🗣️

**Christopher Doyle, MEd**, is a third grade teacher at Glen Urquhart School in Beverly, Massachusetts. He has also taught in public, charter, and independent schools in New York City and Newark, New Jersey.

