

# But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids?

## What is ADHD?

May 29, 2025

**Jane** 00:20

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. We get a lot of questions from you about how our bodies work, and sometimes the part of your body you're interested in learning more about is your brain. Several of you have been sending us a specific kind of brain question lately.

**Amir** 00:45

What is ADHD? My name is Amir. I'm nine years old. I live in Limerick, Ireland.

**Ava** 00:51

My name is Ava. I live in Cy Austin, New York. I'm eight years old. What is ADHD?

**Tristan** 00:57

My name is Tristan. I'm eight years old. I live in Apex, North Carolina, and I want to know what is ADHD.

**Felix** 01:07

My name is Felix. I'm nine years old, and I'm from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. What is ADHD?

**Jane** 01:12

ADHD is a term used to describe a certain type of brain and the ways it's similar and different from other types of brains, we wanted to get someone who knows a lot about ADHD to help us tackle your questions today.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 01:27

I'm Dr. Liz, and my job in the world is to help kids understand their amazing brains.

**Jane** 01:34

Dr. Liz Angoff is a licensed educational psychologist and the author of a book called Our Brains Empowering Neurodivergent Minds. If you haven't heard the word neurodivergent before, here's how Dr. Liz explains it.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 01:49

There are lots of different types of brains in the world, and we can talk about all the different types of brains as neurodiversity. So, there's two parts to that word: neuro means brain and diversity means all different kinds. So neurodiversity is all different kinds of brains, and most brains, even within

neurodiversity, they kind of work alike, and the world is designed to work for those kinds of brains, because it's most brains, but some brains work differently in some really cool ways. And when you have a brain that works differently than most brains, we call it neurodivergent. You have a neurodivergent brain, or you might say I'm a neurodivergent person, and that the neuro still means brain, and divergent just means different, so it means I have a different kind of brain than most brains.

**Jane** 02:46

Like, if you think about the word divergent, you often think about a path - something that diverges is something that goes away from the other path. So, a neurodivergent brain is a brain that sort of separates a little bit from the maybe the path that has more footprints on it, but it's still a perfectly good path, and your path.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 03:06

Yeah. So it's important that we have all different paths, because if all brains worked exactly the same, our world would be very, very boring, and we have all kinds of different problems that come up that we face every day, and so we need lots of different types of thinkers to solve these different kinds of problems, and in fact, some of the people who have made the biggest difference in our world have been divergent thinkers who have thought in a different way, who have gone off the beaten path to go in a different direction, so that we could be better as humans.

**Jane** 03:44

One type of neurodivergence is ADHD. Now, you may have been told by doctors or school counselors or parents that you have ADHD, or maybe you have a friend, a classmate, or a relative with an ADHD brain, but what is that?

**Daniel** 04:01

My name is Daniel, and I live in Columbus, Ohio, and I'm 10 years old. What is ADHD? Because I have it, and I don't really understand it.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 04:12

Yeah, so ADHD is one of those unique types of brains. It is a really cool kind of brain with a ton of strengths, and some things that can be a little bit tricky, and so if you are listening to this and you are an ADHDer, or you have an ADHD brain, I think it is amazing that you already know that you have this type of brain, but you are not alone in being confused about it, even the name is really confusing. So, ADHD is actually the letters A, D, H, D, and it stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. But to be honest with you, it's actually a really bad name for what's going on. So I would love to break it down. So the first piece is the attention piece. So attention deficit means lack of attention, but it turns out that ADHD brains are actually paying attention to everything, and a lot of what's really going on is that it's not a lack of attention, but that it's hard to control what you're paying attention to, and when. So, in fact, ADHD brains tend to notice a lot of things that other people don't, or they might be thinking about things that other people aren't thinking about, and this can lead to new ideas, it leads to creative thinking, or unique problem solving, and in fact, when ADHD brains find something that they love, they can do something called hyper focus, which is where you put extra focus into something for an extra long time, and can sometimes become your area of expertise when you grow up, which is a really cool feature.

On the flip side, it can be hard to turn on your attention for things that aren't interesting to you. So, like in class, if the teacher's talking about something that's not that interesting, or if you have to remember to do your chores at home, that might be a little bit trickier for your brain than most brains, so that first part of ADHD is the controlling attention part.

**Jane 06:26**

I think that hyper fixation, hyper focus part is so cool, because some kids and some adults are able, as you said, to really spend a lot of time thinking about one thing and get so deep into it and become such experts in it, and something that a non-ADHDer might be like, well, I'm interested, but I can't focus for that long, that you're like, I just spent three hours thinking about this one thing, and I know so much about it, and I didn't even eat! So you know, sometimes you need to remember to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water, but you've spent all this time focusing on this really cool thing that you're interested in.

**Dr. Liz Angoff 07:03**

Exactly, exactly, so that is one of the cool parts of ADHD brains, and the part that can be tricky as well, so you've got both parts there, I think the second part of ADHD is the H, which stands for hyperactivity, and hyperactivity just means that you love to move, and the funny thing about this part is that not all ADHDers have this part, but if you do have this part and you're a mover, you might find that you learn best when you're moving, or that you love movement activities like sports, or dance or just running around playing tag, and you may also find that you say and do things before you think about them, which actually leads a lot of ADHDers to being very funny and spontaneous. Sometimes this part may mean that you do things before you think through them, which can be tricky if you do something you didn't mean to do, and you have to say you're sorry, so we can think of that second part of ADHD as the moving and doing part of ADHD.

**Jane 08:13**

And some people who have ADHD have more of a tendency to have that attention piece of things that you were talking about it. Some people have more of that hyperactivity, want to move all the time. Some people have both, but it's all considered part of the same kind of neurodivergent brain?

**Dr. Liz Angoff 08:32**

Yeah, yeah, it's really interesting because every ADHDer is a little bit different. They all have things in common, but it might show up differently for you. So, if you have an ADHD brain and your friend has an ADHD brain, it might look really different in both of you. So, for some people, that moving and doing part of their brain is actually that they love to talk, and that they might be that they love to share their ideas, and it might be really hard to keep those ideas inside for some people. The attention part might mean that they do like have that hyper focus piece. For some people, it might look like I have a ton of projects that I want to do all the time, and I love to start things, but it's really hard to finish them, so it might look a little different in every kid that's out there.

**Jane 09:24**

The last part of those letters in ADHD stands for disorder, but Dr. Liz doesn't like that part of the name either, because disorder makes it sound like there's something that needs to be fixed, and she doesn't agree with that.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 09:39

There is nothing to fix in an ADHD brain. Your brain is awesome just the way it is. I think that the word disorder came about because when we didn't know what was going on, we thought that, or people back in the day thought that, oh, this is something that's causing a lot of problems; we should fix it and try and make it go away. We've learned so much about brains since then, and we've learned how important neurodiversity is, and how important neurodivergent brains are to our society, and so we know now that it's a difference, not a disorder, and so I like the word difference, and the kids that I work with, we like to talk about our amazingly dynamic, hyper-focusing, different kind of brain, instead of the traditional way of defining ADHD.

**Jane** 10:38

What do you think about those words for ADHD instead: Amazingly Dynamic, Hyper-focusing, Different. ADHD.

**Paisley** 10:48

My name is Paisley. I'm seven years old. I'm from Fort Collins, Colorado. My question is, why do people get ADHD?

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 10:57

Well, there are a couple of theories about why people have ADHD. It turns out that ADHD brains are really important to the world, because we need these innovative or creative thinkers to get us out of sticky situations to solve problems that people face every day, and some of our greatest inventors and entrepreneurs, or people who start businesses, have ADHD brains, so they're necessary for our world. And if we think back to the very olden days, when we were hunting and gathering our food and looking for new places to live, ADHD brains tended to be constantly looking around to see what's happening, and this would have been really helpful to find food. ADHD brains also really like new things, so they tended to be less scared of investigating new places where it could be better to live, so we actually think that this kind of brain was really adaptive or helpful for humans, and it has been for a really long time, and currently we need these ADHD brains to help us solve new problems, come up with new ideas, or even bring energy to friends when they feel down, and we need all kinds of different brains for our society to thrive. So ADHD is one of those types of brains that we really need.

**Jane** 12:21

There's evidence that ADHD has been around for as long as there have been people around. It just wasn't called ADHD way back when. And some of the challenges people with ADHD have today are related to our modern world.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 12:36

The way that the world is right now is that we go to school, we have to sit for a very long time. We need to concentrate on very specific things and get certain things done, and so the reason that we've come

up with a name for this type of brain is because this type of brain might need different things to help to be really successful in the world that we have right now,

**Jane** 13:03

So, what kinds of adaptations or accommodations might be helpful to people with ADHD brains? Stay tuned, we'll get into it.

**BREAK** 13:12

BREAK

**Jane** 13:12

This is But Why, A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm. Today we're talking to Dr. Liz Angoff. She writes books about neurodivergence and works with kids and families, and she's helping us understand something called ADHD, one of the ways some of us have what are thought of as neurodivergent brains. Here's a question from Zane.

**Zane** 13:34

I'm six years old, I live in Santa Cruz, and my question is, why do only some people have ADHD instead of all?

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 13:48

I love this question so much. What if we had a world that was all ADHD brains? I mean, how amazing would that be? The thing is that the reason that we have, you know, different types of brains is largely because of genetics, or what our parents, the traits that our parents have passed down to us, so different characteristics like how tall you are, or even some parts of your personality, or why you're so much like your uncle, is you know, like all these different things that are related in families,

**Jane** 14:24

and you're talking just about the biological piece of families, because there are lots of different ways to have families that maybe your genes aren't related to the other family members, but you're talking about the pieces, the actual genetic material that gets passed on to us from two biological parents.

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 14:42

Exactly, exactly, yeah, lots of different ways that families can be, and biologically we have genes that are passed down from one person to another, and so chances are that if you have an ADHD brain, somebody in your biological family likely had ADHD as well, even if it wasn't named for them.

**Quinn** 15:07

My name is Quinn. I'm seven years old. I live in Newton, Massachusetts. My question is, how does ADHD affect your brain?

**Dr. Liz Angoff** 15:17

What's happening in your brain when you have ADHD is that the way that the parts of your brain work might be a little bit different, so our brains have all these different parts, and each part has a really

important job. So, there's parts of your brain that help you understand what you see, parts of your brain that help you understand what you hear, parts of your brain that help you with movement and coordination parts of your brain that help you know where things are and where your body is in space, and there's a really important part of your brain right in front that helps you to pay attention, it helps you make good decisions, it helps you to regulate or respond to your emotions when you're having big feelings, and we call this front part of your brain your frontal lobe, or your executive lobe, and I love the term executive lobe, because it's like the executive or the boss of your brain, it is the boss that's helping you figure out what you need to do and when you need to do it, so that you can get the task done, just like the boss of a company.

**Jane 16:27**

When you have ADHD, sometimes that part of your brain develops a little differently, or more slowly, so it might make it a little more challenging for you to pay attention to something you're not super interested in, for example, or to sit still when you're being told you're supposed to be quiet, or to pause before doing something that might not be a great idea, at least not right now. Sometimes the chemical signals from one part of the brain to another are also a little different in an ADHD brain, so you might seek out things that make you feel good right now, as opposed to feeling like you can be patient.

**Jameson 17:04**

Hi, I'm Jameson. I'm from Virginia. I'm 10 years old, and I would like to know, what is ADHD, and how do you control it?

**Dr. Liz Angoff 17:13**

I appreciate this question from Jameson, because sometimes having an ADHD brain can be really tricky or just hard and tiring. The world's not necessarily built for ADHD brains, for example, and so it can be tricky to sit through the school day, or you might say, or do something that you haven't totally thought through, and so it makes sense that you would want to control the ADHD, but I think the key thing here is to learn how to do things in a way that works with your brain to help it be at its best, rather than thinking about trying to change your brain, so for example, if you're having trouble staying focused at school or on your schoolwork for a long time, you can break things down into tiny parts, so that it's easier to get started and to get finished. And so, instead of saying I'm going to sit down and do all of my homework, you might say I'm going to do five math problems and then check in with my adult, so that you have a check-in point. If your brain is a brain that tends to act before it finishes thinking, then you might have a phrase that you say to yourself, like, what's my plan before you start doing something. So, for example, before you join a group to play, you might think, what's my plan, and then pause to think how you're going to go ask that group of kids to join to join them. And if your body loves to move, we want it to move. We want to use fidgets and movement to help your brain stay on. So, in class, you might have a wiggle stool or a standing desk. You might have a small object that you can have in your hand, it's called a fidget, or you might get up every so often and do some wall push-ups while you're listening to the teacher, so that because that's going to help your brain stay engaged and stay in learning mode. I'll say exercise is super helpful for ADHD brains, and some people also take medication to help with focus and slowing down to think before they act, and so that's something that would be a decision with your adults and a doctor to to help you with, if that's something that could be a tool in your toolbox as you're building your brain.

**Jane 19:34**

How do you know if you have ADHD? Because I think a lot of us listening now are like, some of this sounds challenging, and some of it sounds really cool, and some of it sounds familiar to me, based on my brain, and some of us already know if we have ADHD or not, because we've worked with a doctor or a medical professional or a psychologist who's talked to us about it, but some of us are just like, wait a minute, How do I even know what kind of brain I have?

**Dr. Liz Angoff 20:00**

Yeah, so most kids are, or learn that they have ADHD because they work with a doctor, like your pediatrician, or they might go see somebody like me who's an educational psychologist or a neuropsychologist. There's that word neuro again, that means brain, so someone to help you understand your brain. And you might do a lot of different activities that help the doctor to understand how your brain works with different types of information, how you learn, how you remember things, how you solve problems, and they might be looking for a pattern to see, oh, do you solve problems in a way that ADHD brains solve problems, or do you solve problems in the way that a different type of brain solves problems, and so you would learn about your brain by working with one of those people. Now, I will say, if you're listening to this and you're a kid and you're thinking, I think that my brain might work like that, then your next step is to talk to your parent or talk to your adults to say, I wonder what kind of brain I have, and to start asking them some questions about how do I learn what is helpful for me. And then you can talk about your unique type of brain, whether you have an ADHD brain, a different type of brain, or there's other words that would describe your type of neurodiversity.

**Jane 21:30**

Is it useful for all of us to think about what kind of brains we have? I mean, often we only go to a doctor or we go to somebody who can help us, who's called a specialist, if there's a problem or a challenge we need to overcome, but is there a benefit to all of us thinking about, oh, let me think about the best ways I learn, let me think about the best ways that I talk to people and enjoy things or have feelings?

**Dr. Liz Angoff 21:55**

Yeah, well, a fun way to think about your brain is that all those different parts that I talked about are communicating with each other with special cells called neurons, there's that neuro term again, and they make connections in your brain like billions of tiny roads, and so we can think of our brains as under construction, which means that we all have highways, or the things that we've built those roads that we've built, where things, the messages are going super fast, and we do them really easily. And there are construction projects that we all have, the things that we are still building. So maybe that's something that you're working on in class, like you're learning fractions for the first time, and so it's a new construction project, and maybe that construction is going smoothly, or maybe it's a tricky construction project, and you need some help, and you need some new tools to help build that part of your brain, and so for yourself and with your adult, you might make a list of all the things that are highways in your brain, you know what you love to do what you've worked really hard at, what roads you've built over time, and you might start to think about what's under construction right now. What are my construction projects, and what tools are going to be most helpful for me? So, not everybody, not everybody might have a specific name for their type of brain, but I know that you know things that might

be helpful for, for my child, or even for me. As I'm talking to you guys, I am on a wobble stool, because I love to move, and I know that's helpful for my brain. And so we don't need a specific name to know that a tool is helpful for our brain to be at its best.

**Jane 23:43**

I really like that idea of all of us thinking about what our brains need to be best. Maybe that's good homework to think about how we learn best, what tools we need to be successful in school, in sports, at home. If there's something that you need help with, talk to the adults around you, they can help you figure out what your brain needs and how to get it. And I'd really love to hear from you, what you already know about the best ways you learn and stay focused. Do you have tips or suggestions for us, like always putting your stuff in the same place, so you don't forget where it is, or breaking up your homework or chores into smaller chunks, so you don't get overwhelmed and not even know where to start. That's a challenge I really have. Sometimes a task feels so big that I don't even know how to begin, and then I don't. I do what's called procrastinating, not starting and not starting, but usually if I think of a small piece that I can handle to start with, the rest of the project is easier to get into. It just takes that one small thing to be able to help me get started, but you may have lots of other tricks, just like you do with questions. You can send us a voice memo sharing your best strategies that work for your brain, and that you think might help other kids work with their brains, and if we get enough, we'll share them. Dr. Liz had one more thing she wanted to mention to you.

**Dr. Liz Angoff 25:10**

I think that, regardless of what type of brain that you have, there's something really important, especially if you have a neurodivergent brain called self compassion, and as you understand your brain, I think it's really important to remember that we're all human and we're all going to make mistakes, and we're all working on those construction projects, and they can be tricky at times, and learning how to recognize and repair when you've made a mistake is just such an important skill, and learning how to talk about the things that are hard is something that even a lot of adults are still learning how to do. It's under construction for them too.

**Jane 25:52**

That's the truth. Whether we have ADHD brains or not, we can all benefit from learning to repair our mistakes and being as kind to ourselves as we are to other people. Thanks so much to Dr. Liz Angoff for being our guest today. One of her books is called *The Brain Building Book*, and another one is called *Our Brains Empowering Neurodivergent Minds*. That's it for today. If you have a question about anything, you can send it to us. Have an adult help you record yourself asking a question using an app like Voice Memos on a smartphone. Then have them email the file to [questions@butwhykids.org](mailto:questions@butwhykids.org) But Why is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette, and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public, and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up, or a review, or a comment on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us. It helps other kids and families find us and helps us keep making the show. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!