

Medication Pros and Cons

The challenges associated with raising a child or adolescent who struggles with mental or behavioral health concerns are numerous. Parents and caregivers constantly face decisions that seem far beyond their ability to answer. How do you know if your child's behavior is a result of a mental health condition or is just an extreme form of "normal" childhood behavior? How do you respond to teachers (or neighbors, or family members) who expect you to be able to "manage" your child? And among the most difficult decisions a parent is expected to make – should you put your child on medication, and if so, which one?

There is significant controversy surrounding the use of medications for children's mental or behavioral health challenges (known as "psychotropic" medications). A caregiver may go to the Internet seeking information and find hundreds of arguments for the use of such medications with children, along with dire warnings against such use. To make the problem even more challenging, much of what is written that appears credible uses terminology that is impossible to understand for those of us that do not have a medical degree. This makes it very difficult for caregivers to make informed decisions that will best benefit their child.

There are certain facts that parents (and adolescents beginning to manage their own health care) should know. First, medication alone does not cure mental health problems. What medication can do is manage symptoms that impede a person's ability to function at their full potential (such as sleeplessness or extreme agitation). As such, medication can offer supports that will help an individual successfully engage in treatment and increase their internal functional capacity.

Secondly, there are concerns at the national level related to over-medicating children or to placing children on medications that have not been adequately tested and shown to be safe and effective with children. This is particularly true for children in the foster care or child welfare system. A recent study in Ohio found that "nearly a quarter of foster care and disabled children in the Ohio Medicaid program were prescribed three or more psychiatric medications. Nearly one-fifth of them were prescribed medications from three or more drug classes." The author goes on to note that this trend has "occurred despite lack of data on safety and efficacy of multiple drug combination and existing concerns about adverse effects of drug-drug interactions." (Miller, 2014, <http://www.clinicalpsychiatrynews.com/single-article/ohio-medicaid-data-document-rising-polypharmacy-in-foster-children/0f8cb74610db08851cf0cce48286d017.html>).

In spite of those concerns, there is evidence that many children and youth benefit from medication and are much better able to succeed in school, in social settings and with their families when they are prescribed appropriate medication. Advances in our understanding of brain chemistry and neurodevelopment have aided doctors and researchers in their ability to develop, test, and prescribe effective medications. Most parents would not deny their child insulin if they suffered from diabetes, so it makes sense that parents would want to work with doctors to find appropriate medications for children who struggle with disorders that emanate from their brains.

Psychotropic medications affect brain chemicals related to mood and behavior. Families and doctors should always weigh the benefits and risks of medication. It is important to understand and be involved in this decision. Fortunately, there are places where parents and older youth can find information in laymen's terms that will help them when faced with decisions regarding psychotropic medications. The Ohio Minds Matter project is a statewide initiative aimed at reducing inappropriate medicating of children while also educating caregivers and youth in how to be an informed consumer and fully participating partner when working with doctors to make decisions about medications. The Ohio Minds Matter website (<http://www.ohiomindsmatter.org/index.html>) has easily accessible information for caregivers and youth about mental health conditions that affect children. There is also information about medications that are typically prescribed to children, including what those medications can do and any potential side effects. This website helps parents know what their rights are with regard to their child's challenges, what questions to ask their doctors, and how to partner successfully with medical professionals to find the right treatment approach for their child.

Parents are wise to be cautious about medicating children without understanding the pros and cons. Arm yourselves with the knowledge you need to ask the right questions. In that way you can be a truly informed partner in managing your child's mental health.