



The Vermont Legislative Research Shop

Psychotropic Drugs and Children

What are Psychotropic Drugs?

A psychotropic drug is any drug capable of affecting a person's mind, emotions, and behavior. Psychotropic drugs work by changing some of the body's natural chemical levels and ratios; the change induced by these medications in the brain's chemical composition modifies human behavior (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2002). Psychotropic drugs are most commonly used as part of a treatment regimen for mental illness; drugs prescribed to treat mental illness include types such as stimulants, antidepressants, anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers, and anti-anxiety medications (Nicely et al, 2002).

A Trend of Increased Drug Use

Research released in January 2003 indicates that the number of children who are taking psychotropic medications more than doubled from 1987 to 1996 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2004). Another study examined the rate of use by children in two states' Medicaid programs and a large, private HMO. They found that, in 1987, approximately 2.5 percent of children were taking at least one psychiatric medication, whereas in 1996, the rate jumped to 6.2 percent. One estimate is that six million prescriptions for Ritalin are filled annually (NCSL, 2004).

Ritalin and Prozac are the two most commonly prescribed psychotropic drugs for pediatric patients. Methylphenidate is the active ingredient in Ritalin, which acts by stimulating the body's central nervous system (brain). In treating children with Attention-

increased by 122 percent. Overall, boys continue to be prescribed psychotropic drugs more than young girls, yet the use of these drugs by girls is on the rise (NCSL, 2004).

Notably, children with Medicaid coverage were more likely than children with private HMO coverage to receive anti-psychotics and mood stabilizers, drugs that are very potent and have dramatic effects on a person's behavior and sometimes serious side effects too (NCSL, 2004). Examples of anti-psychotics include Zyprexa, Haldol, and Risperdal; mood stabilizers include drugs such as Tegretol, Depakote, and Lithium (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists, 2002).

These trends pose a new set of challenges for health science researchers, policymakers, medical professionals and parents; such as, what is the increased usage and reliance upon psychotropic drugs indicative of? Perhaps there is a notable increase due to a lessening of the cultural stigma associated with mental illness, thus making it more acceptable for children to undergo evaluation and possible treatment for their mental health problems (AACAP, 2000). In addition, research has surged in the area of psychotropic medications, with the effect of practitioners learning more about how to treat children, as well doctors now have more medications in their arsenal to treat children with (AACAP, 2000). One negative aspect of increased research of psychotropic medications in pediatric patients may be that increasing prescription rates could be in-part due to aggressive marketing by pharmaceutical companies. Furthermore large advertisement campaigns popularizing and familiarizing parents with medications entice them to request medications for their children with greater frequency, which may result in physicians relying on pharmacological therapy as the main component of a young patient's treatment (NCSL, 2004). A possible trend may arise where doctors are promoting medication at the expense of therapy (family therapy, play therapy, music therapy, or psychotherapy); a trend that would likely be supported by insurers if it proved to be most cost-effective for the insurance companies (NCSL, 2004).

Psychotropic Drugs in the School Environment

The school environment plays an important role in monitoring the healthful development of children; school personnel are able to view a child's development and behavior in a variety of situations; such as, classroom learning and social interaction with their peers. Teachers can play a crucial role in helping to identify children who may need to be screened for a condition like ADHD (AACAP, 2000).

A disruptive child not only hinders his or her own learning, but their disruptive behavior affects the quality of a learning environment for other children also. Considering that it is estimated that 3-5% of school-age children have ADHD, it is likely that most teachers have one or more students with the disorder in their classes (AACAP, 1999). For some problematically disruptive students Ritalin has a positive therapeutic effect. However, some parents and educators are concerned that medications such as Ritalin are becoming fall-back solutions for school personnel to facilitate classroom function and easily control disruptive children. For some children with ADHD, Ritalin or similar psychotropic drugs are the appropriate treatment for them, but disruptive behavior is not only caused by

ADHD. Automatically prescribing Ritalin for all children who exhibit such behavior is only masking the problem, rather than addressing the cause of their disruptive behavior.

For whatever reason school children are being medicated, a problem arises if schools set attendance conditions for these children on the basis of taking psychotropic drugs in order to attend school. Concern arises over whether schools will push medication rather than provide specialized educational services for needy students. A related concern regarding psychotropic drugs in schools concerns the safe keeping of medication at school. Central Nervous System stimulants like Ritalin and Adderall have a relatively short therapeutic effect, usually 4-6 hours (AACAP, 1999). This means children taking these drugs typically have to take at least one dose while at school. Furthermore, recreational drug use of such stimulants occurs, and school nurse's offices need to have a safe method of storing and monitoring stimulant medication administered. However the

Psychotropic Drug to Child Not Considered Abuse or Neglect Prohibits Requiring a Child to Take a Psychotropic Drug in order to Attend School	MI, RI
Request a Study on the Effects of Psychotropic Drugs	MA, MI, MN, VA
Academic Solutions Instead of Psychotropic Drugs as a Means of Ameliorating Behavior/Learning	CO, TX,
Tracks Number of Children Being Treated with Psychotropic Drugs	IL, HI, NC, TN, WA,

Table 1: Legislation Regarding Psychotropic Drugs Across the States

Alternatives to Psychotropic Drugs

There are certain alternatives to psychotropic drugs for parents to consider. Herbal remedies such as ginkgo biloba, valerian and passionflower are some options, evening primrose oil and certain fish oils also may help to balance out depression. However,

American Psychological Association Online “Archival Description of Biofeedback: Applied Psychophysiology” www.apa.org/crsppp/biofeedback.html (2004); Site visited 4/26/04

American Psychological Association “Psychotropic Drug Use in Young Patients is Rising” <http://www.apa.org/monitor/apr03/druguse.html> April 2003; Site visited 4/21/04

Littell, Mary Ann “Psychotropic Drugs and Children” University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) Magazine, http://www.umdj.edu/umcweb/hstate/winter_spring01/features/feature03_psychotropic.htm Spring 2001; Site visited 4/26/04

MedicineNet Online Dictionary <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=30807> Updated and Reviewed 2/17/04; Site visited 4/26/04

National Conference of State Legislatures, (Vol. 3, No. 3) “Psychotropic Drug Use Among Children.” <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/forum/shld/33b.htm> Site Visited 4/19/04

National Conference of State Legislators, “Psychotropic Medications at Schools” <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/ritalin.htm> April 1, 2004; Site visited 4-26-04

National Institute on Drug Abuse “NIDA Fact Sheet: Methylphenidate” <http://www.nida.nih.gov/Infofax/ritalin.html> June 25, 2003; Site visited 4/26/04

National Institute on Drug Abuse “Prescription Drugs—Abuse and Addiction” <http://www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Prescription/Prescription.html> October 21, 2002; Site visited 4/26/04

Nicely, Starr L. BS and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart, PhD “UNC CERTs Finds that Psychotropic Drug Use in Children is on the Rise” http://www.certs.hhs.gov/newsarchive/2002/20020430_01.html visited 4/21/04

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