

# New Evidence on Omega-3s for Behavioral Problems in Children

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Kids with behavioral disorders or emotional issues can be so challenging – disruptive, defiant, argumentative, impulsive, inattentive, nervous, negative. Parents know it can be exhausting, frustrating, and stressful. Many parents assume that prescription medication is the only way to improve symptoms that are associated with conditions, such as [ADD/ADHD](#), [oppositional defiant disorder](#), [anxiety](#), [depression](#), or [autism](#). But a growing body of scientific evidence shows that supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids improves the quality of life and mental health status in children with emotional and behavioral issues.



Here's what the current research reveals about children, mental and behavioral health, and omega-3 fatty acids. First, let's take a quick look at the basics of omega-3s.

## WHAT ARE OMEGA-3s?

Omega-3s are essential fatty acids that children (and adults) need for optimal physical, mental, and cognitive health. There are 2 active compounds in omega-3s: EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). Children (and adults) need both. Omega-3s are considered essential fatty acids because the human body doesn't produce them naturally. They can only be derived from food or dietary supplements, such as fish oil.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT OMEGA-3s AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

A 2020 study in the *Journal of Dietary Supplements* involved 942 children ages 6-12 with behavioral disorders, including conduct problems, inattention, nervousness, hyperactivity, trouble concentrating, and learning issues and poor school performance. For the 3-month study, the youngsters were split into 2 groups—one group received supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids while the other group did not. By the end of the study period, children who had been taking omega-3 dietary supplements health status, quality of life, and scores on Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires improved significantly. The researchers concluded, “Omega-3 fatty acid supplementation alone or in combination with other nonpharmacological treatments is effective in improving children’s mental health.”

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT OMEGA-3s AND ADD/ADHD

In an [analysis of 10 studies](#) in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, researchers summarized 10 trials involving 699 children. Omega-3 fatty acid supplementation demonstrated a small but significant effect in improving ADD/ADHD symptoms. EPA dose within supplements was significantly correlated with supplement efficacy. They concluded that omega-3 fatty acid supplementation, particularly with higher doses of EPA, was modestly effective in the treatment of ADD/ADHD.

A 2017 [review of 16 studies](#) found that omega-3 fatty acids improved impulsivity, hyperactivity, attention, visual learning, and working/short-term memory. These are all symptoms often associated with ADD/ADHD.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT OMEGA-3s AND MOODS

Although there is an abundance of research on omega-3 fatty acids and depression in adults, the research on children remains sparse but encouraging. In a study in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* involving 20 depressed children ages 6-12, dietary supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids showed highly significant improvements in depressive symptoms. Omega-3 supplementation produced a large advantage compared with the placebo. In addition, a 2017 study in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* on 38 children ages 11-17 found significant reductions in depressive symptoms in the participants taking omega-3 fatty acids.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT OMEGA-3s AND AUTISM

A deficiency of omega-3 fatty acids may be linked to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children, according to a meta-analysis of 6 trials in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*. These studies showed that supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids may improve hyperactivity, lethargy, and stereotypy (movements such as body rocking), which are common in children with autism.

## THE HEAVY TOLL OF LOW LEVELS OF OMEGA-3s

Having low levels of EPA and DHA have been linked to mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder, as well as suicidal behavior, ADD/ADHD, cognitive decline, and other behavioral and emotional issues. Unfortunately, most Americans have low levels of EPA and DHA.

In 2016, Amen Clinics tested the omega-3 fatty acids levels of 50 consecutive patients who were not taking fish oil (the most commonly used source of EPA+DHA) and found that 49 had suboptimal levels. In another study in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, the Amen Clinics research team correlated the brain SPECT scans of 130 patients with their EPA and DHA

levels and found those with the lowest levels had lower blood flow (the #1 predictor of future brain problems) in the right hippocampus and posterior cingulate (one of the first areas to die in Alzheimer's disease), among other areas. On cognitive testing at Amen Clinics, low omega-3s correlated with decreased scores in mood.

To find out if your child has low levels of omega-3 fatty acids, there is a simple test called the [Omega-3 Index](#). It measures the total amount of omega-3 fatty acids EPA and DHA in red blood cells and directly reflects their levels in the brain. The test is a clinically validated biomarker of the health of the brain. Aim for a level above 8%.

## BOOSTING OMEGA-3 LEVELS IN CHILDREN

Getting adequate amounts of omega-3 fatty acids is critical for children. If your child has low levels of omega-3s or simply has behavioral or emotional symptoms, it's a good idea to increase the intake of this important nutrient.

**Increase healthy fats.** To raise omega-3 levels in children, be sure to include foods in their diet that contain omega-3 fatty acids, such as:

- Salmon
- Sardines
- Avocados
- Walnuts
- Flaxseed
- Chia seeds
- Dark green leafy vegetables

**Try high-quality omega-3 supplements**, such as fish oil. At Amen Clinics, the recommended dosage for children is about 800 mg of combined EPA and DHA daily for every 40 pounds of body weight. Look for a ratio of approximately 60/40 EPA to DHA.

Your child's mental, emotional, and behavioral health lays the foundation for their overall well-being and happiness in life. ADD/ADHD, depression, and other emotional and behavioral problems can't wait.

*At Amen Clinics, believe in using the least toxic, most effective treatments, including natural solutions.. We offer in-clinic brain scanning and appointments, as well as mental telehealth, remote clinical evaluations, and video therapy for children as well as their parents. Find out more by speaking to a specialist today at 888-288-9834. If all our specialists are busy helping others, you can also [schedule a time to talk](#).*