

Attentive, focussed ...and damaged?

Prescriptions for Ritalin rose 72 per cent between 2000 and 2011 in Australia. **Will Slater** explores the surge in ADHD diagnosis and the parallel growth in prescriptions for potentially harmful psycho stimulant drugs

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Have you ever noticed kids these days are overactive, unable to sit still and find it hard to concentrate at school? They don't seem to listen and become distracted really easily? Well I have the solution! Throw them a tub of Ritalin and your problem is solved. You will never have to worry about them acting out at school again. They will always listen and even finish all their English and Maths assignments when they are expected.

Has the connection between generations really drifted so far apart that as soon as children act out we take them to a doctor, and that same doctor diagnoses them with ADHD, puts them on medication for the rest of their life and offers a credible excuse for their behaviour? Sure, this gives you a great reason for why your son or daughter is disengaged; they have ADHD. No

So what effect are these drugs actually having on our youth?

need to worry anymore, the medication will fix it. But what does that really mean for your child's health and wellbeing?

Let's have a look at exactly what is being prescribed to your child. Methylphenidate, commonly known as Ritalin or the 'magic' pill. It is also known to cause suicidal, violent and aggressive behaviour. Ritalin is classified in the same category as cocaine, opium and morphine. In February 2009, the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration placed a boxed warning (the strongest warning) onto the psycho stimulant drug Ritalin for drug dependence. It warns that chronic abuse of Ritalin can

lead to a marked tolerance and psychological dependence with varying degrees of abnormal behaviour and franked psychotic episodes can also occur. In Australia, prescriptions for Ritalin rose 72 per cent between 2000 and 2011.

According to the *Australian Guidelines on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*, treatment with methylphenidate (MPA) and dexamphetamine (DEX) is suggested. So what effect are these drugs actually having on our youth? Are they making children sit still and listen at school? Or, are they actually having the opposite effect and causing serious long-term damage? The Centre for Community Child Health and Ambulatory Paediatrics at the Royal Children's Hospital completed a study to help answer these questions. In 1997, 125 children diagnosed with ADHD were tested with MPA

and DEX. The study was completed to evaluate the side effects of these drugs in children and concluded, “both DEX and MPA caused appetite suppression and DEX caused insomnia.”

It seems apparent that a number of symptoms evident in children with ADHD are direct side effects of the prescribed medication we are force-feeding them. These drugs could be creating more long-term damage to a child’s physical and mental health than they are serving as a cure to this disease. Have we had a chance to stop and think that maybe our youth are disengaged because we are not providing the right environment for them to learn?

Maybe all children are different and learn in different ways. Maybe some children are great at English and Maths where others are great at Art and Music. Are we providing opportunities for these children that are ‘different’, or are we sending them through the same production line as everyone else and hoping a magic pill will do the trick?

I am certainly not a doctor, nor am I suggesting ADHD does not exist in our community. However, I do understand the struggles our youth go through every day – I’ve lived it. I know what it is like not to fit in. I know what it is like to hide behind a mask and pretend the real you does not exist. I

know what it is like to feel like a failure when you are struggling at school. I know what it is like to feel as though everything around you is having a negative influence on your life but you are too afraid to change because of what ‘they’ may think. I know what it is like to feel worthless, like no one would even notice if you disappeared. I have lived those moments and am so glad to have made it out the other side. I know so many never do.

Maybe these children having pills shoved down their throats and being diagnosed with ADHD are simply just misunderstood. We should be embracing the fact they learn differently, not telling them to cut it out and sit still. We should be trying to connect and engage with them, not sit them outside until they start to behave. We should be providing them with alternate ways of education, not failing them and shattering their self-belief.

It is estimated over 6000 Australian students drop out of education and training systems every year. Is this because kids these days are overactive, distracted and unable to concentrate? Or is it due to our lack of understanding and inability to connect? I know what my answer is, because I have walked in their shoes. I recently read an article about a woman’s cry for help. Her son was extremely disengaged and had



been diagnosed with ADHD. Unfortunately she spent Mother’s Day without her son because he was locked up in juvenile detention. I only wish I had a chance to meet him and show that someone ‘gets’ him, someone has hurt just like him and someone understands.

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Will Slater is a young social pioneer and education activist based in Melbourne. He runs development programs that seek to connect with and empower disengaged youth. He is also a board member for NFP organisation ‘Our Connection’ based in the Philippines.

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