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Parents must take leading on treating ADHD

"We agree with our child's pediatrician and teachers that our delightful but trying and very active youngster has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). We understand that the problems that children with ADHD experience are not limited to school and academics.

"We've seen how inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity disrupt interpersonal relationships and can lead to social problems at home, school, and play. We know that, with reduced concentration, class work suffers and homework is often incomplete, leading to poor grades and low self-esteem. However, we don't know how to address this problem. Should we consider medication? Are there other strategies or procedures to think about?"

These are legitimate questions raised by parents every day, since more than 10 percent of American children are diagnosed with ADHD, and half of those are treated with medication. Parents must be aware of their options and professionals should first consider the goals of treatment before jumping into a specific type of treatment or management.

Medications, primarily stimulants, have been used for decades to treat children with ADHD. Numerous studies have shown that, when used properly, these medications are both safe and effective for improving concentration. With the increased ability to focus, a child's academic performance and interpersonal skills improve, leading to greater confidence and self-esteem.

As with any medication, however, complications can occur. The FDA is reviewing whether or not drugs used to treat hyperactivity can create cardiovascular or psychiatric risks for pediatric patients who take them. In February, the FDA Committee on Drug Safety and Risk Management said that a "black box warning" should be added to the labels of these medications, informing patients of their associated risk of heart attacks or sudden cardiac arrest in adult patients. Another FDA committee noted, however, that the risks

did not seem to be similar in pediatric patients, unless they had a pre-existing cardiac disorder.

When medication is used, close monitoring is required, as every child exhibits a unique response to medication. In addition, some children will respond positively to one medication, but not to another.

Medication should only be used when combined with well-designed behavioral and academic intervention strategies. Behavioral therapy is neither psychological therapy nor counseling. This intervention sets limits on behavior and rewards appropriate behaviors while providing consequences for undesirable conduct. For the program to be effective, parents and teachers must work closely together and communicate with each other and the student, as only a consistent approach will ensure success.

Schools have a responsibility to thoroughly evaluate struggling students, create effective educational plans, and provide appropriate services in an environment structured for the success of each child. However, even the best educational plans won't succeed without parents as partners.

Frequently, parents engage other professionals, like academic tutors, to support their child's academic needs, forgetting that they too need to provide and promote a structured, learning environment. Parents need to be aware of homework assignments and check to see if the work is being done. Parents should communicate with teachers and let them know whether incomplete assignments are due to a lack of understanding or to a lack of effort. Parents need to communicate consistent expectations to their child: limited TV and computer time, regular bedtime, and mandatory school attendance.

Follow-up is critical, as even the best plan may go astray or fail. Parents should check in regularly with the school, their team of professionals, and their child to ensure that all are on the right track and make corrections where needed to ensure the best outcome for your child's success.

Parents who would like to know more about ADHD and ways they can help their child socially or academically can contact their pediatrician, their child's teacher, or check out the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site at www.aap.org

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