

Are We Medicating What it Means to be a Child?

Written by Danielle Miller, M.S.W.

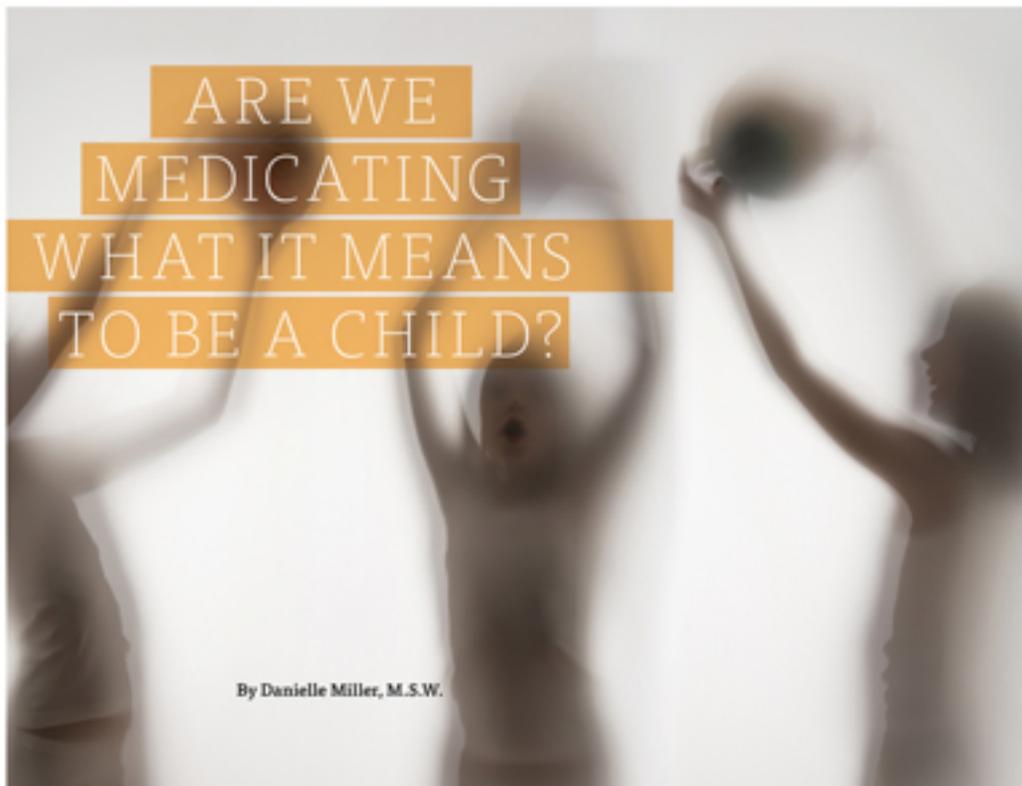
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The labels are becoming all too familiar to modern families: ADHD, ADD, OCD, ODD, and bipolar disorder, to name a few.

Twelve percent of U.S. children and teens carried a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in 2011, a figure that rose 43 percent since 2003. Of those, 69 percent were medicated, and only half the children were engaged in counselling or psychotherapy.

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TOUCHING THE FUTURE



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Not only will our children's lives be cut artificially short, they will also be the saddest generation to ever live. The studies are in, and it doesn't look good. Anxiety and depression increased in American teens by 30 percent between 2009 and 2014. The American Psychological Association states, "Major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability in the United States for people aged 15-44 years." We're not alone, according to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability globally.

Statistics like these are overwhelming for any parent. We must ask: Are these diagnoses accurate? And if they are, why is our children's mental health rapidly declining, and what can we do about it?

Second Opinions and Alternative Treatments

As a former child and family therapist, I remember the outrage I felt as I read the charts of children who were diagnosed without reason. Many kids carried multiple labels. Once applied, these were difficult to remove, no matter how inappropriate.

I often wondered how quickly these children had been diagnosed. Professor Philip Mitchell, head of the School of Psychiatry at University of New South Wales in Australia, reports that many general practitioners can only spend 10 to 15 minutes with each patient. This makes it more practicable to write a prescription than to delve deeper and get to the heart of a patient's issues.

If doctors took the time to sincerely talk to a child, they would realize they were, in fact, diagnosing the child's living conditions. Take away stress, remove the fractured family structure, eliminate poor diet, and stamp out abuse, and in most cases, one could dismiss the diagnosis. Many doctors are categorically medicating a child's life circumstances, not the child.

As parents we all strive to make the best decisions we can for our children. Many of us believe we can trust doctors without question. We need to recognize we have a choice. Our opinions matter. Our children need us to protect them and we're entitled to ask questions and advocate on behalf of our children's health.

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Our Kids Are Not Broken

The misguided habit of viewing children and teens who are struggling with the unreasonable demands of modern life as broken in some way leaves us susceptible to influence. It may sound extreme, but easy targets make easy prey.

Unknowingly, we're encouraged to detach from normal feelings and view them through the lens of disease. Yet, to feel is healthy. To experience emotion is human. And to struggle is to grow. Part of growing into a well-adjusted adult is the ability to navigate a spectrum of emotions throughout life.

We cannot mute the negative without diminishing the positive.

Sadly, the days of expressing thoughts and feelings without boundaries or guidelines are long gone. Normal behavior, such as a reluctance in young children to concentrate on their homework or sit still for long periods, is marketed by pharmaceutical companies as a potential symptom of ADHD. This leads parents of healthy children to ask their doctors about whether their kids need treatment for their "problems." Many people believe this has propelled the exponential rise in ADHD (mis)diagnosis.

Our western culture has pathologized the very essence of the human condition. If you have a symptom, America has the pill. Sometimes a diagnosis is easier than addressing change.

We are no longer given permission to experience a passing mood without being forced to question if we may be ill.

Masking pain with drugs, alcohol, and maladaptive behaviors has long existed in the most

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vulnerable. We all struggle with varying levels of tolerance toward our own pain. But what happens when the very infrastructure designed to support us instead contributes to our illness? Is it possible we are ushering our children into diagnoses as a hurried means to an end?

The Answer Is Not Always Medicine

If we can acknowledge that the answers to our struggles are not always medicinal, we open our minds and give ourselves the freedom to invite true healing into our lives.

Embracing a community of support, reaching out to loved ones, nourishing our minds and bodies with real food, and feeling the sun on our skin while keeping our bodies in motion can offer a restorative, side-effect-free path toward wellness—far more powerful, in many cases, than medication.

I became a therapist because I'm an optimist who believes in the innate wisdom of the human spirit. I believe people can change for the better. And as a parent of three young children, I want the healthcare system to do more. To be better.

Doctors have a duty of care to read and act on the same reports I do about the success of exercise versus antidepressants on mental health. Multiple studies acknowledge proper nutrition and social support in combating mental illness. So why is no one prescribing exercise and improved nutrition in mental healthcare? Who benefits if much of our population is medicated?

We write articles and pontificate on issues of cyberbullying and social isolation. We discuss over stimulation from a steady stream of information that pummels our children at all hours, leaving them stressed-out and on high alert. And with suicide being the second-biggest killer of our teens, we have no choice but to dig deeper and begin addressing why our children are suffering in the first place.

If we view emotion only through a lens of disease, we will find disease. Yet, if we view emotion as an integral and necessary piece of the human puzzle, we will learn to accept and grow rather than diagnose and medicate. As parents, we'll understand our immense responsibility to teach

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young children how to regulate emotions they are physically incapable of coping with alone.

Healing Our Children Holistically

Of course, one cause does not lead to mental illness; rather, it is an accumulation of factors. Just as one pill cannot erase disease, one source cannot be at the root of mental fragmentation. We need to view our children as whole people. We need to work to heal their immature brains holistically.

We need to simplify our children's lives: increase family dinners, reduce scheduled activities, decrease time spent with technology. Openly discuss our feelings with our children. Accept and work through all emotions in our homes without judgment. Exercise regularly, and nourish our children's bodies with food from the earth. The magic is found in simply and fully being human.

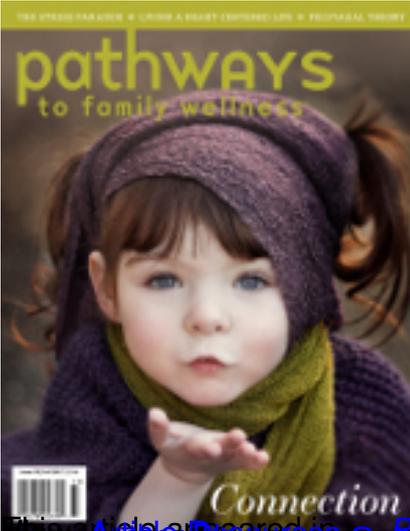
Broadening symptoms and stretching diagnoses until they fit every possible human experience does not mean we are providing best practices in terms of healthcare.

Turning childhood difficulties into disorders takes away from those who truly need the medical community. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to our children, to connect and feel. We can no longer afford to medicate what it means to be a child.

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