



**WHY  
GOOD  
BOYS  
GET  
A BAD  
RAP:**  
Understanding  
ADHD

By  
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**J**acqueline Washington was livid when her son Bryan's second-grade teacher kept insisting he had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and needed medication. Despite her anger, she discussed the teacher's comments with Bryan's pediatrician, who ruled out ADHD. "He was just being a little boy—an active little boy," Washington recalled. "He just wouldn't listen and wanted to play more than anything." ¶ Like most parents, Washington wanted the best for her child. She was prepared to deal with whatever diagnosis Bryan had; however, she wanted an accurate assessment, whether it was of ADHD, a learning disability such as dyslexia, or just restlessness. In addition to consulting with the pediatrician, Washington met with a staff teacher trained in designing student-specific instruction to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for Bryan. The teacher recommended more classroom breaks and moving his desk closer to the front of the room.

These steps helped, but the overall experience propelled Washington to transfer her son to another school in Columbus, Ohio, for third grade.

Their experience isn't unique. Many African-American children, particularly boys, are misdiagnosed and mislabeled with an alphabet soup that can include a blend of ADHD, ADD (more inattention and less hyperactivity), BD (behavioral disorder) or LD (learning disability). Widely misunderstood and with symptoms mistaken for an array of illnesses from depression to learning disabilities, ADHD is often blamed for certain behaviors, and certain behaviors are tagged as ADHD.

All of this contributes to the disproportionate placement of Black boys on the compensatory side of special education rather than the gifted end, notes Leslie T. Fenwick, Ph.D., a former PK-12-grade teacher who is now dean of the School of Education at Howard University in Washington, D.C. It can also cause a boy's interest in school to deteriorate and derail him for life in some cases.

Now 14 and in the eighth grade, Bryan, whose IEP allows him to get extra help with class work or tests, excels in school and has varied interests in computers, art and track. "My son gets A's and B's," Washington says proudly. "He wants to be a mechanical engineer."

#### THE CLASSROOM CONNECTION

Because school is the first structured environment outside of home where children are expected to absorb information and follow rules and expectations, observations about their performance and behavior will have lasting consequences. For the boys whose rambunctious behavior is interpreted as a behavioral disorder, the consequences can mean being placed into special education classes during that critical early elementary instruction time frame. Why are some teachers quick to overlook the intelligence of African-American boys?

A number of factors can influence how teachers respond to boys being boys with pent-up playground energy or to their exhibiting the primary characteristics of ADHD: hyperactivity, inattention or impulsiveness.

The disconnect can stem from racial bias, fear or an inability to distinguish between normal behavior and behavior that's out of the norm, Fenwick notes. "We need a broader representation of specialists in special education," she says. "Some of the behaviors we see in classes are being misidentified. Students are being labeled as having a behavioral disorder when, in fact, they may be gifted. More work needs to be done on the intellectual and academic behaviors of students who are gifted and those who really do have learning needs, particularly those students who are Black and male."

Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D., an associate professor of counseling psychology at Howard University and also a research analyst for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, counters doom-and-gloom reports on Black males by focusing on what's going well in his acclaimed Breaking Barriers research studies. Both Toldson and Fenwick pointed out that African-American males outscored females on standardized tests from elementary through graduate school, but that females had higher GPAs.

"If we did some more analysis of this gap between performance on standardized tests and classroom performance," Fenwick says, "that would tell us something about African-American males and classroom instruction and what it elicits in terms of behavior."

Toldson knows the connection all too well. He grew up with ADHD but made the discovery later in life. "I started having trouble in school when I was in the fourth grade," he recalled. "I had a teacher who didn't like the way I responded to her instructions."

He was a little disorganized but had a vivid imagination. He was friends with a like-minded boy, and both were fascinated by astronomy, mythology, rocks and minerals. They would get in trouble and ended up in the slow-learners group, a blow to Toldson's self-esteem. Alarmed by the D's and F's on his report card, his mother transferred him from the private school to a public one. It was there that his fifth-grade teacher recognized his potential and reversed his perception of himself.

Fenwick worries that too many African-American and Latino children are missing out on teachers who can motivate and engage them in the classroom, especially with the popularity of

programs that recruit inexperienced college graduates who are trained for only a few weeks and have little teaching experience or credentials. "It's unconscionable," says Fenwick. "Why do our children deserve teachers who have five weeks of preparation?"

"We have raised the standard for classroom performance for students and lowered the bar for who can stand in front of those students and teach them," she continues. "Black, brown and poor students are 70 percent more likely to have someone teaching math, science, social studies and English who is not certified in those subjects."

Another problem, she says, is a "tremendous demographic mismatch" between these students and their disproportionately White and female teachers, who account for up to 91 percent of faculty at some urban schools. "Even when they're well-meaning, teachers bring baggage, and it impacts student learning."

#### WHEN IT'S REALLY ADHD

The percentage of children whose parents said they had been diagnosed with the neurobehavioral disorder jumped 22 percent between 2003 and 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. More than 5 million children have ADHD, with twice as many boys diagnosed than girls.

For the child who is truly challenged by ADHD, behavioral specialists cite positive developments in both attitudes and treatment. The stigma has been greatly lessened, and not as many now think and say what Grant Suttle once told his mother, Cattie, which brought tears to her eyes: "I'm bad. I'm a bad kid."

Children with ADHD aren't "bad" or dumb, their parents, medical professionals and enlightened educators emphasize. "It's a brain disorder, like dementia, schizophrenia, alcoholism or autism," notes Rahn K. Bailey, M.D., chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., and president-elect of the National Medical Association.

"It's unfortunate that we . . . just don't accept brain disorders as easily as we accept others," says Bailey, who has served on the Professional Advisory Board of Children and Adults With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Although children with ADHD are often very smart, their report cards might have D's and F's mixed in with the A's and B's,



says Shane Perrault, Ph.D., a psychologist in Greenbelt, Md., who specializes in ADHD and has it himself. "Our challenge is to find out how they're smart and how they learn," Perrault explains. "They're wired in a different way."

Kay Foster of Silver Spring, Md., whose son Amir was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 5, nominated his first-grade teacher for an award because he recognized her son's potential. After noticing Amir's interest in Chinese, the teacher came up with enrichment activities and gave him a folklore book. He also recommended Amir, now 9, for accelerated instruction. "We need more teachers like him," Foster says.

Perrault's ADHD Performance Counseling includes coaching and the Play Attention computerized learning system to "reboot" children's brains to help improve their grades, social skills and behavior. He also helps students recognize and build upon their strengths using the book *You're Smarter Than You Think: A Kid's Guide to Multiple Intelligences* by Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D.

A boy who's good in math or science might call himself "logic smart" as he interactively learns about the eight intelligences in psychologist Howard Gardner's theory. If he is a leader or likes to help out, he might say he's "people smart." An affinity for plants, animals or the environment could indicate that he's "nature smart."

Playing to children's strengths builds their self-esteem, which spills over into other areas, Perrault says. "Once they develop that confidence, we're able to help them learn at a higher level."

Fenwick concurs and is particularly enthusiastic about the success of demographic matching. She cites four outcomes when children attend schools with high concentrations of qualified teachers who look like them:

1. They are less likely to be placed in special education.
2. They are more likely to be tested for gifted education.
3. They are less likely to be suspended or expelled.
4. They are more likely to graduate from high school in four years.

And for any parent, that's a match made in heaven. **E**

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## Proactive Parents

**KARRAN HARPER ROYAL** went into denial the first time she learned that her sons had ADHD. As it turned out, a few of her family members did, too. They went a lifetime without being diagnosed or treated; one ended up having problems coping in society. Royal was determined to learn as much as she

could about ADHD so that her sons would have better outcomes. Here's advice from Royal, other parents and experts on how to help your child:

**> Pay attention to potential signs and symptoms.** Here's an interactive checklist based on the American Psychiatric

Association's test: [cdc.gov/NOBDDD/adhd/widget/checklist/index.html](http://cdc.gov/NOBDDD/adhd/widget/checklist/index.html).

**> Make sure** that your child has been properly assessed. There's no one test to diagnose ADHD, and multiple symptoms must be present in a child's behavior both at home and at school. Check with your State Department of

Education in addition to specialists recommended through your pediatrician. "The parents should have an opportunity to speak directly to a doctor," says Rahn K. Bailey, who also recommends second opinions.

**> Listen to your child.** Some parents said their children told them that certain classes were

too easy and that they needed to be challenged.

**> Go through** your PTA to request the credentials of teachers, Leslie T. Fenwick recommends.

**> Consider getting tutors** outside class and during the summer.

**> Engage your child** in activi-

ties that align with his interests and strengths. Visit museums and other places as a family.

**> Be persistent**—in person, on the phone and in writing.

**> If your child** has been properly diagnosed with ADHD, do not be afraid of pharmaceutical intervention. "ADHD happens to be one of those diagnoses

that is particularly responsive to medication management," Bailey says. "Good treatment is worthwhile. It can produce the outcome that you're looking for, which is good health."

**> Don't worry** about what people think. "It's OK; there's no stigma," Kay Foster says. "Your child comes first." —YRL