

ADHD and School Challenges (As seen in Baltimore's Child Magazine)

A parent recently posed this question, "My son's teacher complains that his behavior is disrupting the class. Both she and the principal strongly suggest that he be given medication to treat hyperactivity. I'm not convinced, however, that my son needs medication. What should I do?"

This parent is wise to question the opinions of her son's teacher and principal. While your child's behavior may be disrupting the class, ADHD or Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder may not necessarily be the culprit. I always encourage parents to investigate attention and behavior-related issues very carefully. There has been some controversy associated with the over-identification of ADHD and the use of medication treatment options. Research suggests that ADHD, a neurobehavioral disorder often associated with inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, affects between 3 to 7 percent of the population. The DSM-IV, published by the American Psychiatric Association, includes three subtypes of ADHD: Predominately Inattentive, Predominately Hyperactive-Impulsive, and Combined Inattentive and Hyperactive-Impulsive. In other words, children with ADHD won't all look the same. Their behaviors may present in a variety of ways.

Parents frequently ask us, "How can I tell if my child has ADHD?" While you really seem to notice the child who can't sit still, follow directions, and constantly blurts out answers to questions in class, it may be more challenging to spot the quiet, inattentive student, who finds it hard to focus or stay on task.

A few common behaviors of ADHD are:

- Easily distracted from a task
- Doesn't pay close attention to details, makes careless mistakes
- Disorganized, has difficulty finishing tasks
- Avoids to tasks that require sustained attention
- Fidgets, squirms, and has trouble sitting still
- Talks excessively
- Interrupts conversations, blurts out answers
- Demonstrates low tolerance for frustration

Children with behaviors that "look like" ADHD should be evaluated by a skillful professional like a psychologist, neuropsychologist, or psychiatrist, before medication should be considered. We recommend checking with your pediatrician for a referral in your area. Once a diagnosis has been made, a variety of interventions from medication to behavior modification techniques can be investigated. Since not all children have a favorable response to medication for ADHD (roughly 80 percent of children taking stimulant medications have a positive response- that leaves approximately 20 percent that don't), behavioral therapy and social skills training, applied by trained therapists, are options certainly worth considering. In some cases, a clinical diagnosis of ADHD may qualify your child for special services or classroom accommodations. It is important to keep in mind that inattentive and disruptive behaviors may also be associated with anxiety, oppositional defiant, and conduct disorders as well. These disorders may require

different behavioral and medication options other than those usually associated with treatment for ADHD.

While nearly all children are restless and inattentive from time to time, if you or your child's teacher suspect ADHD, talk to your pediatrician. ADHD can prevent your child from being an efficient learner, so careful investigation and appropriate intervention strategies may make the road to success a little easier.