

**FOR TEACHERS**

## **9 Mean Teacher Comments Every Student with ADHD Knows Too Well**

“My teacher is so mean. She doesn’t like me.” If your child has ADHD, you know that “mean teachers” are rarely cruel on purpose. But sometimes their lack of knowledge and training on ADHD means that they have expectations — and comments — that are wholly inappropriate and/or unhelpful for our kids. Here are the 9 that I remember most clearly.

BY ELIZABETH BROADBENT

Maybe your child already has an [ADHD diagnosis](#). Maybe you’re still wondering if your child might show signs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)). Or maybe you’re an adult diagnosed late in life, like my husband and I, thinking back to your own childhood. Regardless, we all share something: the same barrage of unhelpful comments, the same snarky asides, and the same unsympathetic demands from “mean teachers.” They hurt. They erode our [self-esteem](#). And they never, ever end.

If you’re a parent, and you find your child is subjected to them constantly, it’s time to [talk to the teacher](#) about ADHD and its symptoms. You’d be doing your kid an immense favor. Believe us late-diagnosed adults: hearing this stuff for 13 years (or longer, in college) really hurts.

### **ADHD Comment #1: “If you only tried harder you would...”**

We are trying as hard as we can. “Trying harder” is not an option.

Why do we struggle to maintain engagement? Our brains are wired differently. The class may not capture our interest. The teaching style may bore us. Our [learning style](#) may differ from the teaching methods, or we may just simply *have problems paying attention to what’s happening in the classroom*. The idea that we need to “try harder” shames us for our [neurodivergence](#), and it offers zero helpful strategies for future learning.

*[Self-Test: Could Your Child Have Inattentive ADHD?]*

### **ADHD Comment #2: “If you stopped making careless mistakes, you could be at the top of the class.”**

Yes, we make “careless mistakes.” Those mistakes, however, originate not from a lack of care. They stem from our neurodivergence. We often think faster than we write. We interpret information too quickly. We forget to proofread, or check over our work. We legitimately forget. This is another way that our ADHD manifests itself.

Don't shame us for being "careless." We aren't careless. We do care. To say that we don't care insults and shames us, which many actually feed apathy over time.

### **ADHD Comment #3: "How many times do I have to tell you?!?"**

Answer: Over and over again, because we have ADHD. Those first two letters stand for "attention deficit," and they mean that we [have trouble paying attention](#) to things other people have no problem following, especially if we find those things boring. So we look around the classroom for amusement. What's outside that window is, often times, more interesting to us than what's happening in the classroom.

Shaming us, in front of our peers, for our neurodivergence won't change that. Instead, try re-engaging us by touching our shoulders, saying our names, or otherwise calling us back in a gentle manner that doesn't teach us to hate school.

### **ADHD Comment #4: "Stop talking to your neighbor."**

But what if we have a question we don't want to bother the teacher with? Or we got lost and need help catching up with the class? Or we're just plain bored, because we have an attention deficit? The root of the problem is not that we're a "chatterbox" or "too social" or even disrespecting you; the problem is that you've lost our attention and we lack the tools for fixing that ourselves. Help us; don't embarrass us.

### **ADHD Comment #5: "Why can't you remember your homework?"**

Answer: Many, many reasons. Students with ADHD have trouble with organization. We forget to write down [homework assignments](#). We leave our textbooks at school. We want to do the homework but forget about it once we get home. We mean well but we don't understand it, because we don't understand what's going on in class, because, well, attention deficit disorder.

*[ADHD in Adults: Your Guide to Symptoms, Diagnosis and Treatment]*

### **ADHD Comment #6: "You're smart. You should be doing better in this class."**

Yes, we are smart. We're also neurodivergent in a world and a school system designed exclusively for the neurotypical. So no matter how "smart" we are, we're also operating at a significant handicap. How can we "do better" in a class that's not designed for us? We're always doing the best we can. This comment just shames us into feeling stupid. Into feeling that we don't try or don't care or don't understand some basic life rules. We end up feeling that our ADHD is our fault. I thought I was a lazy space cadet for years. I wasn't.

### **ADHD Comment #7: "Stop drumming your pencil/tapping your leg/kicking your neighbor's chair, etc."**

ADHD bodies are meant to move. We are not programmed to sit still: our brains simply don't work that way. The modern classroom is designed for neurotypical students, who can happily sit on their butts for hours at a time. We can't. So we resort to things like clicking our pens over and over, or tapping out feet, or drumming our pencils, sometimes even picking at our cuticles because we're so desperate for any stimulation.

## **ADHD Comment #8: “No, you may not go to the bathroom again.” or “No, you do not need to sharpen your pencil again.” or “Another trip to the nurse’s office? I don’t think so.”**

Some [children \(and adults\) with ADHD](#) resort to bathroom or office or back-of-classroom trips to get much-needed stimulation: We have to get up and stretch our legs, and going to the bathroom or sharpening our pencil is the only way we’re permitted to leave our seats. I used to take regular “bathroom” breaks and wander around the school because I couldn’t stand to sit still any longer.

## **ADHD Comment #9: “Stop drawing all over your papers.”**

Many kids, especially those of us with the [inattentive type of ADHD](#), try to mask their neurodivergence by staring intently at their desk, while doing things like coloring in all the o’s, a’s, e’s, etc. on a page, drawing instead of taking notes, making paper footballs, etc. I had an elaborate system that involved taking notes in different colored Crayola markers to keep myself interested. Despite that, I still drew all over everything. I also spent most of graduate school studiously typing away in the back of class, looking like I was taking copious notes, when I was really writing a novel for my master’s thesis.

If your child hasn’t been diagnosed, but he or she hears these comments on a regular basis, you may want to think about an [evaluation](#). If you’re a late-diagnosed adult, you may have experienced a few flashbacks just now. And if you’re the parent of a kid with ADHD: well, now you know what they hear every single day, and how demoralizing, demeaning, and shaming it can be.

*[[What Every Teacher Should Know About ADHD: A Poster for School](#)]*

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