

Childhood Bipolar Disorder

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Bipolar Disorder in children has received increasing attention over the past several months. It has been said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Sometimes when people learn a little bit about a psychological malady it becomes more frequently diagnosed. During the past decade this seemed to be true of ADHD. Now this phenomenon seems to be occurring with Bipolar Disorder in children.

Often when we hear about a problem or illness we begin to wonder if maybe it could apply to us or our children. Therefore the most important thing you can remember is this: just because some of the symptoms may apply to you or your child, it does not mean that the diagnosis of Bipolar disorder is appropriate. Furthermore the prevalence of Bipolar Disorder is less than 2% of the population (DSM-IV). Some research studies have given higher estimates however Bipolar Disorder in children is very uncommon.

Adults have been diagnosed with this disorder for many years. Until recently it was called "Manic Depression". There is a great variation in symptoms between individuals with Bipolar disorder. There are also clear differences between adults who have Bipolar Disorder and children with this disorder. This makes accurate diagnosis more difficult.

The basic symptoms include periods of mania with alternating periods of depression. Mania may be characterized by elevated mood and energy, racing thoughts, rapid speech, and impulsiveness. Depression may be characterized by sadness, lack of energy, loss of interest in normally enjoyable activities and tearfulness. These symptoms ("ups and downs") may cycle throughout the day or for several days at a time. Children sometimes display less pronounced extremes than adults. The diagnosis of Bipolar disorder in children can be an arduous task. Their moods may vary between relatively "normal" to sullen and depressed. They may also display periods of high activity with increased energetic behavior. These children often have difficulty sleeping and may routinely sleep for only four to six hours per night. A family history of Bipolar Disorder increases the likelihood of a child being diagnosed with the disorder.

Treatment for children with Bipolar Disorder often includes medication. Medications can help make their moods less extreme. Sometimes these children are initially misdiagnosed with ADHD because the manic behavior is mistaken for hyperactivity. Children who have Bipolar Disorder, and who are prescribed stimulants, sometimes show a worsening in their condition.

Diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder in children should not be taken lightly. It requires a careful and thorough evaluation by an experienced mental health expert.