

Attention Deficit Disorder An Innovative Treatment

Rick A. Harris, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist
Director of The Neurofeedback Institute

What is Attention deficit Disorder? Attention deficit disorder is a condition that becomes apparent in some children in preschool and early school years. However in children who are not behavioral problems the condition may go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed until middle or high school and even into adulthood. It is estimated that between 3 and 5 percent of children have ADHD, or approximately 2 million children in the United States. This means that in a classroom of 25 children, it is likely that at least one will have ADHD. The numbers are considerably higher when one includes children that have attention problems that affect their academic performance but do not meet criteria for a formal diagnosis.

The principle characteristics of ADHD are inattentive, hyperactivity and impulsivity. These symptoms will appear over of many months often with the symptoms of impulsiveness and hyperactivity preceding those of inattention, which may not emerge for a year or more. Different symptoms may appear in different settings depending on the demands the situation may pose for the child's self control. A child who "can't sit still" or is disruptive will be noticeable in school, but the inattentive daydreamer may be overlooked. The impulsive child who acts before thinking may be considered just a "discipline problem," while the child who is sluggish and passive may be viewed as merely unmotivated or "lazy". Because these symptoms vary so much across settings, ADHD is not easy to diagnose. This is especially true when inattentiveness is the primary symptom.

There are three subtypes of ADHD recognized by professionals. These are the predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type (that does not show significant inattention; the predominantly inattentive type (that does not show significant hyperactive-impulsive behavior and the combined type (that displays both inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive symptoms).

Is it really ADHD? Not everyone who is overly hyperactive, inattentive or impulsive has ADHD. Because everyone shows some of these behaviors at times, the diagnosis requires that the behavior be demonstrated to a degree that is inappropriate for the person's age. The behaviors must create a real handicap in at least two areas of a person's life such as in the classroom, on the playground, at home, in the community or in social settings. To assess whether a child has ADHD a comprehensive evaluation is necessary to determine; if the behaviors are excessive, long-term and pervasive? Are they a continuous problem? Do the problems occur in several settings? How do they affect the cognitive or academic performance?

What causes ADHD? One of the first questions a parent will have is “Why? What went wrong? “Did I do something to cause this?” There is little evidence at this time that ADHD can arise from purely social factors or child rearing methods. Most substantiated causes appear to fall in the realm of neurobiology and genetics. Environmental factors can influence the severity of the disorder and especially the degree of impairment and suffering the child may experience.

What is the treatment for ADHD? The National Institute of Mental Health has found that a combination of medical management and behavioral treatment was the treatment of choice. The medications that seem to be the most effective are a class of drugs known as stimulants. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the stimulant drugs when used under medical supervision are usually considered quite safe. However, there are children that do not show symptom improvement after taking medication and there are side effects. The most common side effects are decreased appetite, insomnia, increased anxiety and/ or irritability, stomachaches or headaches

Neurofeedback-an innovative treatment! Neurofeedback is direct training of brain function, by which the brain learns to function more efficiently. It addresses problems of brain dysregulation such as attention deficits. A person diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder can train the brain to pay attention. This is done through the use of EEG biofeedback. Electrodes are placed on the scalp to listen in on brain activity. The signal is processed by computer and information is extracted about key brain wave frequencies. To optimize brain regulation there are particular frequencies that we wish to diminish and other we want to promote. This information is presented to the individual in the form of a video game. The person is effectively playing the video game with their brain. Eventually the brain wave activity is “shaped” toward more desirable, more regulated performance. The person is better able to focus and pay attention.