

ADHD IN BLACK AND BROWN GIRLS

Recognizing the Signs, Understanding the Bias, Knowing How to Help

ADHD affects girls as often as it affects boys, yet girls are diagnosed far less often, and much later, than boys nationally. For Black and brown girls, that gap widens further. Quiet symptoms, cultural double standards, and racial bias in both schools and healthcare mean many girls are disciplined, dismissed, or misdiagnosed for years before anyone asks whether ADHD could be the cause.

3 to 5x

Black girls face discipline rates three to five times higher than white girls for the same classroom infractions.

(U.S. GAO, GAO-24-106787, 2024)

8%

of U.S. girls have ever been diagnosed with ADHD, compared to 15% of boys, a gap that widens further for Black and brown girls.

(CDC/NCHS Data Brief No. 499, 2024)

HOW ADHD CAN LOOK DIFFERENT IN GIRLS

- **The inattentive, internalized presentation is most common.** Girls with ADHD more often show inattentive symptoms and internalizing struggles (anxiety, overwhelm, self-criticism) rather than the visible hyperactivity associated with boys. *(Chronis-Tuscano, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2022; Kok et al., 2020; Fraticelli et al., 2022)*
- **Masking hides the struggle.** Girls frequently develop compensatory strategies, copying a friend's notes, staying quiet, working twice as hard, to appear fine in public while falling apart at home. Symptoms researchers describe as socially oriented and internalized (losing track of a conversation, doodling, quiet frustration) rarely appear on standard checklists built from studies of boys. *(PMC, Reflections on ADHD in Girls, 2025; King's College London, ADHD in Girls and Women thesis)*
- **High effort can hide real impairment.** A girl who is passing her classes may still be working far harder than her peers to get there. Grades alone do not rule out ADHD; functional strain does.

PUNISHED INSTEAD OF EVALUATED

- **Adultification bias drives harsher discipline.** Black girls represent about 15% of girls in U.S. public schools but accounted for 45% of out-of-school suspensions and 43% of expulsions nationally, even for infractions similar to those of white girls. Investigators identified adultification, perceiving Black girls as older, less innocent, and more defiant than they are, as a key driver. *(U.S. GAO, GAO-24-106787, 2024)*
- **The same behavior is read differently by race.** In controlled studies, teachers judged identical misbehavior as more blameworthy when the student was Black or Latino, and emotional expressiveness in Black girls was evaluated more harshly and referred for discipline more often than the same expressiveness in white girls. *(Owens, American Sociological Review, 2022; Social Psychology Quarterly, 2023; Morris and Perry, Sociology of Education, 2017)*
- **Black girls are the least likely to be diagnosed.** A study of over 849,000 ADHD patients found Black girls were the demographic least likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis, while remaining among the most likely to receive a disciplinary referral. The result: a discipline record often forms years before an evaluation ever happens. *(Shalaby et al., Scientific Reports, 2024)*

SIGNS THAT WARRANT AN EVALUATION CONVERSATION

- Struggles to start or finish homework despite clearly understanding the material
- Routinely loses or forgets things across more than one setting: home, school, activities
- Appears to “space out” or daydream often, even when trying to pay attention
- Emotional reactions that seem larger than the moment calls for and take a long time to recover from
- Holds it together all day at school, then “falls apart” emotionally once home, a common masking pattern
- **A pattern, not an incident.** Symptoms persisting six months or more, and showing up in more than one setting, are what clinical criteria look for. A hard week is not the standard; a hard year across home and school is. (*APA, DSM-5-TR, 2022*)
- **A family history of ADHD.** ADHD is one of the most heritable conditions in psychiatry (77 to 88%). If a parent has ADHD, a child's symptoms deserve a closer look, and a parent's own unmanaged ADHD is worth naming too; supporting the parent is often part of supporting the child. (*Faraone and Larsson, Molecular Psychiatry, 2019*)

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **You do not need the school to go first.** Any parent or guardian can request an ADHD evaluation directly from a pediatrician, or request a school evaluation in writing under IDEA. Evaluation is provided at no cost to the family. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414*)
- **Ask about parent training in behavior management (PTBM).** This is the evidence-based, first-line approach recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for children ages 4 to 12, shown to strengthen the parent-child relationship and improve behavior. (*AAP Clinical Practice Guideline, Pediatrics, 2019*)
- **Document patterns before the appointment.** Specific, dated examples across settings carry far more weight with a clinician or school team than a general impression.
- **Separate the behavior from her character.** Strengths-based language at home changes how a girl understands herself, and it is not in conflict with clear expectations and consistent structure.
- **Give warnings before transitions and break tasks into smaller steps.** Both reduce the friction that most often triggers frustration and shutdown at home.
- **Advocate firmly, and bring support if you need it.** Write your questions down beforehand. If you feel dismissed by a provider or a school team, you are entitled to ask for a second opinion or a formal evaluation in writing.

PARTNER WITH THE SOCIETY FOR ADHD AND CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS

The Society is the only ADHD organization in the United States with a dedicated focus on faith-based and marginalized communities. We are a secular, faith-informed nonprofit, science-backed and community-rooted, serving as a bridge between families and the culturally conscious ADHD support they deserve.

- ADHD UnMasked Support Groups: peer support for families, held in faith community settings
- ADHD Unplugged: free podcast on ADHD and co-occurring conditions
- Resource Library: free, publicly accessible at www.societyforadhd.org/resource-library

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References available upon request. All content is science-backed and evidence-based.