

## Resource 25: Treating ADHD

The whole issue of treating children with ADHD provokes a great deal of debate. The prescription of medicines for symptoms of ADHD has been common practice in the USA for many years, but 20 years ago was still unusual in the UK. In the past decade or so it has become much more common in most countries.

Some people object to the practice of prescribing drugs as a panacea for all problems without using other treatments. They also argue that many children who do not have a true attention disorder are given medication as a way to control their disruptive behaviours.

### Medication – some facts

- In the UK, medication for ADHD can only be prescribed by a medical doctor. In many other parts of the world, psychologists have the authority to prescribe it.
- The effects of drugs used to treat ADHD vary in the length of time they last. For example, a dose of Cylert lasts five to ten hours, whereas Ritalin and Dexedrine come either in tablets that last about three hours, or longer-term preparations that last through the school day.
- A short-term dose is the more practical solution for children who only need medication during the school day, or for one-off situations like a school outing or taking a test or exam.
- The doctor, in conjunction with parents and child, decides which preparation to use, and whether a child needs to take the medicine during school hours only, or in the evenings and weekends as well.
- Nine out of ten children improve on one of the stimulant drugs. If one of the drugs doesn't seem to be working after a week or so, the doctor (or equivalent clinician) will try adjusting the dosage. If there's still no improvement in the behaviour of the child, another drug will be tried.
- Sometimes, medication can provoke new or exaggerated behaviours, particularly when a child is under stress. The challenges that all children face, like changing schools or entering puberty, may be even more stressful for those with ADHD.
- Some doctors recommend that children are taken off a medication now and then to see if they still need it. They recommend temporarily stopping the drug during school holidays when focused attention and calm behaviour are usually not as crucial. These 'drug holidays' work well if the child can still participate in activities without medication.

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### **Some arguments for medication**

- In most cases, treating an ADHD pupil with stimulant medication such as Ritalin, Cylert and Dexedrine produces immediate and dramatic improvements. The pupil's concentration and attention improves and they become less hyperactive and impulsive.
- These drugs are widely considered as quite safe. They seldom make children 'high' or jittery, nor do they sedate them.
- These drugs don't claim to cure the symptoms, but they do a good job of helping the child focus and pay attention.
- Research in the USA (MTA Trial) and UK (NICE Report) confirm that the benefits of medication are significant and that they far outweigh any potential side effects.

### **Some concerns about the use of medication**

- While on medication, some children may lose weight and appetite, and grow more slowly. Others may have problems falling asleep – though this usually only lasts for a short period.
- Drugs alone can't help pupils feel better about themselves or cope with problems. These require other kinds of treatment and support.
- Sometimes the positive effects of stimulant medication can be caused by the placebo effect.
- Medication may be of greater benefit for the people responsible for looking after ADHD children than the children themselves.
- Most reviews about the effects of medication recommend that stimulants should always be used in combination with educational and behavioural interventions, but there are few empirical studies supporting this recommendation.

### **Other treatments**

There now follows a brief overview of some of the other approaches to treating ADHD. For more details on any of these, you should contact your local ADHD association.

### **Counselling**

Life can be hard for children with ADHD. They're often in trouble at school, they can't finish a game and they lose friends. They may spend

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hours each night struggling to keep their mind on their homework, then forget to bring it into school the next day. It's not easy coping with these frustrations day after day.

Some children release their frustration by being uncooperative, starting fights or destroying property. Some turn the frustration into symptoms of illness, like the child who gets a stomach-ache each day before school. Others hold their needs and fears inside, so that no one sees how bad they feel. Facing these daily frustrations can make children feel that they are strange, abnormal, or stupid.

Counselling can help pupils with ADHD identify and build on their strengths, cope with daily problems, control their attention and aggression and learn to feel better about themselves.

Counselling may be carried out by a psychologist, a special support agency or a health professional. A whole range of methods and approaches can be used depending upon the therapist's background and training.

### **Cognitive-behavioural therapy**

Cognitive-behavioural therapy helps children to understand their feelings and actions and change their behaviour by changing their feelings.

The therapist helps with practical everyday things, like learning to think through tasks and organise work. They'll also encourage the pupil to change their behaviour by giving praise or rewards each time they act in the desired way. These techniques can help reduce violence or other impulsive behaviour like shouting out.

### **Social skills training**

Social skills training can also help children learn new behaviours. A therapist discusses what they consider 'socially acceptable' behaviours like waiting for a turn, sharing toys, asking for help, or responding to teasing, and then gives children a chance to practise them.

### **Support groups for parents**

Support groups connect people who have common concerns. Many parents or carers of children with ADHD find it useful to join a local or national support group. Sharing experiences with others who have similar problems helps parents know that they're not alone. It's worth finding out about whether these groups take place in your area, so you can suggest them to parents who are having difficulties.