



## **Dr. Richard Formica, Ph.D.**

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# ADHD: MEDICATION FACTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

*Parents arrive at my office confused about whether their child has ADHD or not. They are also deeply conflicted about whether placing their child on medication will help or hurt their child's development. They have heard from their friend that "naturalistic" supplements help greatly with ADHD. They ask me what they should do.*

Here are my evidence-based answers.

### **1. Validate your child's diagnosis of ADHD:**

When a parent arrives for a consultation without a clear and certain diagnosis of ADHD for their child by a properly-trained professional, I typically administer ADHD Questionnaires to the parents, teachers and, sometimes child. I follow the questionnaire up with a very detailed interview to get descriptions of exactly what the parent noticed which led to the answers they provided. I then engage a second professional such as their pediatrician, a child psychiatrist, pediatric neurologist, or neuropsychologist for confirmation of the diagnosis.

The gold standard for diagnosing a child with ADHD is using a Behavioral Questionnaire designed by a psychologist to assess the presence of a significant ADHD pattern across many situations. This Questionnaire must be given to parents and teachers, and a competent professional should assess and score this Questionnaire. ADHD cannot be ruled out or positively diagnosed using only an interview with your child.

## **2. Be open-minded about medication usage for ADHD:**

Parents almost always spontaneously ask me about the use of medication. Most parents are ambivalent about giving their child medication as they fear that their child's developing brain might be harmed. I always recommend a medication consultation.

Why? Because the side-effects of not properly medicating your child are infinitely greater than any passing side-effects of using ADHD medication.

Children and teens who do not receive proper treatment, including medication, often run into severe problems as they grow. School failure, substance use disorders, promiscuity, and depression are common effects of having untreated ADHD. Losing one's appetite in response to a stimulant medication can be addressed by altering your child's eating pattern. But social difficulty, failure in academics, difficulty in regulating emotion, depression, and experimentation with drug use cannot as easily be addressed with medication alone.

## **3. Why is my child being placed on stimulant medications?**

Even though your child may be impulsive and hyperactive, may be bouncing off walls, unable to sit still and is constantly talking and interrupting others, it is not because his or her brain is "too jacked up." It is the opposite.

The child with ADHD has brain functioning which often gets interfered with by insufficient blood flow and inadequate electrical current. Put in simple terms, your child's frontal cortex is often "too sleepy" to stay alert and to pulse out the energy to operate optimally. The bionic computer that is your child's brain needs energy to optimally engage in effective executive functioning and solid self-management.

#### **4. Don't give up if the first medication trial does not go so well.**

Your doctor may start your child at a “starter dose.” This is not the ultimate therapeutic dose. It can take some time to find the correct dosage levels. The average child has a 65% chance of responding therapeutically to the first stimulant medication they are placed on. However, even if that first medication does not work, another often does. And when stimulants do not work or are not appropriate for any reason, we have several other categories of medication, including the Central Nervous System Suppressants like *Intuniv* and the *Selective Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors* like *Quelbree (viloxazine)*.

ADHD clinical research data suggests that more than 80% of ADHD children, teens and adults who are placed on ADHD medication are significantly helped. So do not get discouraged and give up on medication even if a prior trial with medication did not work out well. Get a second opinion from a doctor who is knowledgeable about all the medication options and is patient enough to help your child find out what works for him.

#### **5. Speak with and get guidance from a psychologist who specializes in parent counseling for ADHD:**

Parent Counseling is an evidence-based treatment for ADHD. It is a wonderful complement to medication, school-based intervention, and behavioral coaching for your child.

Here is how I have come to talk with parents about the therapeutic combination of medication and parent counseling: medication allows the brain to “come on line,” while parent counseling helps the child develop habits which lead to the development of healthy capacities and healthy character.

## **6. Why don't I use non-medical, alternative interventions for ADHD, rather than medication?**

Currently there is lots of research on non-medical interventions for the treatment of ADHD. Some interventions are almost certainly helpful. Some have less research backing. More specifically, many individual research studies which seemed to show positive results were contradicted by future studies which demonstrated that when the experimenter did not know which subjects got the preferred intervention, the positive result disappeared. It was the experimenter's bias, not the intervention, which worked. Those studies which legitimately showed positive results are real, but the results were rather small. The only bio-chemical intervention which has been proven over and over to work effectively at a very significant level are the medications which your doctor will prescribe. Everything else, including omega three fish oils, vitamins, neurofeedback, are useful supplements, but none takes the place of ADHD medication.

## **7. Encourage lots of exercise.**

If there is one "non-pharmaceutical" intervention which you can emphasize with your child, choose exercise, lots and lots of it. According to research findings, exercise changes hormonal balance, increases dopamine levels and energizes the brain. We want all of those effects for the child with ADHD.

## **8. What exactly have research studies concluded about specific "natural" alternative approaches to helping ADHD?**

This is a common question I receive from parents. Here is a super quick summary of the research on alternative approaches to helping ADHD: supplements, restrictive diets, elimination of food dyes, fish oil,

neurofeedback, and computer cognitive training programs provide small, positive, but not statistically significant, effects on a reliable basis. (Sonuga-Barke, et al, 2013; Rapaport et al, 2013; Farone and Antshel, 2014).

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