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Physicians Concerned About Ritalin Being Forced on School Children

by Lynda Kirk, MA, LPC, BCIA-C, QEEGT

"Dare to Say No to Drugs." How many times have you seen the familiar black tee shirt with the red logo on our elementary school kids? I've always smiled as I thought, "I'm so glad to see that we're about educating our kids about drugs at this crucial age." Now I shake my head in disbelief and wonder at the irony as I read the recent chilling report in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) that the use of Ritalin and other psychotropic drugs has increased two to threefold in the years 1991-1995 among 2-to-4-year-olds. The package insert for Ritalin, however, states: "Ritalin should not be used in children under 6 years, since safety and efficacy in this age group have not been established."

The JAMA article was not the first critique of Ritalin treatment for the Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD). As early as 1973, the U.S. Congress began holding hearings on the overuse of stimulant drugs in our nation's schools. 25 years ago, there were over 200,000 children using Ritalin and other amphetamines to treat ADHD. Ironically, today in our public schools, which are being promoted as "drug-free zones," many of our students are routinely being given legal mind-altering drugs. Today's current estimates are that in excess of six million children are taking Ritalin on a daily basis. Nearly 90 percent of all Ritalin sales worldwide are in the USA.

In early May 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics urged pediatricians and family doctors to take a more active role in correctly diagnosing attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children, and issued guidelines to help them. "ADHD is the most common neurobehavioral disorder of childhood," the Academy reported in this month's issue of the journal Pediatrics. "ADHD is also among the most prevalent chronic health conditions affecting school-aged children." The Academy also voiced concern about the lack of consistency in diagnosing ADHD as well as the potential for the overuse of

prescription medication.

Although it is clear that psychotropic drugs do help some individuals with ADD, many parents are concerned about using such drugs in younger children as well as side effects over the long haul. Many are seeking effective, non-drug alternatives to treating ADHD. According to WebMD, "Neurofeedback, a technique for learning self-regulation of brain activity, is a new treatment option for individuals with ADHD. The individual learns how to suppress brain activity associated with distraction, while boosting brain activity associated with focused attention.

The way in which drug-free neurofeedback therapy works is illustrated in the true story of Laura, a bright, precocious eleven year-old. She has a house-full of pets, writes wonderful poetry, takes guitar lessons, and her daddy is teaching her to shoot skeet. Laura learns quickly and easily, but last year problems at school became serious. She was not turning in assignments. Often her work was lost or misplaced. "I couldn't concentrate," Laura said. She was so distractible that staying focused long enough for her to finish her homework was an exhausting, frustrating process for both Laura and her mother.

Concern for her daughter's well being led Laura's mother to seek medical help for Laura's problems. Her doctor diagnosed Laura's condition as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and prescribed the drug Ritalin to control the problem.

According to Laura's mother, Ritalin proved to be an unsatisfactory and ineffective treatment, so Laura, her mother and her doctor decided on a course of EEG biofeedback (neurofeedback) as an alternative to the medication. Laura received her neurofeedback at the Austin Biofeedback Center, where her brain was found to produce an excess of slow frequency brain waves accompanied by low levels of fast frequency brain waves - a pattern that is typical of individuals with ADD.

According to Laura, "I was nervous at first, and I thought it felt kind of weird having them clip the things (sensors) on my ears - but it was fun!" Her twice-a-week training sessions began with the placement of delicate wire sensors, with drops of conductive gel, on her scalp and ears. The sensors were attached to an electroencephalograph (EEG) that "read" and interpreted the electrical activity of her brain and then fed this information into a computer. Software in the computer translated the brain activity into pictures and sounds that Laura could

use to train her own brain.

Laura's brain learned to produce the higher levels of fast waves and lower levels of slow waves that are exhibited in a more focused brain. Some of the software even produced video games that Laura learned to play with her own brainwave patterns through the EEG, instead of using a joystick.

According to Jim Robbins' new book *A Symphony in the Brain: The Evolution of the New Brain Wave Biofeedback*, "Using electroencephalograms (EEGs) and computerized biofeedback equipment, neurofeedback clinicians train patients to function in brain frequencies they don't normally use. This exercise strengthens the brain and the rest of the nervous system, which in turn has powerful effects on the entire body. Proponents say the training not only helps treat medical problems from epilepsy to ADD but can also improve everything from golf scores to sleep to opera singers' voices."

Guided by the brainwave training on the computer and with coaching and encouragement from her biofeedback therapist, Laura began to make progress. As her brainwave patterns became more normalized and flexible, her organizational problems at home and at school began to disappear. Now, several months later, Laura reports that she has made straight A's in the last two grading periods with no missing homework. "I've been able to keep my locker clean and my desk clean," Laura smiles.

"Which is a miracle!" her mother interjects.

Even better, according to Laura, "Another problem was that I would have a ton of homework and we never had any time for activities. Now I get a lot of [homework] done in school. I'm a lot happier because it's made things easier for me."

Laura's mom is happy too, "It has really helped all our lives-a lot! It has really made a difference in my life. I don't have to constantly sit down with her and make sure she is doing her homework anymore!"

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