

Medication and ADHD: What Parents of Adolescents Should Know

BY JACK PELACCIO, M.D.

Understanding the uniqueness of our child's mind, both cognitively and emotionally, is arguably the greatest challenge we face as parents; thus the decision to start an adolescent on psychoactive medication is often a complicated one. The diagnosis of ADHD is probably the most common reason for prescribing psychoactive medication for adolescents. These medications (e.g., Ritalin and Adderall) are known as central nervous system (CNS) stimulants, and are frequently prescribed for ADHD.

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Parents may not fully understand how a diagnosis of ADHD is reached. Physicians often use a cognitive based approach for making the diagnosis of ADHD; that is, they use a standard psychological test to quantitatively measure the ability of a child to complete a cognitive test in a timely manner. The score of this test is assumed to provide an evidence-based reason to begin treatment with medication. The key issue for parents and physicians to consider in this testing approach is the nature of the "evidence."

The "evidence" provides only a partial perspective — a discrete look at certain abilities to complete specific tasks. We know what we are measuring, but we also know we are not measuring the emotional life of an adolescent, a crucial component of his or her overall well-being. The test used for assessing ADHD does not attempt to measure or quantify the influence of the adolescent's emotional life. The emotional conflict, which may be affected by an array of factors (e.g., family dynamics, peer pressure, academic pressure, identity or self-image concerns), and could contribute to learning inhibitions, is not addressed in any quantitative fashion by the standardized test presently in use.

Emotional conflict may be one of many causes of poor school performance and one that may be overlooked. A child's inability to complete assignments or study successfully for exams may have less to do with not understanding the material and more to do with poorly understood emotional conflict. Emotional conflict can interfere in myriad unknown ways, causing what appear as needless mistakes and forgetfulness. For example, emotional conflict may trigger anger, which may in turn be expressed by neglecting homework or by not trying hard enough on those assignments that are completed. Kids might want to do better but can't get themselves to settle into doing what they know will get them ahead. These kids feel terrible about disappointing themselves and their parents. Too often loving parents and children become adversaries around children's failures in school.

Parents should consider the value of helping teens think things through. It is well known in the medical community and beyond that CNS stimulants do not change underlying pathological conflict in an individual over time. We also know that helping teens understand their emotional conflicts will give them strategies to help them through future tough times. Thinking things through rather than turning to medication as a solution can be an effective means of managing ADHD. ●

Jack Pelaccio, MD is a certified child, adolescent and adult psychoanalyst, a supervising child and adolescent analyst, and an adolescent psychiatrist. He is a senior instructor at the NYU Psychoanalytic Institute, former chair of the NYU Psychoanalytic Institute Division of Child and Adolescent Psychoanalysis, and member of the national Committee for Child and Adolescent Psychoanalysis of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Dr. Pelaccio is in private practice at 159 E. 80th Street in Manhattan.

PRESIDENT'S Letter

A New School Year

Next to the lazy days of summer, September is my favorite month. Heading back to a new school year brings with it an air of possibility and opportunity — the beginning of a journey and a fresh start after a well-deserved break. Getting back into the routine offers not just comfort, but also an annual chance to “do it better” this time. A friend of mine likes his children to adopt a motto or theme for each new school year. “New year, new me”; “Work hard, play hard”; and “Do your best, forget the rest” are a few examples.

I’m trying to come up with my own new school year aphorism — one that could help me become a better parent. “When in doubt don’t shout” might be one; or “Patience is a virtue” another. Like my friend who encourages his children’s mottos, my hope is that if I can reduce a large idea to a catchy slogan it might help me make a successful transformation.

At NYC PIA, we have a tag line: “Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected.” Simple as it is, it offers parents sound advice on the path to being a better parent. Each separate piece — staying involved, keeping informed and nurturing connections — is important, but all three practiced together can help parents develop a good sense of when a child needs help, and to know whether watching and waiting or quick intervention is the wisest course. Improving one’s parenting skill is a process built in incremental steps. Keeping in mind and following these three actions is a useful and powerful start, and the tag line is a good reminder.

Yet here’s the problem: no matter how much effort I put into being a better parent, improvement is difficult to measure. Years ago, an acquaintance of mine described a friend as “an extraordinary mother.” Fifteen years later, I am still wondering about what makes an extraordinary parent. I can’t seem to win over the teens in my household. What



I call “organizing structure for good work habits” they call “controlling”; what I call “encouragement” they call “nagging”; and any attempt to get to know their friends through casual conversation is labeled “lurking.” In each case, I’m the enemy and my suggestion is uncool.

In truth, being a better parent is not synonymous with being more popular with your children. Rather, it is connected with staying involved and doing your best to help your children find their own way... by making their own mistakes and discovering their own passions — insights they’ll use all their lives. We parents still benefit from this approach when we learn from our past parenting mistakes, and strive to do better. As yet another saying goes, “Change is not an event, it is a process.”

At NYC-PIA, we, too, are engaged in such a process, and are in the midst of our own metamorphosis. Our non-profit organization has been in existence for over 30 years — a testament to the vision of our founders — and at this juncture, we are searching for ways to stay current, relevant, and of use to our constituency. In a version of the familiar dog-years to human-years age calculation, we seem to be in our own teenage phase. In a sense we are asking ourselves: “What do we want to be when we grow up?” To help us succeed in this journey, we sent out an electronic survey earlier this summer (many thanks to the hundreds of you who completed it!). Responses were honest and helpful and will be of great value to us as we work to create a long-range plan that will secure our future.

A new start and a more coherent strategic direction for PIA will likely involve changes, such as a registration fee for some of our signature events, such as “Fathers Only” and “Teen Scene.” So, stay tuned, stay informed and stay connected as the changes roll out. Stay with us on the journey to becoming the best that we can be!

—LIB GOSS

NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION 2011-2012 CALENDAR

Please note: All School Rep Luncheons and Facilitator Training sessions will be held at Saint James' Church, 865 Madison Avenue; 212.774.4200.

SEPTEMBER

Tuesday 20th

School Rep Training

8:30 am–10:30 am • St. James' Church

Wednesday 21st

New Facilitator Training 1 • 9:00 am–12:00 pm

Friday 23rd

New Facilitator Training 2 • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Monday 26th

New Facilitator Training 3 • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

OCTOBER

Monday 3rd

Facilitator Refresher • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Wednesday 12th

School Relations Luncheon

Keep Calm and Carry On: Answers for Pressured Families

Speaker:

- **Wendy Grolnick, Ph.D.** *Clark University*

12:00 pm–2:00 pm • St. James' Church

Wednesday 19th

Benefit Luncheon

Stress Takes a Holiday: Effective Coping in Challenging Times

Speaker:

- **Gail Saltz, M.D.** *Psychiatrist*

12:00 pm–2:00 pm

Cosmopolitan Club • 122 East 66th St.

NOVEMBER

Wednesday 2nd

Facilitator Refresher • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Monday 14th

Seminar: Anti-Social Networking

Speakers – *NYU Child Study Center:*

- **Dr. Lori Evans, Ph.D.**
- **Richard Gallagher, Ph.D.**
- **Yamalis Diaz, Ph.D.**

6:00 pm–8:00 pm

Nightingale-Bamford School • 20 East 92nd St.

JANUARY

Tuesday 10th

Seminar: Fathers Only

Speakers:

- **Dr. Harris Stratyner**
- **Dr. Paul Hokemeyer**

7:00 pm–8:30 pm

Hewitt School • 45 East 75th Street

FEBRUARY

Monday 6th

Facilitator Training • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Wednesday 8th

Facilitator Training • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Monday 27th

Teen Scene XXVI with NYC Independent School Teen Panel

6:00 pm–8:00 pm

Trinity School, 101 West 91st Street

Wednesday 29th

All Facilitator Refresher • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

APRIL

Wednesday 4th

Facilitator Refresher • 8:30 am–12:00 pm

Monday 16th

School Relations Luncheon Intelligence: It's Not Just IQ

Speakers:

- **Laura and Malcolm Gauld**

12:00 pm–2:00 pm • St. James' Church

Ned Hallowell Speaks on “Crazy Busy Families”

BY MEG SHERIDAN

Life gets crazy busy, crazy fast as Dr. Ned Hallowell described at the third and final NYC-Parents in Action School Rep luncheon held on April 28th at St. James Church. Dr. Hallowell, a practicing psychiatrist for over 25 years, is the founder of the Hallowell Centers located in Boston and New York. He based his remarks on the philosophy and research contained in his most recent book, *Crazy Busy Families*.

Dr. Hallowell began by noting the paradox of modern life: we are hyper-connected electronically but disconnected emotionally. If we don't set boundaries, he says, we could spend all day sending and receiving e-mails and reacting to the constant barrage of data coming at us. If we aren't in control of technology, we can be “crazy busy” — but not crazy productive.

We watch our children constantly texting and at the same time we wonder if their electronic conversations could possibly be deep enough to establish strong friendships — that is, they sure look connected electronically but are they connected emotionally? According to Dr. Hallowell, the time to worry is when the child retreats and replaces social interaction with texting, Facebook and video games. Most people “behave as if they don't have control,” said Dr. Hallowell, “but to stay connected emotionally, you need to put yourself back in control.”

Dr. Hallowell shared his philosophy of raising children in what he called “the best way.” In his opinion, parents have bought into a bogus model of parenting, which he called the “pyramid” model: the belief that “those kids who will do best are as close as possible to the top of the pyramid at every stage.” To secure a place at the top, parents will hire tutors and coaches to give their child every advantage, which could lead, sometimes, to choosing activities

as resume builders and then to over-scheduling, particularly when there is more than one child in the family.

Dr. Hallowell stressed that a far more important element of best parenting practice is the innate bond between parent and child, which needs to be preserved; he likened that bond to an emotional

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spinal column. “Honor it, develop it, respect it,” said Dr. Hallowell. Build it with family dinners, reading together, spending time outdoors. “If you're having fun, you're doing it right,” he said. You are creating a force field on which your child will come to rely time and time again. Additionally, let your child play — let him do any activity that fires his imagination. Activities chosen based on interests are not only likely to lead to a strong sense of self esteem, but very possibly to career satisfaction. Your child will come to think “I like life; I like myself.”

Dr. Hallowell asked: What's the opposite of play? Doing what you're told. What, then, if your child wants to quit the piano? When does she get a vote? If your child has a real talent but wants to quit, you may need tactics to get her over the hump. “Bribery is a fundamental tool of parenting,” said Dr. Hallowell. Conversely, if you have to hound your daughter to practice, it's time to reconsider. If you have an extended time of unpleasantness, it's time to quit. But if the lessons were your child's idea, and she doesn't want to practice, hold your ground. Require your child to get to the end of the year, to finish what she started. “Happiness is not having what you want,” said Dr. Hallowell. “It's wanting what you have.”

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“CRAZY BUSY FAMILIES” CONTINUED

Successful people work hard because they have found something they really like and for which they have a talent. Ideally, work will be a natural byproduct of play. You don't have to worry about building a work ethic: “Model it, don't lecture about it.”

And when someone does recognize a child's work product, that child's feelings of connectedness and self-esteem will consolidate and expand. He'll develop motivation and confidence by working at something that's challenging. He'll make moral decisions because he's connected to a group. He'll be able to give back. “You'll have a phenomenal adult,” said Dr. Hallowell. ●

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NYC-Parents in Action, Inc. invites speakers to present their opinions and expertise on specific topics. Their opinions and comments are not necessarily those of NYC-PIA.

Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected!

If you'd like to be in touch with NYC-Parents in Action, you can reach us at:

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Our Web site is a great source of information about our programs, upcoming events and other parenting resources.

Train to Be a Discussion Group Facilitator

Are you looking to give back the support and shared experience other parents have given you during the child-rearing years? If you are, here's a way:

VOLUNTEERS WANTED!

NYC-Parents in Action provides facilitated discussion groups free of charge to member schools. To serve an increasing number of requests for discussion groups, we need to train parent volunteers from as many schools as possible. We are looking for parents who are articulate, comfortable speaking in groups, and have an interest in parenting issues. Our goal is to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and concerns among parents and to create a comfortable communications network that will be in place through lower, middle and upper school. Facilitators receive professional training, and become an integral and valued part of the NYC-PIA community. If you would like more information about becoming a discussion group facilitator or about our upcoming training, please call NYC-PIA at 212-426-0240 or e-mail facilitation@parentsinaction.org.

Facilitation Group Coordinator: Josseline Charas