TV and ADD
by Foster W. Cline

The six-year-old dumps out the Tinker Toys and stares at the pieces. He doesn’t have the slightest idea what to do with them. For Christmas, a seven-year-old girl is given Lincoln Logs. Mildly curious at first, she briefly tries putting them together, but then quits. “It’s too hard.” Without clear purpose, she wanders into the bedroom, turns on the TV and watches a Disney video.

Out on the front line, our schools reel as across America, hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of kids are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. This diagnosis has reached epidemic proportions. All across the land, parents seek answers to help them understand their learning-disabled or attention deficit-disordered children.

What is this epidemic of Attention Deficit Disorder? How is the condition defined? Briefly described, the children’s thinking easily fragments. It is hard for them to focus and carry through a task. Their attentions wanders. Such children are often impulsive and have behavior problems. It does not seem to be a problem born of poor parenting, for high-achieving, loving and responsive parents have children with ADD. However, fathers and mothers of children with ADD may have had similar problems when they were younger. There is a good indication that some aspects of Attention Deficit Disorder are genetic. But genetic disorders are never epidemic in nature.

To understand the nature of ADD, it is important to see how the definition of Attention Deficit Disorder has changed with time. Twenty-five years ago, Attention Deficit Disorder was seen as a true disorder of attention. That is, it was noted that children’s attention fragmented easily, and they could not pay attention to television shows. This is no longer seen to be true. Attention Deficit Disorder children can pay attention to TV and are able to play video games. As a matter of fact, playing video games or watching TV is often used in the primary grades as a positive reinforcement for behavior-disturbed and learning-disturbed children. Increasingly, videotapes are used as a teaching tool across the primary and elementary grade spectrum.

But Attention Deficit Disorder could more correctly be labeled an intention disorder. That is, the children’s attention fragments when they should be intending to do something: to accomplish a goal, to start or complete a project. In my experience as a child psychiatrist, it appears the majority of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder have no problem at all if they are being entertained, playing a video game, or watching TV. The entire problem seems to revolve around getting the job done. Whether the job is putting together Tinker Toys, building with Lincoln Logs, focusing on a Monopoly game, or completing a school assignment, such children demonstrate an inability to carry through with their intention to complete the task.

CRITICAL PERIODS
It is essential to offer a brief examination of the “critical period” theory. This theory of development holds that there are optimal developmental moments to facilitate particular types of learning. It suggests that the greatest opportunity for learning a particular concept or method of thinking is irreversibly lost if the environment does not provide the necessary stimulation at the critical period. The theory holds, for instance, that maximum language development takes place in the second and third years of life. According to this theory, while it is possible to learn a language at a later time in life, the opportunity for greatest language development occurs only in these early years. Obviously, the longer the environment “deprives” the individual of the critical input, the more difficult it will be to learn the concept or skill later.

Eric Erickson defined the central tasks of the three- to five-year-old child to be Initiative and Industry. Of this stage, Erickson wrote:

“Now is the sense and the pervading quality of initiative. It adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning and ‘attacking’ a task for the sake of being active and on the move. ‘Initiative’: there is no simpler, stronger word for it; it suggests pleasure in attack and conquest. At no time is the child more ready to learn quickly and avidly, to become bigger in the sense of sharing obligation and performance and work-identification.”

Does this sound like a description of today’s preschooler, kindergartner or even first grade child? It is very rare to find small children today that stick with any task, invested in mastery of doing something. Rarely, rarely today will one see a three- to five-year-old working for more than a few moments at mastering a task. Gone are the days of cutting figures from the Sears and Roebuck catalog and dressing them with tabbed clothes. Gone are the days of making corn cob dolls. Gone are the days of having a “market” in the corner of the play room so the child could sell food to his or her parents. Gone are the days when a toddler would be given a role of masking tape and be encouraged to cover a kitchen chair. Gone are most of
the Tinker Toys, Erector Sets, and Lincoln Logs. Gone are the
days when a child would be given a cloth and given the chance
to sew on dozens of buttons in the pattern of her choice.
Gone, too, are the days of helping on household and farm tasks — gathering eggs, milking and quilting. Gone are the days when, at an early age, children were encouraged to memorize
psalms, stories and songs.

Instead, at a time of developmental readiness for essential
task mastery, today’s three and four-year-olds, children of
Initiative and Industry, are watching television and enjoying
video games.

And therein lies the basic problem. In fact, reflecting the
television and video-game generation, most of the items for
younger children in any major toy store reflect an emphasis
on sensory input and rudimentary motor skills, but rarely encourage creativity, task focus, job completion and mastery. Even when offered for sale, Tinker Toys, Legos, Lincoln Logs, and alphabet blocks are not the big sellers. What sells big are the video films and video games — Game Boy and Nintendo, “The Little Mermaid” and “Aladdin.” Those are the items that make millions. And in general, children are exposed to more
movies than ever before. When parents “do” something with
small children now, it rarely involves really “doing” anything:
the parents watch TV with the children, enjoy the televised
game together, go to the movies or may, more rarely, go to the
zoo.

John Rosemond, MD, a pediatrician, notes many of the
activities left unused in watching TV:
• Scanning
• Practicing motor skills, gross or fine
• Practicing eye-hand coordination
• Using more than two senses
• Asking questions
• Exploring
• Exercising initiative or motivation
• Being challenged
• Solving problems
• Thinking analytically
• Exercising imagination
• Practicing communication skills
• Being either creative or constructive

But it is more than that! Today’s parents, who themselves
grew up in front of the TV, do not know how to do things with
their children. Even if they know of the importance of helping
small children with focus and task completion, they don’t know
how to make a kite or tin-can telephone. They don’t know
how to cover chairs with masking tape; they don’t know about
the corner grocery where the child sells cans of. They don’t
know about sewing on buttons or making paper dolls. But
most importantly, they know nothing of the developmental
necessities their preschoolers. They themselves grew up
with Big Bird and Sesame Street. And now they go to movies
and watch TV as a family. And when their three and four-year-
old child gets bored, they, as good parents, have a library of
“good” videotapes for the child to watch.

Indeed, most “involved” parents today, encouraged by popular
parenting advice, are concerned with the content of their
children watch. Parents worry about sex and violence on TV, as
if quality is all and quantity is nothing. A grandfather recently
spoke to me after a lecture: “What you say about TV and a
lack of internal focus is absolutely true. I have two wonderful
granddaughters, ages six and four. They are active, bright kids.
But you know, I’ve noticed, even before hearing you, that
after they have watched a morning of video tapes, they come
out of the room, sort of floating, spacey, really. They wander
aimlessly for a while. They have a “lost” air about them and
they come up to me, and they say, “What can I do?” I told
their mother that it takes them about one hour to recover from
two videotapes. And generally these aren’t spacey kids! They
don’t watch that much TV. But think of the poor little kids who
watch it day after day!”

Real education involves dialog!!! Real education involves
a feeling of mastery, the ability to respond to situations, to
articulate ideas, and to respond thoughtfully. Whether we
talk about leadership, creativity, responsibility, or motivation,
we are describing action. Television encourages passive
responses. Certainly it encourages absorption, and arguably it
can aid understanding, but it does not, and by its very nature
cannot encourage doing, mastery, task completion, creativity,
independent thinking — all those things associated with being
a functioning and productively busy human being. Schools
must, by their nature, focus on doing and task completion.

Recently, a businessman and his wife, fed up with the amount
time of their elementary age children sat in front of the TV,
bet the children $200 apiece that they could not go one year
without watching TV in the home. The kids took the bet, and
won. At the end of the year, and to the parents’ amazement,
the children asked the parents not to return the TV to the
home. The kids had found, over the year, that it was just too
much fun to be engaged in activities with their parents and in
response to their own motivations and interests. They realized
that they had been missing out on something important.

While we can’t say with complete assurance that a child
robbed of the chance to learn to focus, concentrate, and
master a task during the third and fourth years are doomed to
never learn it. However, I believe strongly that such children
grow under a definite handicap and that it is much more
difficult to learn to focus, create, and achieve a sense of
mastery later.

Foster W. Cline, MD is an internationally recognized psychiatrist. He
specializes in working with difficult children. This article is excerpted
from his article “Reasons and Significance of Societal Mayhem and
Severe Disturbances in the Population.”