

Alternative Approaches to the Child with ADHD

ADD and ADHD have become such ubiquitous diagnoses in children these days that some statistics report 1 in 9 children suffer from the condition. Schools often urge parents to have their children tested the minute the child doesn't conform to school rules or school expectations. Academic performance pressure begins early on and is unrelenting for most children. For the child who truly suffers from ADHD, stimulants can be a life-changing relief. But for many children, this diagnosis is less clear, often confounded with anxiety. What are the alternatives to medication?



I have been searching for alternatives for many years. I am trained in Ayurvedic medicine, the 5000 year old medical science of India. Ayurveda teaches that disease is a manifestation of an imbalance in the underlying or primary energies known as Doshas. Like Chinese medicine, the underlying theory is that all illness is the result of an imbalance of energies or forces. This somehow seemed hard to translate into help for children with ADD and ADHD but I consulted the texts and the experts and their advice seemed worth passing on for consideration.

Manifestations of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder:

These children often have difficulty “focusing”- *but what does that mean?* In school it means they have a hard time sitting calmly or following instructions. They have a hard time listening to instructions or settling down at story time, they fidget and struggle with multi-step tasks. They often interrupt or blurt out comments. As they get older, they have a hard time accomplishing the homework that is expected of them, easily distracted by something on their desk, a toy in their room, a noise in their house. As a result, they often struggle at school, and eventually become quite frustrated and discouraged attempting to complete their homework. By 7th or 8th grade, pre-teens are spending hours at homework; for those with ADHD, it can seem overwhelming and their self-esteem suffers.

Alternatives to stimulant medications for ADHD:

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There are three doshas: Vata, Pitta and Kapha dosha. They teach that everyone is born with a particularly prominent Dosha- what western teaching may describe as a temperament. Vata is the most active Dosha, the dosha of high energy. It governs the movements and nervous impulses in the body. The Vedas say that if Vata is vitiated, the result is more energy- what we might describe as anxiety or restlessness. If your temperament or dominant Dosha is Vata, you are more likely to be more energetic, or highly strung. But as a child, it may appear to be symptoms of ADHD.



What is the cause of Vata aggravation? For many children, simply being constipated (from the dryness inherent in vata dosha) can be a trigger. If toxins and waste material build up in a Vata child, it is found to increase their restlessness, irritability and hyperactivity. For others, it is overstimulation; many activities, full schedules of activities, lack of down time. For others, it is frustration in school. All part of the typical life of a school age child.

So what do the Ayurvedic texts recommend? Appeasing Vata

Kids are constantly in motion in our society: they are surrounded by noise, motion, electronics that stimulate. They have a fully programmed life with extra school activities. The world is moving fast around them and they rarely sit down in a quiet room and just rest. Parents rarely can find time for peace and calmness. When did you last sit on the couch and listen to music with your child.



According to Ayurveda: Like increases Like. This means that in an inherently active child, activity begets activity- and when the child gets tired or overstimulated, they are triggered to become hyperactive, not to relax. Newborns for example, based on their temperament, will respond in one of three ways to overstimulation: they will look away, they will fall asleep, or they will get the hiccups. So if you imagine what the toddler's equivalents for this would be, or the school age child, you can see that, in the child whose dosha or temperament is high activity- instead of the hiccups they run around. Excess movement vitiates vata and there is hyperactivity.

How does this translate into daily life? Simple changes

Diet:

- Replace sugar filled, processed foods with whole grains: bread, quinoa, rice, amaranth, whole wheat pasta etc.
- Root, squashes, pumpkins, zucchini, and okra, are more grounding vegetables than raw leafy vegetables.
- Replace cold fruit juices with fresh fruits.
- Eat meals at the dining table rather than in front of the TV. Stimulation while eating can disturb digestion and assimilation.



Lifestyle:

- Massage kids with warm sesame oil. Leave the oil on for 20-30 minutes and follow with a warm bath. This is also great bonding time.
- Do some fun activities sitting down - drawing, painting, and coloring during some part of the day.
- Do some yoga poses and don't forget to end with Shavasana (laying on your back with your eyes closed). You will be surprised to see your children lying down peacefully.
- Paint the bedroom with calming colors like blue or green.
- Let them listen to tranquil music at bed time.
- Keep the temperature in the bedroom warm.
- Always protect their head and ears- from cold air.
- Limit screen time



Before resorting to medicine, consider trying these simple nutrition and lifestyle alterations. Talk to your child's teacher and her pediatrician. Review the child's busy schedule and look for ways to simplify it. Reexamine your family's habits- good and bad- and look for ways to reduce chaos and add stillness. It will not only support your child, but sustain your family's wellness overall.

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