What is this AD/HD thing anyway?

For young people with AD/HD, their parents and teachers, simply understanding the basic aspects of AD/HD can be the difference between confusion and control.

Imagine this: A kid is on a bicycle speeding downhill. The world is whizzing by. She needs to avoid holes in the pavement. The road is curving. The wind buzzes in her ears, and makes her eyes tear. Suddenly, there are rocks in the road. She tries to put on the brakes—but they don't work! As the bike speeds downhill, just staying on it seems overwhelming. Too many obstacles call for the rider's attention. So much seems out of control. Who has time to pay attention to the huge truck coming up?

That's the daily challenge facing many with AD/HD. It all comes from difficulty with "putting on the brakes," to build upon the title of a wonderful book by Patricia Quinn, M.D. and Judith Stern, M.A.

Here's what's happening. Your brain's "boss" is located just behind your forehead. These frontal lobes figure out where you want to go and the individual steps of how to get there. Like any boss, a large part of their job is saying "no." For example, your parents are supposed to be the boss in your house. Think how often their job is to say "no." They're always saying things like, "Susan, do not have a fifth scoop of ice-cream," or "Bob, stop playing Nintendo so that you can do your homework," or "Jill, don't stay out past 10 p.m." Unless something/someone puts brakes on our actions, we would spin out of control.

Well, at least that's how it is supposed to work. In children with AD/HD, the front part of their brains—the boss—doesn't do a good job of putting on the brakes. This means that these children may:

- Have trouble putting brakes on distractions. Their minds are pulled off the main topic by any competing action. This leads to the "attention-deficit" of AD/HD.
- Have trouble sitting still rather than checking out those distractions. This leads to the "hyperactivity" aspect of AD/HD.



Just like the speeding bicyclist, children with AD/HD are often stuck in the present moment. The future comes as a surprise.

Have trouble putting brakes on any thought that comes into their minds, frustrations and over-reactions. This leads to "impulsivity."

No wonder things go out of control so often!

Why Don't I See Problems Coming?

Let's imagine another scene: Jack is on a boat, happily fishing. Reeling in the jiggling fish while still steering the boat captures all of his attention.

Jack is so consumed by the experience of the moment (catching the fish) that he can't look ahead to see the upcoming waterfall. It's not that he doesn't care about the cliff. After all, he doesn't want to fall off a cliff any more than anyone else. It's that he never gets the chance to see it. Just like the speeding bicyclist, children with AD/HD are often stuck in the

present moment. The future comes as a surprise. This is called a lack of "foresight." So, people with AD/HD:

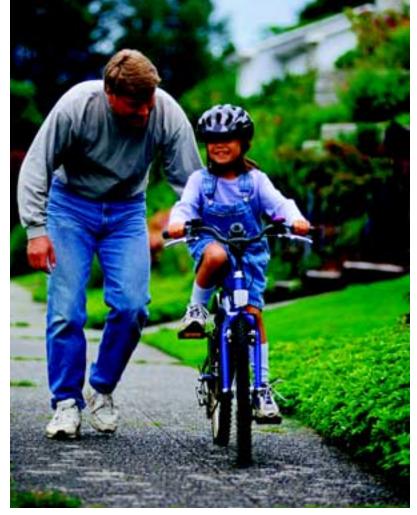
- Have trouble stopping long enough to consider what is best for *themselves* in the future. This often gets misinterpreted as not caring.
- Have trouble stopping long enough to consider what is best for *other people*. This often gets misinterpreted as being selfish or mean.

What Other Problems are Common for Children with AD/HD?

Your teachers, parents and friends may notice many other problems, but may not recognize them as just being part of your AD/HD. This includes:

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A parent's foresight is typically much better than that of the child with AD/HD.

might do the homework and then forget to hand it in!

- Finding that other people seem to take forever to eat, shop or get to the point! Time seems to move so slowly in these settings.
- Having trouble with arguing, blaming others or even lying.
- Sometimes having "blow ups" over unimportant things.
- Yelling at people who are trying to help you.
- Having trouble noticing how other people are reacting to you. After all, who's got time for that?
- Having a sense of always being nervous or worried.
- Having trouble with handwriting, or sometimes with other school subjects.

What Can We Do About It?

Hundreds of books have been written about treating individuals with AD/HD. Here's some of the best

■ **Just STOP.** Remember, the problem in AD/HD is difficulty with putting on the brakes. First, we need to keep an eye out for the warning signs that our brakes aren't working and that we are spinning out of control. The warning signs include getting angry, sensing

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that we are becoming overwhelmed, raising our voice, and tightening our hands. When we first notice these warning signs of getting "over-heated," we then need to try extra hard to STOP. Work out a code word or phrase, such as "I need a ten-minute time-out" with your parents or teachers. Go someplace quiet, such as your room. Don't worry about getting in the last words in the discussion. (You'll get a chance later.) Do something calm like reading a book or sorting cards. Once you are calm, come back for a useful discussion of the problem. Your parents should do the same thing. Sometimes you may not notice—or may not *want* to notice—the warning signs. Then please, please, please listen to your parents when they ask you to STOP and take a ten-minute break.

- Make decisions when you are calm. You'll be surprised how much easier it is to reach a good decision when you and your parents are calm. People cannot think clearly when they are over-excited. Returning to our bicycle example: wait until the bicycle coasts to a stop. Then, look around and calmly consider your options.
- **Realize that your parents and teachers are usually good at preparing for the future.** In the bicycle story, your parents can be thought of as standing on the sidewalk, watching you speed downhill. Since they are not overwhelmed just trying to stay on the bike, they have no trouble looking ahead to see the truck coming. They're screaming, "Watch out for the truck!" or "Watch out for that cliff," or "Watch out for that book report due in two weeks." A parent's foresight is typically much better than that of the child with AD/HD. Please listen to them. If nothing else, it's probably fair to say that your parents usually *try* to act in your best interest.
- Children with AD/HD typically need help with organization. Take it. When you get older, you can hire a secretary to help you. But right now, you probably can't afford your own secretary. Do you know anyone at home that you can trust who is willing to help you for free? Teachers at school may be willing to help with organizational skills too. Remember, it is not fair to yell at someone who is trying to help you!
- lants." These medications stimulate your frontal lobes, making them perform better. Let's return to the bicycle story. Medications work by stimulating the "stopping power" of your brakes. You find yourself in less trouble because you now have a high performance bike, which is complete with a braking system. It does not work by making you too tired to move around.

What is This AD/HD Thing Anyway?

Read more about AD/HD.

- See www.PediatricNeurology.com/AD/HD.htm for good advice for advanced readers and parents.
- Younger children can read *Putting on the Brakes* by Patricia Quinn, M.D., and Judith Stern, M.A.
- Teenagers can read Adolescents and ADD: Gaining the Advantage by Patricia Quinn, M.D.
- High school and college students can read *ADD* and the College *Student* by Patricia Quinn, M.D.
- Social skills—such as how to make conversations and keep friends—can be improved with the very funny book, *How Rude: The Teenager's Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and Not Grossing People Out* by Alex J. Packer, Ph.D.
- Encourage your parents to read about AD/HD. They could start with *Taking Charge of ADHD* by Russell Barkley, Ph.D.
- Keep a good attitude about yourself. Remember that children with AD/HD also have many great traits. They know how to have fun and enjoy the present moment. They are often quite smart, very creative and have a "why not try it?" attitude that is the envy of many people. Always keep in mind all that is wonderful about you.

Good luck! ■

Martin L. Kutscher, M.D., is assistant clinical professor of Pediatrics and Neurology at New York Medical College, Valhalla, NY.