

Every day, more than 5 MILLION AMERICAN KIDS tak

Are Our Children



Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder

(ADHD) was diagnosed in Daniel O'Brien (6), 13, and his brother, Matthew, 6, shown here with their mother, Linda O'Brien, outside their home in Sterling Heights, Mich. Daniel was unable to sit through a church service or focus on schoolwork. When he was 5, doctors prescribed Ritalin. Now he has a B average in school.

director of the Association for the Care of Children's Health. "But families need to work with their health-care providers and teachers to make sure children are getting proper medication."

"The key point is that we need increased funding for research on the effects of medications on children," says Dr. David Fassler, a psychiatrist who treats children and adolescents in Burlington, Vt., and who is the author of *Help Me, I'm Sad* (Viking), about childhood depression. "More research will lead to increased understanding of the way medicines work in children, improve safety and reduce the incidence of dosage problems and side effects."

Are we overmedicating children?

"Most mothers feel resistance against giving kids drugs, but on the whole we are not overmedicating kids," says Doris Haire, head of the American Foundation for Maternal and Child Health.

"More children are being medicated now than in the past, but we have to face the fact that the increase is a result of environmental issues," says Heather McCabe, pointing out the marked in-

Leading medicines prescribed for children...

Antibiotics	47,787,000
Antihistamatics	7,279,000
Ritalin (a stimulant)	1,596,000
Antidepressants	670,000
Anticonvulsants	606,000
Chemotherapy	73,000

1995 prescriptions for children in U.S., 15 and under, National Center for Health Statistics

EVERY DAY, MORE than 5 million children in this country swallow drugs or inhale sprays. They are not drug abusers. They are taking their "meds"—medications against such familiar childhood ailments as ear and throat infections and asthma, but also for more complex conditions such as depression and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration evaluates the drug company tests of

the efficacy and safety of any new treatment. Mostly, the companies carry out the trials on adults. Relatively few tests are done on children; yet, once the FDA approves a drug for adults, doctors are free to use it on anyone. The problem is they don't have good data on the correct doses for children or on serious side effects.

"More than 80 percent of all drugs are not [specifically] approved for use with children," says Dr. Sumner Yaffe, director of the Center for Research for Mothers and Children at the National Institutes of Health. "Physicians are free to write pre-

scriptions for those drugs, even if the drug company has done no special testing."

In August, President Clinton signed an order requiring clinical tests of medications likely to be used by children. "The President has addressed the issue by requiring the FDA to include dosage charts in common medications for children," says Heather McCabe, executive

crease in the number of children with asthma. "Asthma arises from poor air quality and overcrowded classrooms."

In some areas, we actually may be undermedicating children. "Many children who need treatment are not currently receiving it," says Dr. Fassler. "Many childhood psychiatric disorders remain underdiagnosed and un-

BY EARL UBELL