

Family School Liaison Program

Newsletter - February 2012

Girls and ADHD Misunderstood and Misdiagnosed

Mark is a bright sixth grader. He has trouble sitting still in his desk and is always fidgeting with his things, poking his peer in front of him, and constantly interrupts the teacher by shouting out answers. His academics are below average.

What initial thoughts come to mind with that small amount of information about Mark? It would be a common thought that Mark may be experiencing symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), the most highly researched childhood psychiatric disorder. ADHD is defined as a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity that is more frequent and severe than is typical for an individual's age. Symptoms include difficulty paying attention, not listening, not following instructions, forgetfulness, losing things, fidgeting, excessive talking, blurting out and interrupting.

Andrea is also a bright sixth grader. She is introverted and presents as quite shy.

She doesn't speak much in class but seems to work quietly at the back of the class, where she prefers to sit. She is an average student academically. When asked to complete assignments, she works diligently at first, eager to please her teacher, but soon becomes distracted by things around her and loses focus. The unfinished papers get crammed into her messy backpack and aren't found for weeks.

What thoughts come to mind about Andrea? What might be going on for her? Those who interact with Andrea are likely to label her a day dreamer, spacey, disorganized, and maybe even lazy. Because she isn't being disruptive, it is unlikely Andrea would be referred to explore the possibility of ADHD, even though that is possibly the cause of her struggles. Unfortunately if this is what is going on for Andrea, it is not identifiable and as school becomes more demanding, she will slowly decline more and more academically. She will likely drift through school without appropriate supports, resulting in a decreased likelihood of reaching her full potential, become frustrated with herself and experience

other difficulties as time goes on.

Despite the vast amount of research done around ADHD, there continues to be a lack of understanding and research on the differential experience of ADHD for girls than boys. The vast majority of all studies on ADHD have focused on boys and even when we think about ADHD, we mostly think about boys. During childhood and adolescence, up to five times more boys are diagnosed ADHD than girls. However, in adulthood, the ratio is equal. This leads to the question of whether or not ADHD in fact exists more in young boys or is often missed or misdiagnosed in young girls. Recent research has suggested the possibility that upwards of 75% of girls with ADHD do not get the help they need.

This big question that comes up is why? The answer begins with understanding that ADHD shows up differently in girls. They have different symptoms, often times less disruptive symptoms, so they are less likely to cause problems and therefore less likely to be referred for help. Girls have been found to have the predominantly inattentive subtype of ADHD, which is less obvious than the predominantly hyperactive type, more common to boys. Additionally, girls are socialized to please those around them and so put great effort into compensating for their difficulties, making ADHD more difficult to spot. Even when it is spotted, girls with ADHD are treated differently than boys. They are more likely to be deemed as immature or lack academic ability. The outcome of this can be detrimental to young girls, especially as they reach adolescence and the demands placed on them academically increase and things are further complicated by puberty. For this reason, it is essential to have a more clear understanding of



what ADHD looks like for girls.

Clues for Girls:

- 1. Tasingly Talkative** – Boys with ADHD show their restlessness behaviourally, while girls show it verbally. Most girls like to talk. The difference is a girl struggling with ADHD often finds it difficult to understand the social cues around verbal interactions. They may be excessively chatty at inappropriate times, seemingly unable to stop themselves. They also may rudely interrupt often and blurt things seemingly without control.
- 2. Friendship Foes** – Girls are socialized to be cooperative and caring. Girls with ADHD may have a difficult time with the rules of friendships. They may barge into groups, be bossy and interrupt others often. They are slow to pick up on social cues about their interactions. For this reason, girls with ADHD are at much higher risk than boys to suffer social isolation and rejection. It is acceptable for a boy to be hyper or impulsive, but not for girls. This can have a really negative impact on their self esteem.
- 3. Attention Ails** – Attention is difficult for any child with ADHD. A girl may be found fiddling with her pen while instructions are being given and then proclaiming “I don’t get it!” For this reason, she is often mistaken as daydreaming or ditzy, a word seldom used to describe boys.
- 4. Meticulously Messy** – Just like boys with ADHD, girls also struggle with disorganization. Binders, lockers and bedrooms are a huge struggle to keep clean and tidy.
- 5. Fragmented Frenzy** – Girls with ADHD tend to appear shy and studious, especially up until high school, however most assignments are only completed partially, if at all. This extends at home as well, where they have a very difficult time completing tasks, due to distractions. Because they are not disruptive, however, they often don’t stand out as having a behavioural problem, but rather are labelled as lazy.
- 6. Rocky Rollercoaster** – Girls with ADHD tend to appear very emotional

and may be deemed a ‘drama queen’. She can be found to burst into tears or turn into a ball of fury when things are not going her way. This is due to impulsivity, which makes it difficult for her to control her emotions. For boys with ADHD, this impulsivity is displayed through overt aggression or behaviour outbursts. For girls, this issue is exacerbated during puberty due to hormonal fluctuations. Another complicating factor for girls is their constant attempt to compensate for the disorder and please everyone leaves her exhausted, depleted, and vulnerable. This makes emotional regulation immensely difficult or impossible.

Girls with ADHD who do not receive the support and treatment they need are at a higher risk than boys with ADHD of facing a number of issues above and beyond academic struggles. Peer rejection is one particular issue much more common to girls. This is because of the emphasis on verbal control and expression amongst relationships between girls, which is an innate struggle for those experiencing ADHD symptoms. For boys, they relate through shared activities and hyperactivity is more highly valued. Girls are also more apt to internalize things than boys are. Feelings of disappointment, failure and frustrations with their symptoms of ADHD are likely to cause self blame, shame and damaged self esteem. Research has indicated mothers, and society in general, are more critical of the ADHD behaviours of girls than of boys. This criticism also becomes internalized for girls, further damaging their sense of self worth. The results of these internalized negative beliefs of self are an increased incidence of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and at risk behaviours such as substance use and sexual activity. What often happens is these complicating factors get treated instead of addressing the real issue, underlying ADHD. This results in failed treatment efforts and further frustration for both the young girl and her family as symptoms will continue. The ADHD must be treated first which requires an understanding that it is ADHD that is

causing the difficulties.

Despite the possibility of many negative consequences for girls with ADHD who are left misdiagnosed and misunderstood, there is good news. Girls respond equally well to stimulants, the medication used to treat ADHD, as do boys. Additionally, simply understanding what ADHD is and the impact it can have relieves a huge burden and frees the young girl from the damaging labels of spacey, careless, unmotivated, stupid, lazy, and ditzy. Once the young girl and her family understand she simply has ADHD, strategies can be put in place to make life easier and her future brighter. This all starts with an increased understanding and a willingness to broaden our understanding of the experience of girls with ADHD.

It is important to note that a female presenting with any of these symptoms does not necessarily mean she has ADHD. There could be a number of reasons for certain behaviours and any concerns should be explored with your family doctor. If you have any questions, please contact the FSLC at your child’s school.

Resources:

ADD Resources – <http://www.addresources.org/>
Help 4 ADHD – <http://www.help4adhd.org/>
ADHD in Kids – Healthy Children.org – <http://www.chadd.org>

References :

ADHD in Girls – Symptoms of ADHD in Girls; Keath Low (<http://add.about.com/od/childrenandteens>)
ADHD/ADD in Girls; David Rabiner, Ph.D (<http://www.helpforadd.com/add-in-girls/>)
Girls with ADHD – Overlooked, Underdiagnosed and Underserved; Anita Gurian, Ph.D (http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/girls_adhd_overlooked_underdiagnosed_underserved)
Understanding girls with ADHD-Improving the identification of girls with ADHD; Patricia Quinn, Kathleen Nadeau (<http://www.ncgiadd.org/>)