

Is ADHD Really a Gift?



“What if Einstein Had Taken Ritalin,” a Wall Street Journal article for which Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D., was interviewed was the most e-mailed article for the week of January 31,

Psychologist Lara Honos-Webb says it is. Why? Because children with it tend to be exceptionally creative, intuitive, and imaginative. The problem is that our medical and educational systems allow the difficult ADHD traits like short attention span and inability to memorize facts and figures to eclipse the positive ones...and parents often follow suit leaving their children without an advocate to fight for their best interests.

In her new book, *The Gift of ADHD: How to Transform Your Child's Problems into Strengths* (March 05, New Harbinger Publications) Honos-Webb shows parents how to maximize their children's unique gifts and how to use them to correct the behavioral problems that typify ADHD. As importantly, she offers a fresh perspective on ADHD that de-stigmatizes and demystifies it for parents. Here's just some of what she has to say:

- Telling exuberant children they have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is like telling women they have a penis-deficit/hypermammary disorder. Differences do not mean disorders.
- In 1900 Freud discovered that cocaine was an effective cure for depression. Similarly, Ritalin and other medications work for children with ADHD—but at what cost? There is currently no science that tells

us what the long-term effects are.

- The truism “differences are the spice of life” often does not hold so true for psychiatrists and psychologists. For them differences are disorders and many are truly unable to differentiate between a child who is different and one who is sick.
- ADHD appears to be an American phenomenon. For every two hundred and fifty children diagnosed and treated for ADHD, only one child would similarly have been diagnosed and treated in all of Germany, England, France, and Italy combined.
- It's a lot easier—and cheaper—to diagnose a kid with ADHD and put him on Ritalin, than it is to create an environment that nurtures his unique gifts.
- If ADHD is really a gift, not only are we hurting these kids by calling them disordered, we're depriving the world of their much needed gifts of creativity, exuberance, and intuition.

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The Gift of ADHD: How to Transform Your Child's Problems into Strengths
by Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D., ISBN: 1-57224-389-9, \$14.95,
Published in March 2005, by New Harbinger Publications,
800-748-6273, www.newharbinger.com

5 New Things You'll Learn about ADHD in *The Gift of ADHD*

- 1. The diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder has very low reliability.** This means that experts often cannot agree on who does or does not have ADHD.
- 2. The diagnosis of ADHD can negatively impact a child's academic performance.** The main problem with the ADHD diagnosis is that children internalize the belief that they have a deficit and a disorder. They often come to think of themselves as fundamentally flawed and this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy. Lots of research has shown that in the classroom, kids live up to their teachers and parents expectations. We know that 50-75 percent of academic success is dependent on factors such as persistence and motivation. When we lead children to believe that they lack the internal resources for success we encourage the "why try?" attitude that undermines academic performance.
- 3. ADHD symptoms in children are relieved after spending time in nature.** A recent study found that kids with ADHD were more able to concentrate, complete tasks, and follow direction after spending playtime in natural, especially green, settings. The authors suggest that these findings cannot be attributed to simply being active because they did not see similar results when the subjects played basketball on a paved court.
- 4. Other conditions can mimic the symptoms of ADHD and this can result in misdiagnosis.** Problems such as anxiety, depression, and family stressors can cause behavior that looks a lot like ADHD. If these factors aren't ruled out first it may lead to an incorrect diagnosis of ADHD.
- 5. If every day were a field trip kids with ADHD would be considered geniuses.** That's because they are immensely curious and interested, but learn best by actively engaging with what they're learning.

Q & A with Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D.

1. You say that telling exuberant children they have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is like telling women they have penis-deficit/hypermammary disorder. Explain that.

To say a woman has a penis-deficit/hypermammary disorder would be offensive because it would be a clear example of taking differences and turning those differences into a disorder. Similarly, children with ADHD really are different from other children. I don't say in my book that ADHD is not real or that children so diagnosed do not need appropriate, individualized attention in school settings. I say that these children *are* different from other kids in predictable ways. I also say that those differences can even be seen as gifts. Just as women's anatomical differences allow them to birth and feed babies, which is a gift which men don't have, so too do children with ADHD have capacities that other children don't. These gifts should be appreciated and developed.

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2. You point out that for every 250 children diagnosed and treated for ADHD in the US, only one child would similarly have been diagnosed and treated in all of Germany, England, France, and Italy combined. Why do you think there's such a disparity in rates of diagnosis?

One of the theories that seems most relevant to me is that the US is dominated by pharmaceutical marketing. So big business drives the push toward medication and diagnosis. I can't open a magazine these days without seeing a few advertisements for ADHD medications. The tag lines often say things like, "Does your child hate to do his homework?" While most children would rather do other things than homework, the marketing would have a parent believe that such normal behavior indicates a need for medication.

Also, there's the competitive, hyper-parenting trend in the US. Parents with the best intentions, who want to give their children every opportunity have bought into the biomedical model, which says that personality and performance should be shaped by medical interventions. In short, if the technology is there, why not use it? If other kids are using medications to their advantage aren't your children being deprived if you don't pursue an assessment of his or her need for such medications? This sort of thinking has led parents to unquestioningly buy into the medical model.

Finally, there seems to be an emphasis in our culture on conformity and compliance. Our educational system has not caught up with the digital age and we still place the highest value on conformity, control, and compliance and these traits really are enhanced through the use of medications. There seems to be less tolerance for the gifts of ADHD in the US, such as creativity, exuberance, and intense sensitivity. Other cultures may have a wider spectrum of gifts that they value.

3. Tell us a little bit about what you think are the benefits and drawbacks of Ritalin, the most commonly prescribed ADHD medication.

The research is clear: Ritalin works. This means it reduces symptoms. In this way, it can help children get through developmental milestones, so they do not fall too far behind. The problems with Ritalin are that if ADHD is really a gift, as I suggest, than getting rid of symptoms means you are enhancing the child's conformity and control at the expense of their other gifts, which do often come off as irreverence. You are depriving the child and the society of their important gifts.

More inimical are the negative side effects of Ritalin and the fact that there are no research studies that explore the consequences of long-term use. Many anecdotal accounts suggest that Ritalin can stunt physical and emotional growth and lead to increased drug and alcohol abuse. Methylphenidate (Ritalin) is classified as a schedule II drug by the Drug Enforcement Agency along with cocaine and morphine, which means that these drugs are highly addictive. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* was titled, "Pay Attention: Ritalin Acts Much Like Cocaine." The study found that in some biological mechanisms, Ritalin is as potent as cocaine. The author said that the findings demonstrated that the idea that Ritalin is a weak stimulant is completely incorrect.

4. A chapter of *The Gift of ADHD* is dedicated to ecological consciousness. What does this have to do with ADHD?

Children with ADHD have a strong intuitive connection to nature and organic life, more so than abstract "book learning." The image of a child with ADHD staring out the window in a classroom can show that

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he is paying deep attention—but to the natural world outside of the classroom that he can glimpse from the window. Even solid, empirical research has shown that children with ADHD show improvements in symptoms after play in green nature. This isn't just because they're getting exercise, the effects are not shown for example if they play on a concrete basketball court.

This is a tremendous gift to the world and it may be children with ADHD who go on to have careers in conserving the environment, keeping the water clean, or as marine biologists. In their connection to the natural world, they may represent a much-needed force in the world to protect the environment, which has been destroyed by seeing the natural world as expendable

5. You say it's important for parents to be advocates, rather than apologists for their children. Can you tell us why you think parents of kids with ADHD often become the latter and how they can become the former?

Parents often apologize for their children because they are intimidated by the authority of teachers and doctors. They think these people must really be experts so they know what they are talking about. In my book, I am careful to point out that many teachers and doctors really are experts and do care for your child but that they are working from the medical model, which equates differences with disorders. So their pronouncements about your child's deficits and disorders are wrong in that while knowledgeable, these folks have not shifted their vision to allow that your child's difference might indicate a gift.

Parents can become advocates for their children, by respectfully sharing their own perceptions of their child's gifts with teachers and mental health care providers. Parents need to advocate for supportive interventions in place of demeaning or punishing interventions. Parents can help teachers and doctors reframe the very same symptoms as gifts.

About Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D.

Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Counseling Psychology Program at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, CA. She has published more than 25 scholarly articles and written numerous book chapters. Dr. Honos-Webb has been quoted in national and local print media, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Chicago Parent*. She has also been interviewed on national radio and local television. Visit her at: www.visionarysoul.com.



Suggested Interview Questions for Lara Honos-Webb

1. What are the 5 gifts of ADHD?
2. Why do you think there's been such a sharp rise in the number of children diagnosed with ADHD?
3. Parents whose children are not achieving academically often fear that this will condemn them to a future of limited career and financial possibilities. What do you say to a parent of a child with ADHD who has these anxieties?

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4. To a large extent your book is about “reframing,” i.e., changing the way in which we view common ADHD traits like short attention span and frenetic energy. Tell us what you mean by this and how you would reframe those two characteristics.
5. I can just here someone saying that this is really a Pollyanish way to look at ADHD. That, really, if you’ve got a child with ADHD you’ve got a child with a serious problem that’s going to limit him or her throughout life, not to mention take a real toll on the family’s stability. What do you say to this?
6. You talk about the problems that can arise simply by labeling a child with “ADHD.” What are some of these and how should a parent address them?
7. Children with ADHD are often chided for daydreaming, yet you say this can be a source of inspiration. Can you talk a little more about that?
8. Emotional outbursts are a real problem for kids with ADHD and their parents. How do you suggest parents cope with them?
9. Short attention span is hallmark symptom of ADHD and one that can really cause problems academically and at home. How can a parent or teacher lengthen the attention span of a child with ADHD?
10. Let’s imagine you’ve just been given a huge grant to set up what you think would be the ideal learning environment for kids with ADHD. What does it look like?

Raves for *The Gift of ADHD*

“Insightful, practical, and transformational. Honos-Webb has written a great book.”

—**Thom Hartmann**, author of *Attention Deficit Disorder, Healing ADD, and The Edison Gene*

“Honos-Webb grabbed my scattered attention quickly and held it with this enlightening book. (I) learned a lot. You will too...”

—**Thomas Greening**, professor of psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*

“If you can change and do what this wonderful book invites you to, then you can give the most precious gift to your child—transforming your child’s “problem” into a strength.”

—**Alvin R. Mahrer, Ph.D.**, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Ottawa, Canada

“Honos-Webb’s book is a healing gift to children with ADHD, Taken to heart, her message could transform the lives of these children, their families, and even the educational system...”

—**Lane Ayre, Ph.D.**, author of *Unintentional Music: Releasing Your Deepest Creativity*

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