

# ADD/ADHD DIAGNOSIS AND CHILDREN

There is an alarming increase in the diagnosis and medication of children in the United States. Figures show 8-10 million children are on medication to improve their ability to pay attention in school. It is also estimated that one out of every six boys who are five years old is on Ritalin or a similar psychotropic stimulant. The causes of the increase in the reporting of ADD/ADHD are not known, but there are many influences, not given attention by the medical community or others involved in this phenomenon, that merit considerable attention:

- The “No Child Left Behind” act that was mandated but unfunded by the Federal Government has forced schools to focus on the lowest performing children and has narrowed the definition of what is labeled “normal”. Larger numbers of children are falling outside the “norm.” In addition, teachers are compelled to focus not on whether children are learning, but on helping them to pass qualifying exams that the government requires.
- Teacher-centered schools acting out of traditional, top-down models of learning require children to comply with norms for the sake of order in the classroom. The value is on control and compliance, not learning or encouraging and supporting the strengths and gifts of each child. While there are new models wherein children, parents, and teachers contract learning objectives and how the child will achieve them, there are still far too few of these schools.
- Parents buy into the “Success myth” that good grades and scores represent a bright and happy future. Many of those who exhibit poor school behavior or even drop out of school find other ways to achieve success on their own terms. These include historical figures such as Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and Beethoven. Parents should remember that their child’s strengths may not be supported by the school – which does not mean their child is or will be unsuccessful.
- Parents and schools think that children should all develop their strengths evenly and simultaneously. Most children, due to brain development, heredity and environment develop different skills and qualities at different times. Again, many of the greatest minds in history were good at only one area and received very poor grades in areas that were not in their area of interest.
- Schools value only one kind of intelligence: linear and logical. They neither encourage nor reward other kinds of intelligences that Howard Garner has identified through his writing on Multiple Intelligences. If a child has a gift that is not measured by an I.Q. test, such as social, creative, music, intuition, spirituality, or art, his gifts are not supported in the same way as other children’s are. Sometimes frustrated children act out in an environment that seems only to evaluate his areas of weakness. This can create self esteem challenges and move a child toward isolation and depression.
- Schools are set up as competitive arenas with strong judgments on a child’s probabilities of success
- in the “real world.” The fact is that we have no idea what their “real world” will look like in the future, and if their gifts are not cultivated and encouraged, they may quickly become uninterested in the “real world,” disengage, and/or contribute negatively. In addition, when children are labeled, they are often made fun of, and can experience isolation and loneliness as a result of the reaction of other children. These students may actually ask for drugs so that they can be more like other students and more accepted.
- Gifted Children’s behaviors look like ADD/ADHD symptoms. Research has shown that gifted children, even those who are gifted in areas not measured by IQ tests. exhibit behaviors similar to those that the medical community diagnoses as ADD/ADHD and other pathologies. Since schools are not set up to focus on children’s non-traditional strengths, misdiagnosis is not uncommon.
- The last decade represents an historic increase in speed in the way we live our lives – through the

environment, eating habits, and entertainment, to name a few. While we do not know the affects these elements have had on the parents of children who are diagnosed as ADD/ADHD and other pathologies, we do know that the highly sensitive brains of children are programmed from a very young age by the experiences around them.

1. Fast food chains abound, more often than not accompanied by lots of preservatives, artificial colors and flavorings, high sugar, and little nutrition. These factors sometimes intensify hyperactivity or toxic responses in very sensitive children.
2. Television, a medium comprised of a series of fast-moving frames, has increased the speed of information to sound bites, and pictures to rapid flashes. Violence is an everyday occurrence – from cartoons, to daily news shows, to entertainment shows. Recent research shows that television watching by those under two years of age is correlated with a later diagnosis of ADD/ADHD. In addition, sensitive children passively receiving messages of violence need an adult with whom they can discuss their feelings and thoughts about what they perceive. Left unresolved, acting out is not uncommon or unlikely.
3. Video games, while improving eye-hand coordination in children, are not only rapid fire paced, but typically include extreme violence that is being fed directly into the children's retinas – direct channels to the brains of these sensitive beings.
4. Media focus on war and crime rivets national attention, rather than focusing on what is right with the world. These children are surrounded by life-threatening depictions through media and entertainment vehicles. Studies have shown a direct correlation to children "acting out" after being exposed to a high level of the violence they receive through these mediums – though the acting out may not be immediate.
5. Scheduling children's activities so tightly that there is no time for unstructured play and relationship– which are very necessary for a child's development – can be a pitfall for well meaning parents. For some sensitive children organized play is overwhelming because they cannot sort out the rules. For these children, either unstructured play or martial arts are very helpful.
6. Homes are busier than they used to be, with both parents working. Often there is less structure, routine, and consistency than helps most children. Chaos and confusion may be the prevailing climate for children whose inner world is already chaotic.
7. The internet's speed and multi tasking capability trains children from a very young age that they can do many things simultaneously: instant message (IM) several friends at once; get information on demand on any subject; and download radio and music options in the background.
8. Cell phones mean instant communication anywhere and anytime. Children often use cell phones while on their computer, texting friends, doing their homework on-line and listening to music.

## THE BENEFITS OF DIAGNOSIS

The benefit of having a child diagnosed as ADD/ADHD or other pathological labels is that:

- It brings relief to know there is an answer to why a child is behaving differently from other children
- It often makes a child's behavior more compliant and the child receives less negative attention
- Parents can get support from literature and research on interventions that may be helpful to their child
- By law, parents gain access to more specialized academic support

## THE DISADVANTAGE OF DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosing children as having mental disorders is a disadvantage for several reasons:

- It can alleviate from responsibility the very institutions that should be responsible for finding new ways to engage children in learning
- It can create depression and low self esteem as a child is not only seen as “different” (and viewed as “disordered” by adults rather than seen through
- The lens of his strengths and gifts) but also mocked by other children when he receives “special help” in the classroom.
- The diagnosis may be inaccurate and the children may be medicated by a drug that is not suited for their needs.

*These factors all play a role in the environment and “programming” of a child from a very early age. More research needs to be done to understand their influences and potential contribution to the ADD/ADHD diagnosis — or to the mediation of those symptoms once the child receives such a diagnosis. In any case, it is hard to imagine that these cumulative influences are not literally programming sound bite speed into the children we raise.*

*Eventually we must consider changing the institutions of learning that no longer serve children who live in this world, rather than drugging children into compliance within an antiquated system of education. It is also essential to focus on children’s gifts and strengths. In pathologizing children, and labeling them as mentally ill, we see the child as “the problem” and divest ourselves of other important venues for systemic changes that would be healthy for all of us.*

