

ADHD-The Basics and Beyond Part I
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In the opening remarks of a book written by Russell Barkley, one of the most respected researchers in the world on ADHD, he says it is quite normal for children to be more active, more exuberant, less attentive, and more impulsive than adults. And that it's hardly surprising when children sometimes fail to follow through on directions and don't consistently complete their tasks. So when we hear parents complain that their child has difficulty paying attention, or can't control his or her activity, or is impulsive, we are often quick to dismiss these complaints as part of normal behavior.

He goes on to say, however, that there are some children whose attention span is so short, whose activity level so high, and whose impulse control so limited, that their behavior can't be categorized as even fairly typical for their age. This behavior, and their substantial problems of adjusting to the demands of daily life, is often not likely to be outgrown with time. Telling the parent of such a child not to be alarmed or even concerned about these problems, or to simply wait until the child matures a little more, is not only wrong, he says, it may be detrimental to the child's psychological and social adjustment, which only adds to the burden for other family or school members who must contend daily with the behaviors of this child. Children with severe problems involving attention, activity, and inhibition may well have a developmental disability known as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, or ADHD

Over the course of the next three presentations I'd like to talk about ADHD, talking about both the basics and beyond. I'd like to do this by starting out describing the major characteristics of this disorder, and then with other characteristics that are often associated with it as well.

For those with ADHD, there are three primary problems connected with a person's ability to control his behavior. The first difficulty is impairment in attention, or being able to persist with effort in completing tasks. This problem is especially shown when the person is assigned boring or repetitious tasks that lack an intrinsic appeal. Such activities might include school assignments or homework, lengthy household chores, paying attention to explanations, and finishing extended projects that are undertaken. These children have an exceptionally difficult time in sticking to something, and their motivation and will power to stay with something they're not interested in is much less than others their age, even if it's something important that needs to get done. They often report becoming very bored with such tasks, and are likely to shift from one uncompleted activity to the next, without completing anything. Losing their concentration at these times is typical, as well as is the difficulty to return to something should they be unexpectedly interrupted. Because of this, they are easily distracted when concentration is called for and is important to the task at hand. They may also have problems completing routine assignments without direct supervision, because they're unable to stay on task when trying to work independently.

A second major problem is with poor impulse control. Included with this is having a real

difficulty being able to delay gratification for something, or being able to inhibit a response, which is another way of saying they have an exceptionally difficult time saying no to an urge that they might have. Their impatience when they want something is legendary. These children also have a very difficult time thinking before they act. It's as if there is no filter between a thought or an urge, and what they say or do. These are kids who live in the moment. Not only do they have a very difficult time waiting and working for a larger reward in the future, it's as if the lessons of the past have never been learned. It's the momentary circumstances that control them, not the rules, plans, or intentions they may have had before entering that situation. These children are notorious in taking short cuts in their work performance. When they want something that is controlled by others, such as a promise to go to a movie or maybe going shopping, they may badger the person non-stop until they get what they want, appearing extremely demanding and self-centered. Situations or games that involve sharing, cooperation, and restraint with peers are particularly challenging for these impulsive children. Blurting out answers to questions before the questions are completed and interrupting the conversations of others are also commonplace. The layperson's impression of these children therefore is often one of irresponsibility, childishness, laziness, or outright rudeness. It's little wonder that they experience more punishment, criticism, and ostracism than do non-ADHD children.

The third primary problem seen in those with ADHD is excessive movement or hyperactivity. It's when there is excessive movement that is not related to what is needed for the completion of a task. In many cases these individuals are seen to be excessively fidgety, restless, and "on the go." This might be shown by wiggling of their feet and legs, tapping things, rocking while seated, or constantly shifting posture when they are completing relatively boring assignments or tasks. Younger children with the disorder may show excessive running, climbing, and other gross motor activities. While this excessive movement often decreases with age, even teenagers with ADHD may be more likely to be restless and fidgety than their peers. In adults with ADHD, this restlessness might be more subjective than outwardly observable, although some adults do remain outwardly restless as well, and report a need to always be busy or needing to do something and unable to be still.

These three characteristics, poor attention, poor impulse control, and hyperactivity, are the most common areas of difficulty associated with ADHD. Research is suggesting, however, especially with those who have the subtype of ADHD associated with impulsive behavior, that there may be difficulties in other areas of psychological functioning as well.

The first area relates to ADHD children having problems remembering to do things, or problems with their working memory. By working memory I mean the ability to hold information in mind that will be used to guide one's actions, either now or at a later time. It's essential for remembering to do things in the near future. Those with ADHD often have problems with this working memory, and so are described as forgetful in doing things, unable to keep information in mind that guides something in the future, and highly disorganized in their, and in other activities as they often lose track of the goal of their activities. It's not that they're being non-compliant or oppositional (which at times they

may be), it's that they forget. Often times they can't sense or use their time well and may often be late for appointments and deadlines, and less able to pursue long-term goals and plans as well as others. Problems with time management and organizing themselves for upcoming events are commonplace in older children and adults with the disorder.

Another area where problems are being shown is in the delayed development of internal language, what might be thought of as the "mind's voice," and in rule following. Lately research has been suggesting that children with ADHD are significantly delayed in the development of internal language, that private voice in our mind that we use to talk with ourselves, to think about events, and direct or command our own behavior. This private speech is essential to the normal development of contemplation, reflection, and self-regulation. This problem contributes to significant problems with their ability to follow through on rules and instructions, to read and follow directions carefully, and to follow through on their own plans, rules, and "to-do" lists.

The third difficulty relates to the regulation of emotions, motivation, and arousal. Children with ADHD often have problems inhibiting their emotional reactions to events as well as other children their age. It's not that the emotions they are having are inappropriate, but those with ADHD are much more likely to publicly show the emotions they're feeling compared to someone else. They seem to be much less capable both of moderating their feelings and keeping those emotions private. As a result, they are likely to appear to others as less emotionally mature, more reactive with their feelings, more hot headed or hot tempered, and more easily frustrated by events. Coupled with this problem of emotion regulation is the difficulty they have in generating intrinsic motivation for tasks that have no immediate payoff or that don't appeal to them. This strong difficulty they have in creating private motivation, drive, or determination often makes them appear to lack will power or self discipline as they cannot stay with things that do not provide immediate reward, stimulation, or interest to them. Their motivation remains dependent on the immediate environment for how long and how hard they work, whereas others are much more able to intrinsically motivate themselves, even if immediate rewards and consequences aren't there. For a number of children with ADHD whose subtype is primarily inattentive, they also have a problem with regulating their general arousal for the demands of a situation. They have a difficult time activating or arousing themselves to initiate work that needs to be done, often complaining about being unable to stay alert or even awake in boring situations, and frequently seem to be daydreaming or "in a fog" when they should be more alert, focused, and actively engaged in a task.

The fourth characteristic relates to diminished problem solving and flexibility in pursuing long term goals. Often times, when we are pursuing a goal, obstacles get in the way of accomplishing that goal. At those times, people need to be capable of quickly generating a variety of options to themselves, consider the impact of each option, and select the one that seems most likely to overcome the obstacle that's being faced. People with ADHD find such hurdles to their goals much more difficult to overcome, often giving up on their goal very quickly and not taking the time to think through other options that would help them meet their goal. Because of this difficulty, they may appear as less flexible in approaching problem situations, more likely to respond automatically

or on impulse, and are then less creative in overcoming the roadblocks to their goals compared to others. These problems may even be shown in the speech and writing of those with the disorder, as they are less likely to quickly put together their ideas into a more organized, coherent explanation of their thoughts. And because of this, they are less able to quickly put together their actions or ideas into a chain of responses that effectively accomplishes the goal given them, whether it's verbal or behavioral in nature.

The last characteristic that research is showing is the greater than normal variability in their task or work performance. It's typical for children with ADHD, again, especially of the impulsive subtype, to show substantial variability across time in the performance of their work. These wide swings may be found in the quality, quantity, and even the speed of their work, failing to maintain a relatively even pattern of productivity and accuracy in their work from moment to moment and day to day. This variability is often puzzling to others who see it, as it is clear that at some times the person with ADHD can complete their work quickly and correctly, while at other times their tasks are performed poorly, inaccurately, and very erratically. Some researchers in fact see this variability in work related activities to be as much a hallmark of the disorder as the poor inhibition and inattentiveness that I talked about earlier.

In summary, the secondary characteristics are likely to be poor working memory, a delayed development of internal language, difficulty regulating emotions, motivation and arousal, and diminished problem solving capabilities. You add the fact that sometimes they are able to do very well, therefore having others think that they can and should be doing well all the time, and you've got a child who could be facing some very serious challenges, with many of those around the child not fully understanding the nature of the disability.

At heart, ADHD is not a problem of knowing what to do, Barkley says, but of doing what you know. It's a problem of sustaining effort over time, and of motivation, not one of skill. However, the problems of motivation or effort are not under the control of the ADHD person, as we sometimes think is the case. Quite the opposite, it's a biological problem involving an under-activity in those centers of the brain responsible for sustaining motivation and effort over time. I'll say more about that next time.