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The restless and excitable child

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the reasons behind why some children are more restless and excitable than others, gives advice about how to deal with an overactive child and suggests where to go to get extra help if you feel you are unable to cope on your own.



Introduction

Young children are often restless and excitable. Their noisy liveliness is usually just a part of being young. Although it may be tiring, it is usually nothing to worry about.

Sometimes youngsters may be so active and noisy that it makes life difficult for their parents and other children. A child like this may be demanding and excitable and chatter away nineteen to the dozen. He may be noisy, may not do as he's told, and will probably find it difficult to sit still. Adults may say that he's hyperactive, but the trouble with this word is that people use it to describe everything from normal high spirits to sometimes dangerous behaviour, such as running out into a busy road. It may be that he is overactive rather than hyperactive.

What makes children overactive?

There are many things that can make a child overactive. The following should give you some guidance as to the reasons for your child's behaviour. Finding the reasons may help you to come up with some solutions to combat the problem.

Being a parent If parents are unhappy, depressed or worried, they tend to pay less attention to their children. They may find they can't spend the time they need to help them play constructively, or they may find that when they do play with them, they spend a lot of time telling them to be quiet. Children learn from this that they have to be naughty or noisy to get any attention from their mum or dad.

No clear rules It is important to have simple rules about what is allowed and what is not. If two parents are involved, they both need to agree about the rules, and be consistent and fair when they say 'no'. This will help the child to know what is expected and to learn self-control (see Factsheet 2 on good parenting and Factsheet 4 on behavioural and conduct problems).

Temperament We are all born with different temperaments. Some children are livelier, noisier and more outgoing than others. They may prefer going out and being with other people than quietly reading a book or playing with toys by themselves. Quite often, children who are active like this are also excitable and may go over the top while playing. Although this can be a nuisance, it is nothing to worry about, but you may need some help in finding ways to help your child calm down.

Learning problems Some children find it hard to learn things that other children find easy. They may need special help at school. They may seem quite young for their age and find it hard to concentrate on work or control their behaviour as well as other children (see factsheet 10 on general learning disability).

Hearing problems Glue ear is a common example of a hearing problem. If a child has glue ear, they will find it hard to hear what other people say, will tend to shout and may want the television turned up very loudly.

Food Some children do seem to react to certain foods by becoming restless and irritable. This is not as common as some people think, but occasionally, it can be a real problem.

If you are concerned that your child is affected by **attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or hyperkinetic disorder (hyperactivity)**, see Factsheet 5 on ADHD and hyperkinetic disorder for further information.

Sources of further information

- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) produces helpful information for parents and carers. Three useful booklets: *Stress – A Guide for Parents*; *Putting Children First – A Guide for Parents of 0–5 Year Olds* and *Listening to Children – A Guide for Parents and Carers*. NSPCC Publications Department, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH; tel: 020 7825 2775; www.nspcc.org.uk.
- Webster Stratton, C. (1992) *The Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 3–8*. London: Umbrella Press.
- Parentline offers help and advice to parents bringing up children and teenagers. Helpline 0808 800 2222; textphone 0800 783 6783; www.parentlineplus.org.uk.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext: 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

How can I get my child to calm down?

Try to make sure you spend time with your child on their own, so that they know you are interested in them. This will give you the chance to **plan** and **praise**.

- Spend time with your children doing something they enjoy. Get into a routine and **plan** what they are going to be doing for the day or the weekend. You can make sure that they have time for noisy, energetic play so that they can work off some of their energy. You can also make clear times when you expect them to play quietly on their own.
- Take every opportunity to **praise** your child. Be as clear as possible. It is vital that they understand exactly what they have done to please you. For example, 'you've been playing so quietly on your own ... what a good boy you are' or 'what a good footballer you are'.

Where can I get help?

Lively, excitable behaviour is a common problem for parents. Your health visitor will be used to giving advice about this. If there seems to be a problem with your child's hearing, or if there seems to be a reaction to foods, your general practitioner should be able to help. If they think that there might be a learning difficulty or a hyperactivity disorder, they will refer you to a clinical psychologist, paediatrician or child psychiatrist.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.