

The cat dog brain: understanding a dual diagnosis

Take a calm-seeking cat and mix it with an impulsive dog. The result? An analogy for a diagnosis of autism and ADHD by neurodevelopmental paediatrician Dr Georgie Siggers, who explains how the two combine – and how to help them live in harmony

When autism and ADHD coexist, it can feel like a cat and a dog are sharing the same brain – different behaviours, pulling in opposite directions. Understanding this internal conflict is key to offering the right support at home and in school.

challenges may be missed, misunderstood, or misattributed, because traditional support strategies rarely account for the interaction of both neurodevelopmental differences.

To make this complexity more accessible, I developed the cat dog brain analogy, which

Two brains in one head
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resonates with many children and their families. It likens the dual diagnosis to having two different ways of thinking and responding coexisting in one child – each with its own needs, preferences, and reactions.

- The “cat brain” (representing autism) thrives on routine, quiet, predictability, and solitude.

- The “dog brain” (representing ADHD) seeks novelty, excitement, connection, and spontaneity.

Children who are autistic and ADHD live with an internal push-pull between these instincts. The result is not just behavioural inconsistency, it’s often emotional turmoil, confusion, and exhaustion.

The cat dog brain conflict

Consider a child who:

- Insists on eating the same

breakfast daily (cat) but grows bored of playing the same game (dog).

- Hides from noisy crowds (cat) but cannot resist joining the most boisterous group activity (dog).
- Is highly perfectionistic with their artwork (cat) but has a bedroom in constant chaos (dog).
- Craves solitude after school (cat) but constantly interrupts family conversations (dog).

When misunderstood, these opposing behaviours may be labelled as manipulation, defiance, or mood disorder. In reality, they represent a neurological paradox – the cat and dog are both doing their best.

Hidden strengths

As well as difficulties, there can be benefits in having a cat dog brain. Strengths associated with autism can at times counterbalance the challenges of ADHD, and vice versa.

- The caution, conscientiousness, and attention to detail of the autistic brain may help to reduce



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risk-taking and impulsive behaviour linked to ADHD.

- ADHD traits such as verbal spontaneity and sociability may help autistic children initiate social interactions – even if they later struggle to maintain them.
- ADHD adaptability may occasionally help counter autistic rigidity, just as autistic planning and focus can help anchor distraction or disorganisation.

Why understanding is so important

Children with co-existing autism and ADHD are at higher risk of:

- Distress, anxiety and low mood
- Emotional and sensory dysregulation
- School overwhelm, educational disengagement, and burnout
- Being misdiagnosed or denied support.

Standard approaches often fail. ADHD strategies that emphasise structure, compliance, and behavioural rewards may overwhelm the autistic child. Autistic-friendly approaches that

avoid demands, use minimal language, and allow retreat may leave the ADHD brain under-stimulated and dysregulated.

Balancing effects can be helpful, but they may also make a child’s presentation harder to interpret. Parents, teachers and clinicians may be confused by the mix of traits, or view the child as inconsistent. These children fall between service thresholds and are at increased risk of missed or incorrect diagnoses and inappropriate support, especially if their presentation is masked in school or variable across settings.

Therapeutic and medication support

Where both diagnoses are present, therapeutic support should be integrated, holistic, and informed by lived experience – not siloed under “either/or” models.

Medication can help manage ADHD symptoms, but must be used thoughtfully in a dual-diagnosis context. Autistic children may be more sensitive to side effects, and stimulants may exacerbate anxiety or social withdrawal. A slow titration (adding little by little to an existing treatment), with close monitoring, is vital.

The goal: harmony, not control

Our role is not to suppress either brain, but to help children understand themselves, find balance, and thrive. When the cat and dog can learn to live together – respecting each other’s needs, playing to each other’s strengths – that’s when the child truly flourishes.

How to support the cat dog brain

The key is not to choose between supporting the cat or the dog, but to embrace both.

- 1. Structured flexibility** Provide predictable routines with built-in freedom. For example, keep meal and bedtime consistent, but offer choices in play or homework order.
- 2. Dual-tuned environments** Create sensory-safe retreat spaces (for the cat) alongside physical or playful outlets (for the dog). A beanbag and noise-cancelling headphones can coexist with a trampoline or climbing frame.
- 3. Clear, compassionate communication** Use visual schedules and concrete language.

Anticipate transitions. Acknowledge how hard it is to want opposite things at once.

- 4. Behavioural understanding** Try to find out which brain is leading before reacting. Ask “Are they feeling more cat or dog?” Are they overwhelmed (cat) or under-stimulated (dog)? Understanding helps prevent escalation.

- 5. Collaborative support plans** School staff need guidance that incorporates both sets of needs – calm, quiet working areas and movement breaks; minimal distractions and engaging, hands-on tasks.