

Diagnosis and After



ADHD MATTERS

Raising awareness in Northamptonshire

ADHD has long been controversial with some doctors and specialists thinking it's not adequately recognised so children are being under diagnosed and others claiming that parents are pushing too hard to label their child and it's over diagnosed. However as the rate of diagnosis rises some sections of the media claim that ADHD is becoming somehow 'trendy' or that greedy parents are pushing for a diagnosis to become eligible for benefits such as Disabled Living Allowance / P.I.P.

On occasions it is still reported that ADHD is a result of poor parenting, no discipline, too much TV and poor diet. Children with ADHD are often depicted as out of control, bouncing off the walls, destructive, malicious and anti-social. These disruptive behaviours can exist with ADHD but do not form part of the diagnosis criteria. Parents often feel that with a diagnosis of ADHD their child will be labelled a troublemaker but without an ADHD diagnosis they are unlikely to get the help they need.

Much of the conflicting information on ADHD in the media confuses parents and undermines their belief that they know their child best. If they go for diagnosis they are jumping on a bandwagon or are poor parents who want their children to be medicated so they can have an easier life. The reality is that ADHD is a genuine medical disorder which needs to be recognized and treated. The latest NICE Guidelines, <http://www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/CG72> and Quality Standards <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/QS39/chapter/introduction> give a detailed examination of the evidence of the reality of ADHD as a disorder and which is possible to diagnose reliably.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

Unfortunately there are no DNA tests, blood tests or other laboratory tests for ADHD. Only a child mental health expert (child psychiatrist or paediatrician), can make the diagnosis based on the DSM-V (the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), or the ICD-10 (its European counterpart). In order to start the diagnostic process a child whose behaviour is causing concern must be referred by their GP or school for further assessment.

Some behaviour which looks like ADHD may be due to emotional and family upsets or even frustration caused by poor hearing or eyesight so all other possible causes of your child's behavioural problems such as language or hearing difficulties, epilepsy or depression, has to be ruled out during the diagnosis process. ADHD can also exist alongside other difficulties and developmental disorders, such as Asperger's, Tourettes, Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia, further complicating diagnosis.

It cannot be assumed that a child has ADHD until the professional assessment has been completed. At present there is no standard method of assessment. Your child will be observed carefully and may be given them tests to do (for example, Psychometric Test and Continuous

Performance Test) which help build a picture of their mental processes. They will also collect as much information as possible from parents, teachers, playgroup leaders, social workers, health-visitors and anyone else involved in looking after your child. Parents can help this process by keeping a record of their child's behaviours and asking that the school or nursery etc do the same while the child is in their care

Once a diagnosis has been made the professional should suggest suitable treatment for each individual child. Not all children will be offered the same treatment for ADHD because every child with ADHD is different. Due to funding constraints not all treatments may be available.

After Diagnosis

There are many things parents can do to help their ADHD child. It's vital that parents get the help and support needed to learn the extra skills that can help their child. This will enable them to feel more confident about coping and will help reduce the stress and conflict within the family.

After diagnosis behaviour management techniques for home and school, medication and psychological treatments may be offered. It is important for the whole family to be involved and to understand the condition. Support groups can be useful for parents and in older children a mentor or coach can be very beneficial. Unfortunately access to all these forms of help can be limited by lack of funding.

There are many different behaviour management programmes and strategies that can be used to modify the ADHD child's behaviour. Whilst not specifically designed for ADHD children, 123 Magic is a simple but, when used correctly, effective behaviour management programme that is quick and easy for parents and other family members to learn and use. Further details of some of these strategies and programmes can be found on separate leaflets.

Social skills training

Social skills' training teaches children how to manage their relationships better by learning to read the hidden signals of communication. It teaches them to understand what impact their behaviour can have on other people so they can try and change it.

Counselling

Counsellors are trained to help children understand the reasons for their ADHD behaviour and its consequences. Children diagnosed with ADHD often suffer high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Counselling can help to tackle this, help them gain more self-control, focus their attention and find better strategies for learning and organising themselves. However this does not help with hyperactivity or impulsivity and does not cure ADHD.

Parents also need to look honestly at the way their family works as a whole. They may well find family therapy can give all a chance to talk through the worries or problems that can affect the rest of the family. A GP, family therapy centre or child and family consultation service can all be useful starting points for helping parents and children.

Psychotherapy

Child psychotherapists are skilled at helping children to recognise and tackle their own distress.

Some ADHD diagnosed children can become very severely demoralised, anxious or depressed. A child psychotherapist can provide intensive and longer-term help for them. Note, that overactive and disruptive behaviour can be a sign of unhappiness in a child, rather than being a sign of ADHD

Diet

There is limited evidence to suggest that ADHD children react badly to certain foods including dairy products, wheat, chocolate and food additives. Research with boys suggested that there is a possible link between attention difficulties and hyperactivity and the use of preservatives and colourings in food. Removing food additives will only help children who are sensitive to food additives.

Cutting out caffeine and sugary drinks and snacks can be a good start. These measures do not need specific dietetic advice since food and drink containing sugar and caffeine usually have minimal nutritional value and the whole family should be encouraged to be aware of what they eat and to try to eat as healthily as possible benefiting everyone's general health.

Children with ADHD often have sensory issues around the taste, colour and texture of food and may only eat a limited diet. These children often do well on frequent small meals, especially if the side effects of their medication cause them to feel slightly nauseous. Sensory issues can also mean children don't feel hungry, or don't feel full, which can lead to problems with under or over-eating. It is reported by many parents that hunger can be a trigger behavioural problems so it is very important to have regular meals and to try to ensure that they eat.

Fish oil supplements containing EPA and DHA, are only really effective if the diet is lacking these elements. There is little real evidence that giving food supplements, vitamins, minerals helps and large doses of these can be dangerous, as can over consumption of herbal supplements.

Complementary therapies

Research is continuing into the use of Homeopathy in treating ADHD children. This should only be used after consultation with a properly qualified homeopath and in a controlled way. Other complementary therapies include: therapeutic massage, relaxation training, meditation and hypnosis. While these therapies may boost feelings of general wellbeing there is little or no reliable evidence to show these therapies help ADHD, although it has been reported that meditation is a useful tool for those with ADHD to self-calm.

Exercise and ADHD

As well as being good for the body, exercise is also good for the brain. Exercise increases the levels of dopamine and norepinephrine and keeps them elevated for a while so that it can act like a small dose of Ritalin. Exercise has been shown to dampen down impulsivity and aid executive function of the frontal cortex of the brain which allows a person bit more time to evaluate the consequences of actions.

Exercise also enables children to learn better as it heightens their senses, improves their focus and mood and they will find they are less fidgety and tense and so feel more motivated. It also improves the brain's potential to process new information.

Medication

There is controversy about using drugs to treat ADHD. Parents are often concerned about the long term effects of ADHD medication but for many, medication can give both the children and their families a break from their problem behaviours and helps them to maintain a more loving relationship. It can also help them to focus and function when it matters such as during the school day.

Medication cannot cure ADHD but it can help the child to think more clearly, understand better and feel calmer and more in control of themselves. This means they can take proper advantage of the other help they are getting at home and at school.

Conclusion

Studies have shown that children with ADHD need less medication when parents understand the condition, develop behavior strategies and actively work to support their child. Parents should try to attend support groups or join appropriate Facebook groups to share and learn from each other. Discuss the strategies that work at home with their child's teachers and work together to develop these for school.

Unfortunately without any form of support for the family and treatment for the child, some with ADHD may not make it through compulsory education. They may be excluded or withdrawn from school, not pass any GCSE's, are more likely to be in trouble with the police or become drug abusers or in the case of girls with ADHD, become pregnant.

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