

Raising the attentionally deficated child

It used to be called "Deficit in Moral Control". British physician, Dr. George Still (1902) described boys who were "lawless, spiteful and cruel". What impressed Dr. Still was that these boys would not back down even when the authority, be it parent or teacher, was visibly getting angry. The solution of the day was to send these boys to residential schools where religious instruction was reinforced with "stern discipline".

Dr. Still recognized, however, that the problem was not poor parenting. He suggested that the boys were born this way.

During the 1940s it was observed that these children, mostly boys, could not seem to sit still and often acted without thinking. It was thought that there must be something wrong with their brains and, hence, the condition was called "Minimal Brain Damage".

The name changed again, during the 1960s, to "Hyperactive Child Syndrome". It was thought that children outgrew the condition. Then a breakthrough occurred during the 1970s.

You have to wonder at the mind of the individual who first fed a hyperactive child a stimulant, but it worked. The child settled down. Stimulants were found to help other hyperactive children. With this discovery our understanding changed. The problem was not that these children were born hyperactive but that they were attempting to focus on everything at once. The condition was then called Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Medications like ritalin, cylert and various amphetamines stimulate that part of the brain that "tunes out" that which is not relevant. The ADD child, thus stimulated, becomes more focussed and less active physically.

Our understanding also changed about children's ability to outgrow this condition. It is now thought that people keep this weakness throughout their lives but that most adults with ADD have learned to compensate by putting extra energy into focusing when they need to. Counselling, then, is a matter of teaching those with ADD to do just that.

In theory, then, one could have ADD without hyperactivity. Psychologists, however, had such difficulty diagnosing such children that in 1987 the American Psychological Association decided hyperactivity was essential and called the condition "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder". This changed again, in 1994 when it was shown that a large number of adults are "ADHD" without being hyper.

What about Dr. Still's observation that these children are often "lawless, spiteful and cruel"?

Human beings, including children with ADD make meaning out of what they see. ADD children have trouble focusing on what is important. They may not see the other person getting angry until it is too late. They may not connect the anger with their own actions. When they act impulsively, they may be genuinely surprised at the consequences. They do not understand why they have few friends or why they are so frequently disaplined. They see the world as hostile and cruel and they react in kind.

The "spare the rod and spoil the child" approach is probably the worst thing parents can do to these children. Supportive listening is much more effective. Have the child talk it out. This often requires patience because these children often have difficulty putting their thoughts and feelings into words.

"Time outs" are effective when the child is hostile or aggressive. A "time out" should never be a punishment. It should last only so long as it takes for both parties to be able to talk calmly.

The ADD child or youth needs to be reminded of logical and predictable consequences for their actions. Help the child make predictions. There should be no surprises.

Offer encouragement. The ADD child or youth is used to getting yelled at, a lot. Make sure you have four positive things to say for every correction given. Encourage the child to make an effort and praise the effort. Be understanding of their frustration when things do not work out as expected and help them to learn from the experience.

Counselling can help children, youth and adults with ADD to see the world in a different way. By trying new behaviors they are often surprised at the pleasant results.