UNDERSTANDING ADHD
A Handout for Caregivers

Mostly diagnosed in childhood, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is a condition seen in around 11% of school aged children across the world.

Children with ADHD often show incredible creativity, compassion, energy, and imagination. They can focus deeply on activities that interest them, like video games or art but may struggle with tasks they find less engaging -- such as schoolwork or routine activities— due to their natural restlessness and difficulties in regulating attention or controlling impulses.

ADHD is...
- Caused by a difference in brain structure and activity
- An interests-based brain

ADHD isn't...
- Anyone's 'fault'
- A character flaw
- Triggered by 'poor parenting'
- 'Attention-seeking' behaviour

How do you recognise children with ADHD?

ADHD shows up differently in each child, which can lead to misunderstandings about their behaviour, and cause them to be seen as lazy or stubborn when they're really struggling with attention and energy regulation.

Children with hyperactivity often have lots of energy and seem to be always on the move. They might be forgetful, have a hard time focusing on tasks for long, and may interrupt others because it's challenging to wait their turn.

Children with attention regulation difficulties, on the other hand, while able to be quiet and sit still, may seem uninterested or forgetful because their minds tend to wander. They might also struggle with organisation and keeping track of time.

What causes ADHD?

ADHD is a condition that children are born with -- genetics contribute to about 80% of its prevalence. In children with ADHD, the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain behind the forehead that helps with self-control, flexible thinking, planning, and managing emotions— develops at a different pace than their peers. This can make these tasks more challenging for them.

Children with ADHD also have lower levels of neurotransmitters like dopamine and noradrenaline, that help transmit signals in the brain.

How is ADHD managed?

ADHD is best managed through a multimodal approach, i.e. in more than one way, with a focus on learning, participation and emotion regulation. When decision making regarding ADHD management is collaborative, the family and clinical team work as partners. Decisions are guided by the strengths, needs and priorities of the family in the context of the child's support needs.

- **Parent skills training in behaviour management** is the first line of treatment in pre-school aged children. The key objective is to 'catch the child being good', create routines, and use techniques such as visual structures to optimise executive functioning.

- **Medication,** taken as prescribed, is an effective way to manage ADHD symptoms. ADHD medication is of two types – stimulants and non-stimulants. Unlike medications such as antibiotics, that are taken for short durations, there's no medication that cures ADHD. However, most children with ADHD perform well with a combination of medication and behavioural intervention.

- **Educational interventions** involving the child's teachers are necessary as children spend nearly half their day at school. Their teachers must understand ADHD and provide accommodations in the form of opportunities to move about, visual structure, and rewards that promote their learning and participation. A child with a learning disability may require support from a special educator.

Children with ADHD can thrive in an environment that nurtures their interests, and provides structure and encouragement. Good communication is essential between everyone who cares for the child with ADHD – the family, school staff, teachers, therapists and doctors.

For further information on ADHD and executive functioning, check out these online resources:

- Additude
- Child Mind Institute
- ADHD self-advocates: Jessica McCabe, Ned Hallowell