



The whirling dervishes

About 20 years ago, I started to encounter a new phenomenon in my consulting room. A mother would come in with two young children and they would systematically start to destroy the place. One child would try and strangle the other with the tubing of my sphygmomanometer, while the other pulled all the forms off my desk. The mother would be in a state of cosmic annihilation. The whirling dervishes had arrived. Every now and then, the mother would register some sign of resistance, but usually she was in a world beyond contact, worn down into a state of submission.

The phenomenon, now called attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is a complex condition, with many theories as to its cause. Is it nature or nurture? Is it in the genes or caused by the environment? The answer is almost always both, but in different proportions, depending on the individual case. We are our parent's children, raised in unique ways, and we are individual persons living in varying systems and environments. Some of this is partly uncontrollable and some is partly of our own making.

ADHD is a good example of the difficulty encountered by the relevant medical authorities in labelling a diffuse condition. We moved from the label of minimal brain damage in the 1930s to that of minimal brain dysfunction in the 1960s, and then to hyperkinetic reaction of childhood in the late 1960s. It then became attention deficit disorder, before ADHD was finally settled upon. Labels often become self-fulfilling prophecies, and when you move the label from: "He's a naughty boy" to "He suffers from ADHD", you move the cause, stigma, social status and responsibility to another dimension.

When I first entered practice in 1969, I cannot remember seeing cases of attention deficit disorder or ADHD, and now they come in daily and rearrange the furniture.

I think there are several reasons why I did not see, or define, ADHD, 40 years ago. The first was the prevalent adages of the time, which were "spare the rod and spoil the child" and "children should be seen and not heard". These adages are now not politically correct in the Western world in the 21st century. Hyperactive children were usually swatted back into line. When a child was being spanked on the pavement by his mother in the 1950s or 1960s, people passing

by would nod their heads in approval. Now, they would be on their mobile phones calling the child protection services. A few decades ago, children learnt from the whole of their immediate united society to sit still "or else".

At societal level, aberrant behaviour was not tolerated like it is today. The 1950s and 1960s were austere years before the arrival of economic booms. Everyone concentrated on survival and rebuilding a shattered world after World War II, and children, as well as adults, did not have the time or social space for much manoeuvring.

At parental level, parents seemed to be more confident of their roles in the past. These roles had not been subjected to the minute scrutiny, criticism and dissection that now sell modern media. It started with Dr Spock, who told us seductively to be kind and to listen to our children, and continues with Stephen Covey, who asks us to negotiate with them.

Now, in the 21st century, both parents are working to pay for the sports utility vehicle and the children's sports equipment. The noise levels are higher and children are exposed to a zillion hyperactive, noisy, animated cartoons and games on the television and on their laptops, tablets and iPhones[®] through their electronic ear sets. This is all on the nurture side.

On the nature side, ADHD is one of the most inheritable psychiatric disorders (in up to 80% of cases). It was first described in medical terms in 1902 in *The Lancet*, and since then has become a fashionable topic of drawing room conversation. Maternal smoking and alcohol consumption often play a part, as does birth delay or trauma, and a whole host of individual factors in specific cases.

Perhaps it was always there, but it was not recognised, and never let nor allowed out. As the clever saying goes: "Genes load the gun and the environment pulls the trigger".

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