

TV and ADD
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The six year old dumps out the Tinkertoys and stares at them. He doesn't have the slightest idea what to do with them. For Christmas, a seven year old girl is given Lincoln Logs. She is mildly curious at first. She briefly tries putting them together and then quits. "It's too hard." In an unfocused way, she wanders into the bedroom, turns on the TV and watches a Disney video.

Out on the front line, our schools literally reel as across America, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of kids are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). It is a diagnosis that has reached epidemic proportions. All across the land, parents seek answers to help them understand their learning disabled or ADD children.

What is this epidemic of ADD? How is it defined? Briefly, the children's thinking easily fragments. It is hard for them to focus and carry through a task. Their attention wanders. Often the children are impulsive and have behavior problems. It does not seem to be a problem born of poor parenting, for high achieving, loving and responsive parents have children who are part of the epidemic. There is a good indication that aspects of ADD are genetic. The father or mother may have had similar problems when they were younger. But genetic disorders are never epidemic in nature.

First, it is important to see how the definition of ADD has changed with time. Twenty-five years ago, ADD was seen as a true disorder of *attention*. That is, it was noted that children's attention fragmented easily and they could not pay attention to television shows. This is no longer true. ADD children can pay attention to TV and *are able* to play video games. As a matter of fact, far from not being able to attend television, the playing of video games or watching TV is often used in the primary grades as a reinforcer or reward for behaviorally disturbed and learning disturbed children. Video tapes are used as a teaching tool across the primary and elementary grade spectrum with increasing frequency.

ADD could more correctly be labeled an *intention* disorder. That is, the children fragment when they should be *intending* to do something - to accomplish a goal, start or complete a project. In my experience as a child psychiatrist, it appears the majority of children labeled ADD have no problem at all if they are being entertained, playing a video game, or watching TV. The entire problem seems to revolve around *getting the job done*, whether the job is putting Tinkertoys together, building with Lincoln Logs, focusing on a monopoly game, or completing a school assignment.

Critical Periods

It is essential to briefly explore the "critical period" theory. This theory of development holds that there is an optimal time for particular types of learning. It holds that if the environment does not give the essential stimulation at the critical period, the optimal time for learning that concept or method of thinking is irreversibly lost. The theory holds, for instance, that language development should best take place in the second and third years of life. It is not that some people cannot learn a completely foreign language at a later time, but that it is much more difficult at a later time. The longer the environment "deprives" the individual of the critical input, the more difficult it will be to learn the concept or skill later.

To understand the "critical period" theory in relation to the ADD epidemic, the neurologic development of the third and fourth years must be examined. Eric Erickson noted the task of the three to five year old was *Initiative and Industry*. (Does this sound like a description of today's preschooler, kindergartner or even first grade child? It does not!) It is very rare to find small children today that stick with any task,

invested in mastery of *doing something*. Rarely, rarely today will one see a three to five year old working at mastering a task for more than a few minutes. Gone are the days of cutting figures from the Sears and Roebuck catalog and dressing them with tabbed clothes. Gone are the days of having a “market” in the corner of the play room with cans opened from the bottom so the child could sell food to his or her parents. Gone are the days when a toddler would be given a role of masking tape and be encouraged to completely cover a kitchen chair. Gone are most of the Tinkertoys, erector sets, and Lincoln Logs. Gone are the days when a child would be given a cloth and be told to sew on dozens of buttons in the pattern of her choice. Gone too, are the days of helping on household and farm tasks - gathering eggs, milking and quilting. Gone are the days of focus on memorizing, at an early age, psalms, stories and songs.

At an essential time of brain developmental readiness for task mastery, today's three and four year olds, the children who Erickson characterized as being at the stage of initiative and industry, are watching television and enjoying video tapes.

And therein lies the basic problem. In fact, most of the items for younger children in Toys-R-Us reflect an emphasis on sensory input, and rudimentary motor skills, but rarely encourage creativity, task focus, job completion and mastery. Even if they are offered for sale, Tinkertoys, Legos, Lincoln Logs, and alphabet blocks are not the big sellers. What sells big are the video films and video games: Game Boy, Nintendo, the Little Mermaid and Aladdin. Those are the items that make millions. And of course children are exposed to more children's movies than ever before. When parents “do” something with small children now, it rarely involves really “doing” anything. The parents watch TV with the children, enjoy the televised game together, go to the movies or may, more rarely, go to the zoo. John Rosemond, M.D., a pediatrician, notes the things a child is not doing when watching TV: scanning, practicing motor skills, practicing eye-hand coordination, using more than two senses, asking questions, exploring, exercising initiative or motivation, being challenged, solving problems, thinking analytically, exercising imagination, practicing communication skills, being either creative or constructive.

But it is more than that! Today's parents, who themselves grew up in front of the TV, do not know how to do things with their children. Even if they know of the importance of helping small children with focus and task completion, they, themselves, don't know how to make a kite or tin-can telephone. They don't know how to cover chairs with masking tape, they don't know about the corner grocery where the child sells cans of food opened from the bottom. They don't know about sewing on buttons with their child or making paper dolls. But most importantly, they know nothing of the developmental necessity of doing something with their preschool aged child. They, themselves, grew up with Big Bird and Sesame Street. And now they go to movies and watch TV as a family. And when their three and four year old child gets bored, they, as good parents, have a library of “good” videos - “Disney” videos for the child to watch.

Indeed, most “involved” parents today, encouraged by the popular parenting advice are concerned with what their child watches. Parents worry about sex and violence on TV. Most are more concerned with quality than quantity.

A grandfather recently spoke to me after a lecture: “What you say about TV and a lack of internal focus is absolutely true. I have two wonderful granddaughters, one six and one four. They are active, bright kids. But you know, I noticed, even before hearing you, that after they have watched a morning of video tapes, they come out of the room, sort of floating, spacey, really. They wander aimlessly for awhile. They have a “lost” air about them, and then they come up to me, and they say, “What can I do?” I told their mother that it takes them about one hour to recover from two video tapes. And generally these aren't spacey kids! They don't watch that much TV. But think of the poor little kids that watch it day after day!”

Real education is dialog!!! Real education involves a feeling of *mastery*, ability to *respond* to situations, to *articulate* ideas, and respond thoughtfully. Whether we talk about *leadership*, *creativity*, *responsibility*,

or motivation, we are describing action. Television encourages passive responses. Certainly it encourages absorption, and arguably understanding, but it does not, and cannot, by its very nature, encourage *doing, mastery, task completion, creativity, independent thinking* - all those things associated with being a functioning and productively busy human being. Schools must, by their nature, focus on doing and task completion.

Recently, a businessman and his wife, fed up with the amount of time their elementary age children sat in front of the TV, bet the children \$200 apiece that they could not go one year without watching TV in the home. The kids took the parents up on the bet and they won. To the parents amazement, the children asked the parents not to return the TV to the home. The kids had found, over the year, that it was just too much fun to be *doing things* with their parents and in a self-motivated way. They realized after a year that they had been missing out on something important.

Taking the “critical periods” theory into account, we cannot say that all children who don't learn to focus, concentrate, and master a task during the third and fourth years are doomed to never learn it. However, I believe strongly that most such children grow under a definite handicap, and it is much more difficult to learn to focus, create, and achieve a sense of mastery later.