Music for Healthy ADHD Brains:
8 Songs for Focus

From the ADHD Experts at ADDitude
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD
Shakespeare once rhetorically wondered whether “music be the food of love.” Now, some scientists contend that it might actually be the food of healthy brains, pointing to mounting research showing the influence of music on our bodies’ neurologic functioning.

After studying and documenting music’s healing effects in his book *Musicophilia*, Oliver Sacks, M.D., the late professor of neurology at Columbia University, concluded, “Nothing activates the brain so extensively as music.” While Sacks’ case studies covered disorders like Parkinson’s, Tourette syndrome, and autism, others have found similar results on ADHD brains.

Specifically, music’s distinct structure can help an ADHD brain stay on a linear path. Kirsten Hutchison, a music therapist at Music Works Northwest, says, “Music exists in time, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. That structure helps an ADHD child plan, anticipate, and react.”

Other research has shown that pleasurable music may increase the brain’s dopamine levels. This neurotransmitter—responsible for regulating attention, working memory, and motivation—is in low supply in ADHD brains.

“Music shares neural networks with other cognitive processes,” says Patti Catalano, also a music therapist at Music Works Northwest. “Through brain
imaging, we can see how music lights up the left and right lobes. The goal of music therapy is to build up those activated brain muscles over time to help overall function.” This suggests that children with ADHD can train their brains to achieve higher levels of focus and self-control by listening to and interacting with music.

Psychiatrist and best-selling author Edward Hallowell, M.D., writes all his books while listening to the same songs he’s used for focus and concentration since high school. “The music couldn’t have words, had to have a certain tempo, had to last a while, and couldn’t stop and start,” he said. He praises composers like Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, and Handel for helping him focus in his times of need.

Based on these experts’ input, ADDitude has compiled the following list of recommended songs for finding focus and achieving productivity:

1. “Emperor Concerto for Piano, No. 5”  
   Ludwig van Beethoven
   Listening to this complex and beautiful Beethoven concerto, you’ll understand why classical music is often compared to intricate Gothic architecture. The patterns, details, and mathematical structure of pieces like Beethoven’s build all portions of your child’s brain simultaneously; advancing speech and language skills, motor tracking, and more.

2. “Symphony No. 40 in G Minor”  
   Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
   Mozart’s music is often used in the “Tomatis Method” of music therapy. It uses filtered versions of Mozart pieces—like this classical symphony—to stimulate the inner ear. By retraining the muscles in the ear, it strengthens auditory and motor functions, which can be helpful for children with learning issues, auditory problems, or even autism.

3. “Brandenburg Concertos”  
   Johann Sebastian Bach
   Listening to these famous concertos by Bach has been shown to change the electromagnetic frequencies of the brain to 7.5 cycles per second, referred to as the “Alpha Mode,” or the Schumann Resonance. When your child’s brain is in “Alpha Mode,” he’ll focus, concentrate, and learn better.
4. “Water Music”  
George Frideric Handel
Handel’s music is also great for getting brains into Alpha Mode, and this collection is a fun place to start. Since it takes about 20 minutes for the brain to change to this mode, this hour-long collection should be started before your child starts her homework—you won’t have to change the music once she settles in!

5. “Concerto for Violin, D Major”  
Johannes Brahms
Anyone who has heard this jaunty number by Brahms knows that it’s anything but calm—in fact, it’s quite lively! When your child’s brain goes into Alpha Mode, his body may appear relaxed, but his mind is still alert and picking up every note. This allows him to focus his energy effectively and get some of his best ideas, without getting distracted by his fidgeting body.

Antonio Vivaldi
This famous set of violin concertos was used extensively by Donald Shetler, Ph.D., who was the first person to look at how listening to music in utero affected a baby’s speech and language development. He found that children who listened to classical music in the womb—for just 20 minutes a day—had stronger memories, more developed speech patterns, and greater clarity.

7. “Concerto for Piano No. 1”  
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Tchaikovsky’s 1879 piece is one of the best known of all piano concertos. Playing the piano—or any instrument, really—is a vital part of music therapy for children. Learning an instrument improves concentration, memory, and spatial reasoning skills, particularly for children with ADHD or LD. In these kids, it’s also been shown to improve impulse control, reading comprehension, and working memory.

8. “Canon in D”  
Johann Pachelbel
If your child struggles to get to sleep every night, classical music can help with that, too. Check out this classic Pachelbel tune; it’s very meditative, and can help soothe overactive minds after a long day. If your

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child still has trouble, try adding in some ocean sounds—the repetitive sound of the waves, combined with the music, can work wonders.

These songs have helped countless people focus, but it’s important to remember that there’s never a one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to our children. Your child may insist that Metallica helps him study. You may prefer Bach, but that doesn’t mean he’s wrong.

“Why are we attracted to one song or one symphony over another? It’s a complex and personal brain function that is immeasurable,” says Catalano. What helps your child may be specific to him, so remind yourself that what’s playing through his headphones doesn’t matter as much as its impact. If Eminem helps him focus, let it be.

Whatever the songs, incorporate them into your child’s life. For example, instead of writing down, “Wash face. Brush teeth. Get dressed. Eat breakfast,” string together songs that will keep her moving and remind her to stay on task. When Raffi’s “Brush Your Teeth” hits its final note, she’ll know it’s time for a wardrobe change. And when Justin Bieber kicks in, it’s time to pull up those socks and find her sneakers.

Specific songs may help your child enter the right mindset at the right time. Hearing songs of varying rhythms can slow down or speed up your child’s mental and physical processes, so you can trigger an intuitive, neurological reaction with the right playlist. Does Lady Gaga get your daughter moving? Play it after school to burn off excess energy. Does Moby slow her pace? Play it before bed to begin the daily wind-down. “Rhythm, melody, and tempo are tools used to target non-musical behaviors, and to catapult change throughout the body,” says Rebecca West of the Music Institute of Chicago.

One parent even shared a game she plays with her child called “Draw What You Hear”—she puts on music and her son draws or doodles whatever comes to mind. These exercises engage motor skills, organize the brain, and stimulate artistic juices. Many ADHD children are creative and in search of outlets for their imagination, so don’t be afraid to experiment and see what works for your child!
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Do your kids always have a controller or tablet glued to their hands? Instead of fighting it, why not learn to make technology work for your child with ADHD? Jodi Gold, M.D., a nationally recognized expert in adolescent and child psychiatry, shares helpful tips to understand the risks of technology, as well as strategies to teach your child the rules of being a citizen of the digital world.

**Neurofeedback and Cognitive Training for ADHD Kids**

>> [http://additu.de/neuro](http://additu.de/neuro)

Is brain training—including neurofeedback and cognitive training (CT)—really all it’s cracked up to be? Is it safe for kids? Is it worth the money? Naomi Steiner, M.D., shares the research behind some computer-based alternative therapies so you can make an informed decision before treating your child.

**Positive Parenting**

>> [http://additu.de/positive](http://additu.de/positive)

Mary Rooney, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the ADHD and Disruptive Behavior Disorders Clinic at the Child Mind Institute, shares techniques for improving behavior in elementary-aged children through consistency, external motivators, and selective negative consequences.

**A Parent’s Guide to Executive Function Skills**

>> [http://additu.de/efs](http://additu.de/efs)

Executive function skills (and deficits) are so intertwined with ADHD that many consider them interchangeable. That’s not exactly true, but the distinctions are irrelevant to your middle- or high-school student who habitually forgets homework assignments, procrastinates until the last minute, and really struggles to plan and execute long-term projects. What matters is that there are solutions for building stronger executive functions. That’s where experts Sarah Ward, M.S., and Kristen Jacobsen, M.S., come in.

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