pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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ADHD and African American Children

by Willie B. Garrett

Almost every parent has heard of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the medication, Ritalin, commonly prescribed to treat it. However, many parents are not aware that African American children are often misdiagnosed as ADHD, and even when a proper diagnosis is made, parents are not informed of treatment options.

ADHD is a neuro-behavioral disorder in which a child has difficulty with sustained attention and has accompanying symptoms of impulsivity, distractibility, excess activity, disorganization, poor frustration tolerance, and social conflicts. No one knows what causes the disorder, but medical professionals agree its origins lie in the brain, rather than in parenting style or family relationships.

The fact that a child is active or distractible does not necessarily indicate ADHD. Almost all children present some of the symptoms of ADHD at one time or another. Children may behave this way due to anxiety, undiagnosed medical problems (such as diabetes, thyroid disorder, or lead poisoning), depression, family problems, or abuse.

Culture is another factor which must be considered in any assessment for ADHD. A disproportionate number of African American children are diagnosed with ADHD, due in part to Eurocentric definitions of behavior. Some of the behaviors presented by African American children may appear as ADHD symptoms in a classroom setting. Eurocentric cultures value linear thinking, individualism, reserved behaviors, and maintaining eye contact. African American cultural style tends to be very externally expressive, both verbally and physically, to use frequent pauses in speech, to look away when being spoken to, and usually raise to children with emphasis on offering opportunities to learn by self- experience. Often, professionals unfamiliar with African American culture misdiagnose these cultural behaviors as symptoms of ADHD.

A thorough ADHD evaluation should include a physical examination, blood work-up, thorough history including toxic chemical exposure assessment, psycho-educational testing by a culturally-sensitive professional, classroom observation, and a behavioral checklist completed by at least two teachers and two adults significant in the child's life.

Even if your child is properly diagnosed ADHD, medication may not be the most appropriate treatment. Central nervous system stimulants such as Ritalin, Cylert, or Dexedrine can have side effects and should be prescribed only if nothing else works. Children with attention difficulties can be helped in various ways. Parents should limit activities which reinforce sporadic attention, such as watching TV and playing video games. Playing board or card games with the child provides practice in sustained attention. It is also helpful to maintain a structured environment at home with consistent rules and routines and to encourage the child to do one thing at a time. Engaging in daily exercise and playtime is critical, as is instituting a scheduled bedtime allowing for about ten hours of rest each night. Reducing caffeine, sugar, and artificially colored and flavored foods can make a difference. Schools can aid these family efforts by offering calm, structured, supportive teachers who use positive reinforcement programs.

For more information, read some of the books on ADHD available through your public library. Keep in mind that attention and approval from a parent is any child's most important need.

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