

Psychologist: ADD is abused diagnosis

Thomas Armstrong, a psychologist who wrote "The Myth of the ADD Child" and the best-selling "Seven Kinds of Smart," was in Atlanta recently to address teachers working in the state-funded pre-kindergarten program. He spoke with education reporter Betsy White about his beliefs and their implications for schools, teachers and students.

Armstrong's contention that attention deficit disorder (ADD) is being vastly overdiagnosed and Ritalin overprescribed is a controversial one, he concedes.

"I'm certainly not saying that there are no children out there who are distractable or hyperactive or impulsive. . . . But the question is: What accounts for that? I'm suggesting that 'the ADD myth,' as I call it, is really not the best way of explaining it. It's far too simplistic.



Armstrong

"Children who get labeled ADD in fact represent a very heterogeneous group of kids, who are hyperactive, distractable or impulsive for any number of reasons that may involve complex social, emotional, psychological, educational issues, in addition to whatever neurological issues are talked about. . . .

"My criticism is that this is a model coming from a medical disease-based perspective when we should be using a model that's much more health-based. I'm not against medication for some kids under certain circumstances or in a crisis situation or in a very severe case, but I feel we rush too quickly into medications for solutions. Oftentimes physicians aren't trained to look for alternatives that don't involve drugs.

"The medication may work. But the problem is, when the medication kicks in and the kid starts listening and behaving, people forget about the deeper issues, whether there is conflict in the family, whether there's not enough challenge in the school work. . . . But the medication isn't a cure. It's just a sort of a Band-Aid therapy, and as soon as the psychostimulants wear off after a few hours, the symptoms will come back. . . .

"Some of these kids are, in fact, mighty creative individuals who have a different way of thinking, a more global way of attending, more of a hands-on attitude toward learning. Maybe kids that need to move in order to learn. This is where it connects with multiple intelligences. . . .

"I've been going around the country showing teachers that there are a wide range of ways in which all children learn. Not every kid learns best sitting quietly at a desk with a worksheet. In fact, that's one of the worst ways of learning, and yet it's used all too often. There are kids who need to move to learn, who need to build things, work on projects, go on field trips. If they don't get a chance to move, they can often be very fidgety in their desks.

"What we can witness then are some of the symptoms of ADD. A lot of kids who get labeled ADD I find tend to have interests in the arts. They like to build things, they like dramatics or music. So . . . maybe we should think of these kids as needing more creative outlets before we look at the medication issue. . . .

"The ADD community in my estimation has very little idea of what real learning and development is all about because they're stuck in this disease-based model. . . . One reason for the popularity of ADD diagnosis is that it's kind of neutral. Nobody's to blame. It's not due to anything in the family, nothing to do with the classroom. Everybody is absolved of any responsibility, but the kid ends up with the label, which is a stigmatizing label. It's a psychiatric disorder. We've got 2 million kids with it now.

We have to be very suspicious of the fact that kids are being diagnosed using very subjective or very artificial and remote kinds of approaches. . . .

"I think that ADD for some kids might be better termed ADD or attention-to-dittos deficit disorder. . . . We've gotten too narrow in our teaching, too focused on the old fill-in-the-blank kind of teaching. We need some tools for breaking out of that.

"Good teachers have always used role-playing and dramatics and art activities and imagination-building activities and movies and slides and field trips. These are the things that kids 30 years later think back to. They'll say, 'A teacher I had always used to turn the formulas we were learning into songs, and I'll never forget those formulas because of the songs' or 'I had a teacher who had us learn the Civil War by acting out the different battles and that made a big impression on me.'"