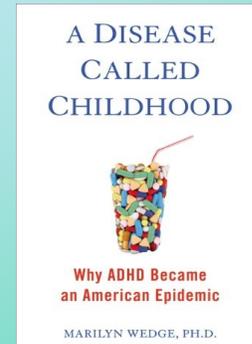


Project for the Kids
A Disease Called Childhood
 Marilyn Wedge, Ph.D.



In 1987, I started out as a child therapist working with all kinds of behavior problems in kids. I found that family therapy helped solve the children's problems most quickly. Then, in the 1990's, there was a dramatic change in the world of child therapy.

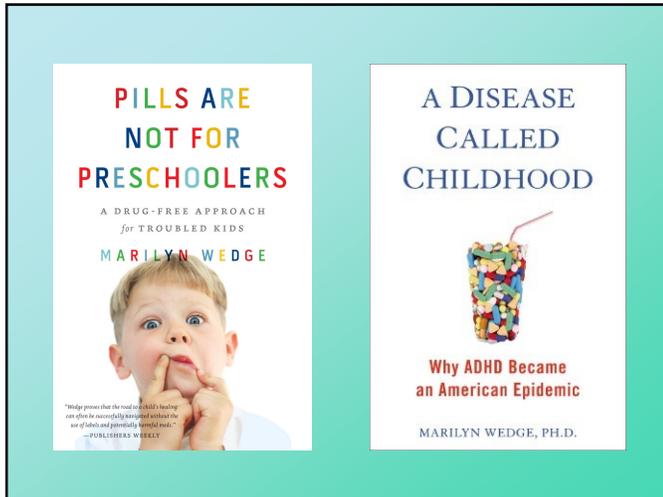


More and more children were coming to therapy for evaluation for ADHD, “oppositional defiant disorder” or other “mental disorders”

More and more children were taking psychiatric medications

I didn't understand why so many kids were now being diagnosed and medicated when that was unheard of when I started out.

So I began to research why this was happening and I shared my research in my books and articles.



“Why French Kids don’t have ADHD”
the most popular article ever
written in *Psychology Today*
14 million readers



3 parts of my talk

1. How stressors in a child's family environment change the child's behavior
2. How other factors in our society can lead to ADHD-type symptoms in kids
 - Food
 - Electronic screens
 - Schools
 - ...
3. Strategies for helping inattentive, over-active kids

Alex’s Story –
 What's going on
in this child's world?

Like all of us, children respond to stress in their social environment

- But they express this stress in unusual ways
- So it's not always easy to tell what's troubling them

Alex



5 year old Alex was an adorable boy with blond hair and big blue eyes

Overnight, Alex changed from a well behaved boy into a little monster

- Disrupted the kindergarten classroom
- Hit other kids at school
- Changed into an "ADHD" kid



Alex's teacher didn't know what had happened to Alex ?

- She thought he might have ADHD
- Advised a medical evaluation

Pediatrician said that a 5 year old boy
was too young to
diagnose and medicate

- Sent them to family therapy (smart doctor)

So the therapist has to do some
detective work to find the
underlying cause of the problem

- The child is my detective assistant



Alex's story shows that
social context is the cause
of ADHD-like symptoms

- Alex was worried because
his father didn't have an "occupation"

New York radio interviewer

- Similar case
- 3½ year old girl suddenly became a monster
- Teacher thought she had ADHD or even bipolar disorder

Kyle

- 5 year old out of control at kindergarten
- Tantrums and hit other children



Kyle's pediatrician recommended Adderall

- Parents worried about side effects
 - Weight loss
 - Insomnia
- Didn't fill the prescription

- Kyle tried to run away from school
- Calmed down in principal's office
- Wished his father wasn't so sad
 - Father had recently lost his job
- Wished his parents didn't yell at him

Principal met with Kyle's parents

- Realized the family was under stress
- Referred them to family therapy (smart principal)

What the Therapist Saw

- No consistent discipline or structure
- Parents felt guilty about telling Kyle "no" because they worked long hours
- Because parents were stressed they sometimes yelled at Kyle
- Parents disagreed about disciplining him
 - Mom wanted to be more strict

Kyle's Father

- Soft hearted
- His own parents had been authoritarian.
- Wanted a more democratic style of discipline

Kyle had become an *Enfant Roi*



- Child King
- Democratic style of discipline didn't work
 - Kyle already had too much power in the family
- Yelling made him upset
- Disagreement between the parents allowed Kyle to get his way

The Solution

- **Calm consistent discipline**
 - Parents came to agreement on the rules and consequences
 - They used count-of-3 method with Kyle
 - No more yelling
 - Time outs in his room

Huge effort for parents to change

- It took three weeks of consistently putting Kyle in his room
- Family therapist acts a coach and cheerleader for parents
- Setting clear limits helps the child learn to control himself

Kyle straightens up

- Kyle figured out that his parents were going to be consistent with consequences
- They also rewarded good behavior
- Star chart at home
 - 5 gold stars earned a reward
- Kyle's teacher sent home a smiley face when he had a good day

Kyle became happier and calmer at school

A Depressed Teenager: Allison



Allison, 16, had always been a straight "A" student

In her sophomore year of high school, she stopped trying at school. Failed 2 subjects and got "C-'s" in the others.

She had to go to summer school to make up the subjects she failed.

Her parents were desperate when she started to fail her subjects in junior year and isolate herself in her room. She stayed up until 1 or 2 AM on the internet and texting her friends.

Her mother called me in tears and said that they were worried that Allison would not graduate from high school. They had taken her to a psychiatrist who diagnosed depression and ADHD. The psychiatrist prescribed Zoloft and Ritalin for Allison.

The drugs didn't help. Allison was so depressed that she could barely get up in the morning to go to school. She started missing school.

**What was going on in Allison's world
?**

I saw Allison with her mother and father. When I asked "What's the problem" Allison immediately said that her parents had started quarreling about a year ago. (This was when her depression started).

Allison was my co-detective. She told me privately that she was terrified that her parents would get divorced. I worked with Allison alone and her parents separately for about a year. Allison graduated high school, and went to community college intending to transfer to a 4-year college.

Ricky



- Ricky, 11, bounced around like a beam of light: high energy
- He had a lot of anxiety
- Mother was concerned about his high level of anxiety

Ricky found a way to calm himself down when he felt anxious

- He found a YouTube video of sounds of ocean waves
- We listened to it during one session

Meeting with Ricky's parents

- His mother was unhappy at work
- She used to love her job
- Couldn't stand her new boss

Ricky was picking up on his mother's worries

The "I HAD A GOOD DAY" strategy helped Ricky

- Mother told him every day one good thing about her day
- Very simple but effective strategy to release a child from worrying about a parent.

Ricky was happy to tell me all about his passion

- Ricky loved to make music videos (and was really good at it)
- When kids find their passion they can focus just fine

Ricky was gifted

- Gifted children often get bored with tedious tasks in school
- They often become fidgety
- Likely to blurt out answers

No blame on parents

- Parents are not to blame for stress on the family
 - Illness / Injury
 - Death of a family member
 - Financial problems
 - Job loss
 - A difficult boss
 - ...
- Rather, we empower parents to find solutions

Top 11 family reasons kids act distracted, impulsive or disruptive

1. Parents are fighting or arguing within the child's hearing.
2. Parents express their own worries to child – having a bad boss or fear of losing their job.
3. Parents are not on the same page about discipline for the child.
4. Parents do not consistently enforce rules and discipline.
5. Parents haven't agreed their parenting rules after separation or divorce.

(more to come...)

Top 11 family reasons kids act distracted, impulsive or disruptive

(...continued)

6. Triangle with a grandparent.
7. Grandparents meddle in parents' marriage or in how they raise the children.
8. Parents bad-mouth their spouse's parents.
9. Child has personality conflict with a teacher
10. The child's sibling is having a problem.
11. Negative atmosphere in the home
 - Child does not hear enough good things about herself or about other family members.

- All sorts of stressors can be traumatic to a child and cause them to act out
- This is a natural response to stress – not a “disorder”
- Of course more serious stressors can cause kids to misbehave and become irritable
- Adverse Childhood Experiences –
 - Poverty
 - Witnessing domestic violence
 - Abuse
 - Neglect

Culture and society are also important

- A few years ago I wrote “Why French Kids Don't Have ADHD”
- Not all cultures view childhood difficulties in the same way
- They do not construct a narrative of ADHD to resolve problems of childhood
- I found that comparatively few children in France and Finland were diagnosed with ADHD and medicated
- I wondered why the United States had such a high rate of ADHD diagnosis and medication

Biological model in DSM-III (1980)

- Created a disease narrative for problems of childhood
- Previously these problems had been viewed as reactions to stressful situations in a child's life

School factors

Schools in Finland

- Kids start school at age 7
- School day is 4 hours
- Each child is given the psychological and educational support she needs depending on her temperament
- Kids get opportunity to stretch and move around after 45 minutes of class time
- Teaching is a respected and prestigious profession.
- Students score far above American students on international testing

School Activities

- Some kids, especially boys, need to move around in order to learn at school
- They need variety of activities at school –
 - Debates
 - Contests
 - Spelling bees
 - Plenty of recess and PE
- I remember when I got bored in class, I looked longingly at the playground outside.

Other factors in the child's socio-cultural environment

Screen Time

- Christakis study of fast paced TV programs
- Electronic screen syndrome
- Child is chronically overstimulated from using electronics
- Front part of brain shuts down and child becomes dysregulated –
 - Irritability
 - Problems concentrating
 - Sleep problems

**Parents must monitor and limit screen time for their child's sake
Also be good role models**

Food

- M&M's not the same in United States and Europe
- Artificial food coloring and preservatives can cause some kids to be hyper and aggressive
- Not all kids react to these but many do
- Feingold's research on artificial food dyes and preservatives (1970's)
- Replicated in the Southampton Study (1990's)

Southampton Study

- Groups of 3-4 year olds and 8-9 year olds
- Diverse backgrounds with no signs of hyperkinesis
- Tested a combination of common food dyes like Red 40 and Yellow 6 and a preservative (sodium benzoate)
- 6-week double blind and placebo controlled study
- Produced hyperactive behaviors in previously normal kids (not all, but a statistically significant number)

Impact of the Southampton Study

- European Union food safety authority required food companies to put a warning label on foods containing the artificial colors the study had tested.
- Food companies voluntarily switched to dyes derived from plants instead of yellow 6 and red 40
- But only for foods they sold in Europe, not in United States.

Our FDA: a different decision

- No change to regulations, since the study did not isolate which substances were implicated (and of course with consultation by the manufactures)
- Recently, Kraft and Nestle have voluntarily changed to natural colorings for some of their kid-oriented products as a response to consumer demand for healthier foods

Sugar: no real research but parents' experience

Being teased or bullied at school

- This is a stressor
- Sometimes parents need to intervene with child's teacher or principal

Not enough sleep

- Sleep deprivation can cause disruptive behaviors
- Established bedtime is part of a well-disciplined family structure

Immaturity

- If a child is among the younger half in his class, he has a 49% higher chance of being diagnosed with ADHD than his older classmates
- May be to the child's long-term advantage to start school a year later (instead of pushing to "get ahead")

Family Therapy gives Parents Strategies for Success. Family Therapy is a Safe and Effective Alternative to Medication

I had a good day!

**Family hierarchy: parents
are in charge of the kids**
(not vice versa)

**Discipline means
"education" in good
manners & good behavior**

**Being in the moment
with your child**

**Don't argue within
the kids' hearing**

**Predictable structure
of the child's day**

**Exercise: only 20 minutes
of walking to school can
make a child more focused
in the classroom**

**Reframe Naughty or Annoying
Behavior as Phases of Normal
Childhood Development or as a
Reaction to a Stressful Situation**



Huckleberry Finn Naughty but Normal

- When he had to study spelling, Huck Finn said, "I couldn't stand it much longer...it was deadly dull and I was fidgety." When Huck's teacher threatened him with eternal damnation if he didn't pay attention to his spelling, Huck replied that it didn't seem like such a bad alternative.
- "All I wanted," said Huck, "was a change. I wanted to go somewhere."
- Today, Huck would be labeled mentally disabled with ADHD and drugged until he sat still in the classroom and stopped his truancy. But then he wouldn't be Huck Finn!