Should You Medicate Your Child?

Perhaps no subject is more controversial and no decision more difficult than whether to medicate your child. Parents struggle with guilt and second-guess themselves over this decision. It's impossible to cover everything in one newsletter, but our goal is to help you make a confident decision and provide your child with the tools to be successful in every area of life.

Consider this analogy when pondering treatment options: If my physician discovers through testing that I have high cholesterol, what approach would I demand he take? I would want him to educate me so that I could be empowered to make changes and lower my cholesterol. I would first change my diet, increase my exercise and take steps to lower my stress. We'd try that for three to six months, then test again. If I were making progress, we'd continue to work my plan. If, however. my cholesterol remained high, we would then test the level of medication necessary to lower my cholesterol while continuing to exercise, eat a healthy diet and lower my stress.

Here's how we approach the medication issue for our children. We should first change everything else-diet, exercise, behavioral interventions, how we teach our children, home environment, how we communicate-before we seek to change the child through medication.

To be clear, we are not anti-medication. We are against using medication as a first option. If you have a doctor who wants to prescribe medication after the first visit, without explaining to you how your child's brain works and other ways to help, that is irresponsible and short-sighted- you should look for another doctor. We are against using medication as some sort of magic pill to fix everything-we want to focus on specifics. We are against using medication without empowering our children to make changes themselves.

That said, here are the practical steps we advise:
(1) List your child's symptoms on the left side of a sheet of paper: Disorganized, forgetful, executive function inhibited, poor planning and short-term memory, slow processing, bossy, obsessive compulsive tendencies, obsesses about fairness, difficult getting thoughts from head to paper, anxious, easily overwhelmed, difficulty with transitions, frequent meltdowns, shuts down, defensive, lies, angry, frustrated, poor relationships with peers. Fidgets, hums, sings, chews on clothes and other objects, doodles, taps, constantly moves, presses against people and objects, distractible, difficulty with focus and attention, zones out, procrastinates, works in spurts, argumentative, strong-willed, oppositional, bored easily, completes tasks the hard way, sensory issues.

(2) List the different tools we can employ to help your child across the top: Improve your child's diet. Eliminate food dyes, sugar, high fructose corn syrup, preservatives, processed foods, soda and allergens; add omega 3's and good protein; whole food supplements and vitamins can be helpful. (This is only a partial list.)

Get more exercise. Encourage as much vigorous exercise as possible, before and after school. Exercise builds new neurons, increases blood flow to the brain and reduces anxiety. It's critical.

Create a calm home. The surest way to reduce anxiety and provide stability is to be a calm, authoritative leader. Modeling and showing your children how to calm themselves and to take power over circumstances, is the greatest gift you can give your child. What we teach is actually a form of neurofeedback-we actually retrain the brain to seek positive, rather than negative, stimulation (which ultimately changes the physical structure of the brain).

Help your child be responsible for his own actions. CD # 4 on the parenting series is dedicated to helping your child take responsibility for his actions and behavior. We also help a child develop vision and internal motivation.

Change your communication style. Many of us unwittingly foster confrontations instead of conversations, put our kids on the defensive, create power struggles and cause our kids to shut down. Much of the anger and oppositional nature seen in children is fostered by negative interactions. We need to communicate in ways that foster trust, responsibility, honesty and accountability. Again, this is something you have the power to change immediately.

Change your teaching style. Simply put, our kids learn and process information differently. So we must use teaching tools that help students complete homework, tests and schoolwork more effectively.

Before insisting and demanding that our children learn how other children do, we must provide them with different tools.

Build your child's confidence (helps with school, social skills, etc.). Cultivate your child's natural gifts and passions. Provide opportunities for your child to express his/her interests outside the home. This is absolutely critical to build your child's confidence.

Engage professionals. We are huge fans of Occupational Therapists- get to know one in your community. They are always positive, proactive and provide very practical tools to help with sensory issues(not to mention anxiety and learning). A learning specialist can help you pinpoint specific learning disabilities and develop a course of action.

Teach and empower your child-we are strong advocates of talking honestly to our kids, explaining their strengths and weaknesses, helping them understand how their brains and bodies work, and giving them tools to overcome weaknesses. Teach your child calming routines and practice this together. Give your child tools with which to handle anxiety, frustration and disappointment.

No matter which treatment option you pursue, NOTHING can take the place of empowering your child to understand him or herself, and making proactive changes over time. This is the long-term solution.

(3) Evaluate.
Note that each of the above treatment options is within your control, some more than others. Consistently employ these tools over time and begin to measure results. You will notice that many of the symptoms on the left side of the paper will be mitigated by the treatment options across the top of the page. You may see a direct correlation between diet and exercise, and specific symptoms. It is helpful if you can isolate specific tools and their effect on symptoms. As you check off the different boxes, you will be developing a scorecard of sorts. "Hmmmm, I can see the difference that changes in diet and exercise have had on x, y and z symptoms. Calming our home and teaching my son has helped reduce meltdowns. Working on my own anxiety and giving my son purposeful missions and jobs has reduced his anxiety." And so on. You can refine and keep working on problem areas.

(4) Consider medication for specific symptoms.
If after providing these tools you still find persistent problem areas that are causing significant issues, you now have the confidence and knowledge to approach your doctor with a very specific list of symptoms that have not responded to your changes.

"Doc, we have put in place these 10 changes for our son and have noticed that 14 of his symptoms have responded positively. So we're going to keep doing these things because they have made a

huge difference. But our son is still struggling with symptoms A and B, which are causing him significant issues in the classroom. Which specific medication, if any, will most effectively treat these two symptoms with the least side effects?"

If you decide to try medication as a tool, you will do so with confidence knowing that you have made other changes, and you will be able to measure specific progress against specific symptoms. You will also be able to isolate side effects as well.

A few notes and caveats: If you medicate your child, it does not mean you are a bad parent. If you do not medicate, it does not make you a better parent. Every child and situation is unique.

Sometimes medication is helpful; sometimes medication is necessary. There are cases where the safety of the child (and even some adults) can only be ensured by medication.

In a separate newsletter, we can talk about different medications, how to discuss medication with your child, what happens when a child says, "I don't like the way it makes me feel" and other issues. No matter what the situation, monitor your child's dosage and reactions carefully. If you see emotional responses or psychotic episodes, contact your doctor immediately.

Let's talk reality here. There are instances in which a teacher or school is not willing or able to make changes to provide a child with more structure or positive stimulation. There are also situations in which a young child simply is not ready emotionally or developmentally for the school environment. This often forces parents and teachers into a tough situation. Some will choose to homeschool their child so they can control the environment. Many simply do not have this option. Medication becomes a reluctant fallback to help ensure that the child is able to be successful in the classroom. When this happens, we should continue to make all the changes within our control to empower our child to be successful.

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