

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder- ADHD- The Buzzword in Schools Today (Part 2)

By Benjie Stern

Q: What is your first step in treating children with ADHD?

A: Firstly, getting an accurate diagnosis. Even if a child's behavior seems like ADHD, it might not actually be ADHD; careful attention to the process of differential diagnosis is mandatory. Many other conditions and situations can trigger behavior that resembles ADHD. For example, a child might show ADHD symptoms when experiencing: a death or divorce in the family, a parent's job loss, or other sudden change; undetected seizures; an ear infection that causes temporary hearing problems; problems with schoolwork caused by a learning disability; anxiety or depression; insufficient or poor quality sleep; child abuse.

Collecting information about the child's ADHD symptoms from several different sources helps ensure that the information is accurate. Appropriate sources of information include the child's clinical interviews with parents, teachers, other diagnosticians such as psychologists, therapists, and child's physician. It also helpful to receive a completed psycho-educational assessment to determine whether the child has a learning disability which frequently co-exists with ADHD or can present similarly to ADHD in the classroom setting. Information from these multiple sources is necessary to enable professionals to eliminate other explanations for the symptoms of inattention, over-activity, and/or impulsivity (Root & Resnick, 2003).

Second, treatment includes helping the parents and child with ADHD understand the positive and negative affects the ADHD symptoms is having on the child's life, and to come up with a plan in how to propel the child's strengths and develop his/her talents. Some of the specific treatments that are implemented to help a child manage their ADHD include individualized therapy, behavioral modification programs, parenting training, teacher consultation/classroom management, and carefully administered medication.

Q: What about medication?

A: When medication works, it works as safely and dramatically as eyeglasses. "Just as a pair of glasses help the nearsighted person focus, so can medication help the person with ADD see the world more clearly" (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994). Medication helps about 80% of the time in the

treatment of ADD. Make sure you work with a psychiatrist who can explain the issues around medication to you clearly. Most people do not realize how safe and effective stimulant medications truly are, when they are used properly. Make sure you work with a doctor who has plenty of experience with these medications. The stimulants include medications like Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall, Vyvanse, Focalin, and others. As long as you take them under proper medical supervision, they can help you or your child immensely.

Rav Noach Orlowek had commented at a Torah Mesorah workshop, that nowadays our children live in a world that education, sitting and learning, and school are major part of a child's everyday life. Therefore, if it is evaluated and determined by a reliable professional that a child needs medication in order to succeed in the school environment, then it is essential for the parent to take the recommendation of the professional seriously. Not taking the recommendation of medication seriously, cautioned Rav Orlowek, can put the child at risk of experiencing negative emotional consequences, as the child will likely encounter failure in the classroom day in and day out. Rav Orlowek however added that if your child is growing up in Uganda, or on an Amish farm, then he would agree that there would be no need for medication.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Schulman, had recently related to me that he had a student in his class that had a *kriah* (reading) problem, and was experiencing failure day after day. After a proper assessment, it was decided that the child needed adjustments in his medication. From that day on, the child was a new student in the class. He was able to read much better and had caught up on par with the class. His trouble in *kriah* was stemming from his lack of sustained attention in reading. As a school psychologist, I experience these types of stories all the time.

On the other hand, I find that few parents use medication as a quick fix to make their child behave. That has negative consequences. When a child is misbehaving in reaction to something in the environment, and not as a response to the ADHD symptoms, the band aid of medication may temporarily help the child, but in the long run the real problem will not be addressed and dealt with. Also, I find that children who are overly medicated or put on medication without being diagnosed properly, transform into a state comparable to space astronauts or human robots in the classroom. Therefore, it is very important to get a clear and objective assessment from a reliable and reputable professional before medicating your child.

Q: What are the negative consequences associated with ADHD?

A: Studies have shown that ADHD that is not managed correctly may lead to negative outcomes. Although these behaviors are not in themselves a learning disability, almost one-third of all children with ADHD have learning disabilities (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 1999). Adolescent outcomes of children with AD/HD show that they are more likely to drop out of school, to rarely complete college, to have fewer friends, and to participate in antisocial activities more than children without AD/HD (Barkley, Fischer, Edelbrock, & Smallish, 1990). Rates of cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use appear more often in those with both AD/HD and conduct disorders, and were two to five times more frequent than in adolescents with AD/HD alone or for those without it. Although any disability can coexist with ADHD, certain disabilities seem to be more common than others. These include disruptive behavior disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, tics and Tourette's syndrome, and learning disabilities (Jensen, et al., 2001).

Q: What words of *Chizuk* can you give parents who have a child with ADHD?

A: Parents with whom I have had the privilege to work with, have discovered that the challenge of bringing up a child with ADHD elevates the chinuch process to a new and higher level. Bringing up a child with ADHD may be one of the hardest things a parent may have to do. The challenge brings a very important choice that the parent must make. The parent can throw in the towel, and succumb to the stress that such a child can place on them, resulting with a child or a family in constant crisis, or worse, with a family that breaks apart over time. On the other hand, the parent can choose to rise to the challenge, and arrive to the realization that raising a child with ADHD can present a tremendous opportunity for self-improvement and fulfillment as a parent. The parent has the opportunity to watch the direct investment of time and energy pay off in the happiness and well being of the child,-not always, but often enough to make it deeply fulfilling. For a parent to know that they are needed by such a child can bring a deeper purpose to the parent's life than many other worldly things can do. **Yom Kippur is a perfect time for all of us to be *Mekabel* on ourselves to rise to the challenges that we have as parents (not**

just parents of children with ADHD), and to commit the time and energy to channel the qualities and talents of our children so they can grow to their fullest potential.

This article scratches the surface on the subject of ADHD. If you have any questions, comments, or need further clarification, please feel free to email me.

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