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Ask Doctor Harold: ADHD - What is it, really?

By Dr. Harold Jules Hoyle, Ph.D.

I was recently at a holiday party where the grandparent of a local child said to me, "We didn't have all this ADD stuff when I was a kid. Kids played outside and got everything out. I think it is these kids with all their electronic stuff, what do you think?"

Once a psychological disorder makes its way into our pop culture, a lot of misinformation can happen. So here is a crash course on the recent research on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

What is it?

ADHD (it was called ADD until 1987) is a serious psychological disorder for those that have it and their families. Although we often use terms in our conversation like 'I was a little ADD this morning,' kids and adults who are diagnosed with this disorder are at risk for serious issues in school and life.

At its core, ADHD is a disorder of the executive functioning parts of the brain: the brain's personal assistant. In small children their motor area of their brain develops early and the personal assistant in their brain develops more slowly. So you have more movement with less planning. These children are less inhibited, Making them more likely to climb to the top of the bookcase or do other dangerous things without thinking twice. They are also more impulsive, making them more likely to get out of their seats in class. These children have deficits in working memory. This is the memory we use to get things done.

Imagine for a moment that you end up in the kitchen looking around thinking, 'what am I doing in here?' (I am sure it happened to you at least once this holiday season.) And then someone asks you what are you doing in the kitchen...The research on this shows your most common response will be to make something up. This is what the ADHD kid has to deal with possibly hundreds of times a day.

So this is not a disorder of the perceiving type of attention. These kids see what other kids see and know what other kids know. They just can't do what other kids can do. It is a disorder of doing.

What it is not?

The researchers in the field are in agreement now that you cannot make a person ADHD with video games, television, and cell phones. I am not saying these don't have their own affects on our kids and our culture, they do, but not in creating ADHD.

So what do you do about it?

ADHD needs to be diagnosed by a licensed medical professional and not a teacher or aunt or grandparent. Start with your pediatrician and go from there. A general rule about treatments is to check things out thoroughly and get more than one opinion. In reference to ADHD there have been decades of controversy about the cause, nature, and treatment of the disorder even among the researchers. The common treatments fall into the three common categories biological, psychological, and social; many studies indicate using factors from each together results in the best outcomes. Biological treatments include changes in diet and medication in the form of stimulants, of which there are a tremendous amount of new distribution models like patches and time-release capsules. Psychological treatment includes individual and family counseling, behavior modification, and direct instruction at the point of performance. Social interventions include time management training, social instruction and use of social scripts.

What can you do to help?

First of all, if you think your kid has an issue get professional opinions, just like you would if the check engine light goes on in your car. After this first step, help the child to build that personal assistant. Instead of telling the kids how and what to do, get up off the couch and go help them with the when and where of getting things done.

I worked with a child with ADHD who stopped doing her homework because even when she did get it done, she lost it, forgot to turn it in, or turned it in to the wrong teacher. We want to help kids avoid getting to the point of giving up. We can help these children by helping them learn to follow through and stop lecturing them on the morality of not following through. Remember they know what you are going to tell them, they just seem not to be able to get it done. And none of us wants to be trapped in that kitchen with the difficult question of what in the world are you doing in here?

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