

ADD/ADHD and Natural Learning Rhythms

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Many of you have asked about the Natural Learning Rhythms (NLR) approach to Attention Deficit Disorder in children (ADD and ADHD). Almost everyone approaches ADD/ADHD as a disease that must be medicated. NLR begins its inquiry much more slowly. In order to understand disease we must also understand well-being. NLR is a profound understanding of well-being in the child. Based on decades of research in human development and its many associated fields, NLR describes the consciousness of children—their innate capacities and motivations. When we understand the consciousness of children we most assuredly have a picture of what well-being means to them. This allows tremendous leverage when interacting with any of the children's behavior.

ADD/ADHD is no exception. Natural Learning Rhythms sees ADD/ADHD as a constellation of behaviors pointing to something much more fundamental in the child. It might be physical, emotional or psychological or a combination of any of the three. ADD/ADHD certainly cannot be well understood if approached only as a behavior. As NLR is concerned primarily with the child's psyche, we turn to the deeper psychological needs of the child. We will describe the dynamics in a moment. This approach is consistent with the disciplines of Developmental, Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology. Children have deep, basic psychological needs. When these are satisfied, children are healthy. They are able to learn well, and able to offer valuable contributions to the people around them. They are able to love and to accept love.

NLR offers a breathtaking panoramic view of the need, and the well-being of children. It shows that these needs form the basis of the developmental stages of childhood. Based on twenty-five years of fieldwork, NLR can, and does, describe the unifying principles that make the needs so very important.

This is crucial to a cohesive response to children, especially when something as dramatic as ADD/ADHD appears. If we do not understand the needs of the child, and we do not understand why it is important for those needs to be satisfied, then we end treating the symptom only. This is why there are so many negative side

effects to medicating ADD/ADHD children. The needs they yearn to satisfy remain. Therefore, other behavioral problems are inevitable. This powerful desire to satisfy basic needs is wellness. The problems point to the need. They are symptoms of well-being wanting to come forth, and not finding a way.

Exacerbating the problem is the unconscionable way these drugs are distributed. There is no guidance for the child. They are confused by the chemically induced shifts in perception. No one understands the far-reaching physiological effects of changing a child's chemistry this way. Even if those administering the drugs have the best intentions, they do not have a clear appreciation of the child's consciousness. If they did, they would be looking for a solution beyond symptomatic relief.

It is certainly our job as parents, educators and caregivers to familiarize ourselves with the deep, abiding needs of children and with their underlying principles. Natural Learning Rhythms accomplishes this all-important task. As it is teachers, parents and caregivers who have the day to day responsibility with children, NLR is deliberately articulated in ways that are easy to understand and easy to use. This is one of its great virtues and has been praised not only by those mentioned above, but also by academicians, psychologists, counselors, and writers.

NLR begins its approach to the ADD/ADHD child with an assessment of needs. The exact nature of those needs depends upon the child's age and development. For instance, we would make a careful assessment of the sensation environment for most six-year-old children. This extensive analysis includes the way the child is touched, particularly those closest to him/her. It includes the learning materials she/he is given. It most definitely includes the attitudes people have towards him/her, which the child directly experiences as sensations. It is absolutely essential that the child's sensation environment be supportive of him/her. Of course, children are individuals and come from unique backgrounds. Therefore each child's most healthy sensation environment will be different. This is easy to accomplish. The key point is that if it is not in accord with that child's needs, the child must try to find way to satisfy them. This is the well-being imperative. Children, and humans, will do all they can to find a way to satisfy their needs. This is an intelligent and healthy thing to do. Often, this means they will engage in socially unacceptable behaviors to draw attention to their deficits.

A balanced sensation environment feeds the child's capacity to belong. This is a crucial point. A very deep quality of self is developing for this six-year-old. NLR names three traits of this quality of self—to fully inhabit her Rightful Place, to create

and respect boundaries, and to have and express personal strength. These three traits comprise the unifying principle for the child. For a child to become conscious of her/himself as truly belonging, as aware of boundaries and full of strength is the very foundation of successful participation in the world and of profound and meaningful self-knowledge. NLR calls this the organizing principle within development.

Every age has a different organizing principle. There are no exceptions. To nourish the organizing principle is to actualize well-being. NLR says much more about six-year-olds, and is equally insightful for all ages from conception to 23. Adults who honor the organizing principle of their children enjoy well-being in all family relationships.

Natural Learning Rhythms carries the full authority of allowing the child to know herself as a capable, whole and worthwhile human being. It describes our inherent, natural, capacities and so, in this way, it is reasonable to say they constitute the law of our existence. In other words, these are the rules, conducts and procedures of our *natural* selves. Natural means to be born with or 'Not acquired; inherent.' Thus, Natural Learning Rhythms describes our inherent capacities (natural) to move through life to gain knowledge, comprehension, or mastery (learning) in recognizable and recurring patterns (rhythm).

Here are characteristics that all developmental stages in childhood hold in common. Simply stated:

- There is a natural and recognizable unfolding of well-being
- The organizing principle must be properly nourished for harmonious development
- Well-being cuts across all gender, race and culture. Honoring the organizing principle does not in any way bias the expression of diverse cultures in diverse ways
- The organizing principle informs all the talents and intelligence of all humans

Now, is it reasonable and responsible to hold the disease view that ADD/ADHD is to be treated as a set of symptoms and medicated? In his *"The Myth of ADD"*, Thomas Armstrong states: "Our children experience the stress of illness, divorce, financial problems, living with single parents, death, school, remarriage, jealousy,

achievement, vacations, step siblings, sex, drugs, sensory bombardment, violence, the threat of nuclear war—a long, long list. The effect can be overwhelming.” Among the most frequent symptoms of child stress are restlessness, difficulty concentrating and irritating behavior, in other words, the same behaviors that make up attention deficit disorder. Recent studies have suggested that as many as 25 percent of children labeled ADD suffer from severe anxiety, and that up to 75 percent of ADD children have some form of depression.

Research reveals that as many as 90 percent of students labeled ADD have learning problems. The boundary line between learning difficulties and behavior problems is rather fuzzy for these children. Because they have trouble learning in traditional ways, they become inattentive, restless, and disruptive. These behaviors make it even more difficult for them to learn material covered in class. Abraham Maslow, the great Humanistic Psychologist, suggests that the teacher must provide an atmosphere of acceptance and understand “the naturalness of defensive and regressive forces” in the child given stressful circumstances. Hostility, neurotic dependency (and like behaviors) must be expressed and worked out in the child rather than suppressed or denied so that the child can move on to more socially approved gratification.

If ADD/ADHD students were provided with opportunities to learn in environments that embraced their natural developmental capacities, which includes their inherent learning styles, they might well experience success. Validating this informed suggestion is the fact that ADD students are often indistinguishable from so-called “normal” students in classroom environments that use activity centers, hands-on learning, self-paced projects, films, games, and other highly stimulating curricula. In other words, ADD/ADHD students do well in the kinds of activities that *all* children enjoy.

A recent report on CNN cited a study, which raises questions about the over diagnosis of ADD and ADHD. Also in this study is the question on the safety of the use of Ritalin, a drug that is commonly used to treat ADD and ADHD in children. This study reports: “nearly 6% of the school-age population in the USA has been diagnosed with ADHD, a condition characterized by impulsive behavior and difficulties in paying attention and keeping still. . . . Pediatric psychologist Gretchen LeFever became concerned when she was suddenly inundated with ADHD referrals. She worried that the disorder was being overdiagnosed and began a study of 30,000 grade-school students in two school districts in Virginia. In her study, published in the American Journal of Public Health, LeFever found the number of children

medicated in school for ADHD was 17% for white boys, 9% for African-American boys, 7% for white girls and 3% for African-American girls. The study raises many questions about ADHD diagnosis but provides few answers. Were previous estimations too low? Is ADHD being overdiagnosed?"

It seems as if the current approach to ADD is similar to the label "consumption" given to all lung problems a century ago. Now we know that consumption was a wastebasket into which we threw all lung and bronchial problems, without having any idea what caused them. We do the same, he believes with the multitude of symptoms lumped as ADD/ADHD. We don't really know what causes it. The medicators only know that the behaviors are not conducive to socially acceptable norms of school and social behavior. Knowing so little, we must ask: Is there really a disease here? What is its etiology? How are environmental factors accounted for? And what about the cradle from which the child operates—his/her family?

Obviously, the family is not separate from this process. The child and the adult are mutually interdependent. We cannot look at the child's ADD/ADHD and fail to see that we, as adults, a part of that child, a part of who she/he is and a great part of how she got to be who she/he is relates back to us.

When a child's natural development is not seen and nurtured it leads the child to believe she/he is separate and isolated. Every part of his/her psychological, emotional and intellectual development is impacted. The way the child communicates his/her distress to us is through behavior. The child's behavior is a cry for help. If we respond to this cry with punishment (or medication) we have taught the child that s/he is the problem. This initiates the cycle of blame and shame that often leads to hurt and violence, perpetrated both on themselves and others.

Can we end this cycle of unnecessary suffering and heal these hurts in ourselves and in the child? Yes, emphatically yes. To do so, however, means a restructuring of both the family system and of education to include a profound understanding of the nature of health and wisdom. It means nurturing and supporting wisdom-based relationships in each stage of childhood. In addition, "the students must be exposed to learning that has meaning and relevance for them". Carl Jung writes, "a balanced education is very important in the development of the child". He includes emotional development as critical for mental/psychic hygiene in personal growth and in education but especially for gifted or highly-strung children. He continues, "there are, besides the gifts of the head, also those of the heart, which are no whit less important," and which often make a more valuable contribution to society.

It is not possible to accurately describe ADD/ADHD until there is some semblance of developmental support for the children. How, for instance, could we claim there is a hole in the Ozone layer unless we knew the environment as complete and natural? How could we say there is pulmonary emphysema unless we knew a complete and healthy lung? Likewise, how can we say that there is a disease known as ADD/ADHD, worth medicating, unless we have a clear picture of a healthy child?

In the service of at least beginning the dialogue of genuine health in the child, we present the following tables and comments. NLR details and substantiates all that is indicated herein. But we hope that you are now committing yourself to understanding the well-being of children. May these remarks, simplified though they may be, stimulate you to investigate further, to step into a true appreciation of children and of humanity.

Here, then, is a preliminary outline of some of the characteristics of the inherent well-being in childhood. A chart that contains a few suggestions of the many possible approaches to education that would genuinely honor the whole child follows this. Even the few simple actions therein would begin to bring about change, well-being and the ending of medicating children with mind-altering drugs.

- *Rightful Place*—The capacity to know that you are a part of family, community, society and Life. (develops throughout ages 0-8½)
- *Boundaries/Strength*—The capacity to know limits and to act capably within them. (develops throughout ages 0-8½)
- *Trust*—The capacity to act with integrity and dignity towards oneself and others. (develops throughout ages 8½-12½)
- *Reciprocal Cooperation*—The capacity to work with others and make sensible decisions with a sense of interconnectedness to all Life. (develops throughout ages 8½-12½)
- *Autonomy*—a "self" aware of individual responsibility, coupled with the capacity to individuate, and form a personal identity with personal power and freedom. (develops throughout ages 12½-17½)
- *Interconnectedness*—The capacity to know yourself in relation to all and everything. (develops throughout ages 17½-23)

- *Humor*—The capacity to see the ironies, paradoxes and contradictions in life, and especially in oneself, with perspective and enjoyment. (develops throughout childhood developmentally appropriately)
- *Humility*—the capacity to place the needs of others as more important than one's own (develops throughout ages 17½-23)
- *Incisiveness*—The capacity for sharp, direct appreciation of a situation. (develops throughout ages 17½-23)
- *Commitment*—The capacity to be in relationship for extended duration. (develops throughout ages 17½-23)
- *Systems Creation*—The capacity to synthesize data into previously non-existent systems. (develops throughout ages 17½-23)
- *Transcendence*—The capacity to experience reality beyond thought, concepts of self or mental constructs.
- *Clarity*—The capacity to see things “as they are” without prejudice.
- *Devotion*—The capacity to feel awe, reverence and love.
- *Compassion*—The capacity to deeply feel and participate in human suffering as a part of oneself.

Thus, development carries the full authority of allowing us to know of ourselves as whole and well. They describe our inherent, natural, capacities and so, in this way it is reasonable to say these are the foundation of our natural selves.

Education, as it is, hurts all children by failing to account for the whole child. Children have a right to guidance and support in the whole of their being.

The following chart could be extended to five pages. It is intended to just give a taste of what is possible with a bit of effort and understanding.

We can bring these transformations about through concentrated work on our own preconceptions. As with any adaptation, it is effort, trial and error and a willingness to stay connected through difficulty that makes change possible.

School Action	Damaged Wisdom	Transformation
Rewards and Punishments - Rewards and punishments Teach that authorities are the guide – not oneself.	Trust, Belongingness, Clarity, Autonomy Cooperation, Incisiveness	Learning is to be seen for its intrinsic value.
Absence of interpersonal curriculum	Trust, Cooperation, Interconnectedness, Commitment	Human relations be given the central place it deserves
Teacher as Authority	Humility, Interconnectedness, Boundaries, Commitment	Cooperative learning with shared governance
Performance based Pedagogy: set curriculum with performance tested and scored & compared against other children	Incisiveness, Clarity, Belongingness	Individualized curriculum, individualized assessments
Absence of Intrapersonal curriculum	Devotion, Transcendence, Clarity, Interconnectedness	“Know Thyself” be taken seriously

We can:

1. Take responsibility for the education of our children.
2. Support educational approaches that honor the whole child.
3. Create ongoing learning centers that honor natural whole child development.
4. Constantly refine our own understandings and continue in self-work.
5. Bring our understanding to every child that we encounter.
6. Bring wholehearted commitment to the transformation.

Many may ask, but what's in it for me? "The Dance" in the Natural Learning Rhythms philosophy is a unique understanding that describes the benefits for the parents/teachers when they meet the developmental needs of the children. This philosophy provides the necessary insight that allows families to create a lifestyle in which connection is the root of their moment to moment existence. It clearly demonstrates how parents awaken their own wisdom by serving the developmental needs of their children. The whole family comes back into balance and wholeness when the developmental needs of children are met.

And what would happen to ADD/ADHD if the child and family lived in well-being? Wouldn't it be great to know? Anecdotal evidence supports the fact that symptoms lessen and tend to fade away. In addition, children become more empowered as self-esteem increases and the locus of control is recognized as within them. But that is not enough. The truth is that the first step lies in the family, with the parents. It lies in the school, with the teachers. There is so much that is not being done to nurture the well-being of children. Starting with well-being is like strengthening the immune system of the body. Which makes more sense, to have a strong immune system and be ill less often or to have a weak one and continually invent questionable drugs to fight disease?

What would happen to ADD/ADHD if we honored the genuine needs of the children?
