

# The Dangers of Overprescribing Children

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There is an issue that I feel very passionately about: children getting diagnosed with disorders at a young age and being prescribed "heavy" medications by their doctors. One example that is commonly seen is children being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD, and then being prescribed medications such as Ritalin, or Adderall. It is my belief that giving these medications to children can lead to even bigger issues, such as addiction, when they get older. I have witnessed this issue in my own home. For as long as I can remember, my brother was always being prescribed medications. When we were very little, the doctors told my mother that he had "extreme attention deficit hyperactivity disorder," and right away prescribed him Ritalin. After the Ritalin, they prescribed him Adderall. After my brother took the Adderall for some time, the doctors said that my brother had anxiety, so on top of the Adderall, they prescribed him an anti-anxiety medication. The doctors started my brother on this ridiculous cycle at such a young age, which I believe only taught him that the answer to any discomfort could be found in a pill.

As the years went on, it was clear that the only coping skills my brother really had were drugs. Soon enough, he began self-medicating with street drugs, and ultimately gained an out-of-control addiction. Even when he made attempts to get clean and sober, the first thing the doctors did was write more prescriptions, which continued his pattern of using drugs, whether they be pharmaceutical or street drugs, to feel normal. Sadly, on June 1st, 2018, my brother lost his battle with addiction at the age of 29. Since his passing, I have done a lot of reflecting on what went wrong and how things could have been different. While there were a few contributing factors, the quick diagnosis and over-prescribing of prescriptions by doctors when he was a child stuck out to me a lot.

While my family has experienced something so terrible, I know that I am not alone. Unfortunately, a large number of people become addicted to these prescription medications at a very young age. The *New York Times* article "Generation Adderall," by Casey Schwartz, does a great job showing

how easily someone can become addicted to Adderall, and how this "study drug" is taking over our generation. In 1990 the number of children on stimulants was 600,000, but by 2013, the number of children on stimulants was 3.5 million, with that number only continuing to increase (54). The article goes on to describe the author's experience and feelings while taking Adderall, and how difficult it was for her to come off of the drug. If this is a college student's experience, I just cannot imagine giving this drug to children. Another article that I read called "Drugging of the American Boy" by Ryan D'Agostino speaks about the over-diagnosing of ADHD in children. Something that I found frightening was that, in order for a doctor to give a true diagnosis of ADHD, the process should take days, or even weeks. During this process, that doctor has to interview and observe the child, interview the child's parents, and receive reports from the child's school. However, a study done by the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that one third of the visits last less than ten minutes (Halfon). Some people may begin to wonder if this over diagnosis of ADHD has anything to do with the money that is being made by prescribing this medication. Maybe it is just easier to prescribe the medication, so that parents can see immediate results. However, misdiagnosing children with ADHD could not only mask the true condition that a child may be suffering from, but also cause abuse of the medications, as seen in the *New York Times* article "A.D.H.D Seen in 11% of US Children as Diagnoses Rise."

With all of that being said, it is very clear that there is an over-diagnosis of ADHD that I believe needs to be addressed. However, there are children out there who truly do suffer from ADHD, so this can be a little bit tricky. Like my mother, many parents are unaware of the dangers of these medications, and that there is a problem with doctors over-diagnosing children with ADHD. Since this issue is so important to me and affects so many people, I would like this issue to be brought to the attention of the schools. If possible, I believe meetings with all of the school's staff, and the parents of the students, should be held to discuss the importance of being aware of ADHD, the signs to look for if their child may have ADHD, and all of the various options of treating ADHD. I would also discuss the issues associated with over-diagnosing children, and the harm that can come from giving children medications, such as Adderall. I would recommend leaving parents with a letter that they could either hold onto for their own reference, or that they could pass along to their friends and members of their community. I feel that going directly to the parents, rather than doctors, could be more effective, because many doctors are already aware of the problem, whereas parents just trust the word of their doctor. Below is the letter that I would write to the parents/ community:

*To Parents and Members of the Community,*

*I am writing this letter to raise awareness of children being over-diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD, is a disorder that causes children to be hyperactive, not able to focus or sit still, and to act impulsively. According to the CDC, about 11% of children between the ages of 4 to 17 have been diagnosed with this disorder, but while the exact number is not known, many of these cases are misdiagnosed and children have been prescribed heavy' medications for a disorder that they do not have ("Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)").*

*If you believe your child may have ADHD, please be aware that this cannot be determined by a quick doctor visit. Your child has to go through an extensive evaluation; reports from his/her school should be submitted, and the parents should be interviewed as well. Please also keep in mind that doctors prescribe medications such as Adderall, which can have a great impact on your child. For example, Adderall can cause your child to have sleep problems, decreased appetite, and some children have even developed tics.*

*Adderall can also be addictive and dangerous if it is abused. If your child does receive a diagnosis of ADHD, it is extremely important that you seek out other options before going straight to stimulant medications. Some alternatives for treating ADHD, or helping relieve some of its symptoms, are: exercise, omega 3 supplements, and a change in diet, which should all be done while receiving some form of counseling or therapy. Unfortunately many children do suffer from this disorder, and do require medication, but I hope my letter to you has given you a little bit more information, and has intrigued you to do more research on the subject before putting your child on medication. I hope you spread this information as well, so that more parents can see that there is an issue with children being over-diagnosed, and to know that drugs are not their only option to treat ADHD.*

*Sincerely,*

*Nicole Afriat*

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