

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

Health News You and Your Family Can Use to Achieve Optimal Health

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

An Expert's Advice for Parents of ADHD Children

By Lisa Bianco

ADHD stands for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and as many as 3 to 5 percent of all school age children have this diagnosis. Parents at first might think their child just has lots of energy – an “Eveready Energizer Bunny” type of kid who never seems to stop and never wants to sleep. But in a school setting problems begin to be apparent because focusing on the teacher, following directions and controlling their behavior are all challenges for these children.

Dr. Mary Beth Boylan, Clinical Director of the Watson Institute Friendship Academy, advises parents to have their child evaluated as soon as they notice the child behaving in a way that stands out from peers. “Socially, ADHD children tend to have fewer friendships, more conflicts with peers, and have trouble reading the emotional reactions of other children. They live in the moment and can blurt things out inappropriately because they don’t think of long term consequences. The child’s teachers may also begin to notice ADHD symptoms. But once a professional has done an evaluation and confirmed ADHD as the diagnosis, parents can begin to participate in interventions that will markedly improve the child’s behavior. At this stage most parents are relieved to find out there is a reason for the child’s inattentiveness, hyperactivity or impulsiveness.”

Watson Institute Friendship Academy is a member of Pennsylvania’s Approved Private Schools (APS). An APS is an alternative placement for students in need of a more systematic program to meet their learning needs. The state and the child’s school district share the tuition. “Eighty percent of our children at Friendship Academy have an ADHD diagnosis,” says Dr. Boylan. “Since our facility is an Approved Private School and partial hospital combined, we can administer medication and offer therapy programs. These services are seamlessly integrated into daily activities and we func-



tion similar to a regular school.”

Many children with ADHD respond very well to stimulant medications. Therefore the ability to monitor medications at Friendship Academy is essential. In children with ADHD, medications such as Concerta, Metadate and Ritalin act on the brain’s neurotransmitter, dopamine to improve concentration and decrease distraction and hyperactivity symptoms.

On the behavioral side, Friendship Academy teaches children with ADHD social skills and problem solving skills. Children are taught how to recognize signals from their environment. For example, discussing the meaning of smiles and frowns and what it signifies about the person. Looking at the body posture of others (crossed arms, loud tone of voice, clenched fists) and then recognizing their own internal signals. When children tune in to their own internal messages – like sweating, rapid heartbeat or tense muscles—they can decide how to respond appropriately. Problem-solving involves learning what steps to take and considering possible obstacles and especially consequences to their actions.

What Dr. Boylan finds most rewarding about her work is the lifetime changes their programs accomplish. “We teach the children skills that give them a tool box they can take with them throughout their lives. Many of our children improve to the point where they can transition back to their school district. It’s tremendously gratifying to witness how our school’s programs and the proper medications can totally transform these children’s lives.”



Dr. Mary Beth Boylan

Parents of Children With Special Needs...
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