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Understanding ADHD in Preschoolers

Does your four-year-old child seem to be into everything, perpetually on-the-go, can't sit still long enough to finish his snack or listen to a storybook, gets distracted easily, moves from one unfinished activity to the next, throws major tantrums when frustrated, interrupts conversations, snatches items impulsively from the hands of another, doesn't slow down enough to follow directions and is restless and squirmy? Do you wonder whether they have ADHD?

Diagnosing ADHD in a preschool child is tricky. In fact, most professionals hold off until early elementary school. After all, how do you distinguish normal four-year-old behavior from the typical ADHD behaviors? Almost all of the behaviors described above are developmentally appropriate for a four-year-old. Almost all four-year-olds are impulsive, squirmy, active and full of energy.

So how do I know if my child has ADHD?

Some questions to consider:

- * How does your child compare with his peers?
- * Is the behavior similar to other children this same age or is this behavior more extreme, more disruptive?
- * Is the behavior leading to chronic problems in daily functioning?
- * Does the behavior occur in more than one setting (for example, at preschool and at home)?
- * Is the behavior innate to the child or could it be caused by other factors and conditions?

If you consider these questions and have some concerns, it would be best to contact your healthcare provider, and have an assessment done. There is a great deal of information obtained when making this diagnosis, and it is important to rule out any other causes for the behaviors -- anxiety, learning disorders, sensory integration issues, sleep disturbances, etc. A thorough medical, developmental and family history is essential as well as detailed information from parents, teachers and any other adult that has contact with the child in other settings.

Diagnosed, Now What?

There is certainly an advantage to having a clear understanding of your child's behaviors early. Once you know that the problems are caused by ADHD, you can begin to implement strategies to help your child. Early intervention can have remarkable benefits.

Positive behavior management approaches, increasing structure and predictability, reducing distractions, creating routines, a smaller classroom setting, goals and rewards are simple environmental changes that are often enough for these young children. These interventions may even help prevent the negative self-esteem issues that develop after repeated frustrations, failures and negative interactions with others.

For children with more severe ADHD symptoms, a low dose of stimulant medication may be recommended if environmental changes are not enough to significantly improve symptoms. These young children must be closely monitored when on any type of medication.

ADHD has been called attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and hyperactivity. But ADHD is the preferred term because it describes both primary aspects of the condition: inattention and hyperactive-impulsive behavior.

While many children who have ADHD tend more toward one category than the other, most children have some combination of inattention and hyperactive-impulsive behavior. Signs and symptoms of ADHD become more apparent during activities that require focused mental effort.

In most children diagnosed with ADHD, signs and symptoms appear before the age of 7. In some children, signs of ADHD are noticeable as early as infancy.

Signs and symptoms of inattention may include:

- * Often fails to pay close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork or other activities
- * Often has trouble sustaining attention during tasks or play
- * Seems not to listen even when spoken to directly
- * Has difficulty following through on instructions and often fails to finish schoolwork, chores or other tasks
- * Often has problems organizing tasks or activities
- * Avoids or dislikes tasks that require sustained mental effort, such as schoolwork or homework
- * Frequently loses needed items, such as books, pencils, toys or tools
- * Can be easily distracted
- * Often forgetful

Signs and symptoms of hyperactive and impulsive behavior may include:

- * Fidgets or squirms frequently
- * Often leaves his or her seat in the classroom or in other situations when remaining seated is expected
- * Often runs or climbs excessively when it's not appropriate or, if an adolescent, might constantly feel restless
- * Frequently has difficulty playing quietly
- * Always seems on the go
- * Talks excessively
- * Blurts out the answers before questions have been completely asked
- * Frequently has difficulty waiting for his or her turn
- * Often interrupts or intrudes on others' conversations or games

ADHD behaviors can be different in boys and girls.

- * Boys are more likely to be hyperactive, whereas girls tend to be inattentive.
- * Girls who have trouble paying attention often daydream, but inattentive boys are more likely to play or fiddle aimlessly.
- * Boys tend to be less compliant with teachers and other adults, so their behavior is often more conspicuous.

You may suspect your child's behavior is caused by ADHD if you notice consistently inattentive or hyperactive, impulsive behavior that:

- * Lasts more than six months
- * Occurs in more than just one setting (typically at home and at school)
- * Regularly disrupts school, play and other daily activities
- * Causes problems in relationships with adults and other children

Lori Rappaport, Ph.D. is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist specializing in child and family issues.

Dr. Rappaport has over 30 years of experience working with children and families experiencing general life issues, chronic, and life threatening illness.

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