

Why ADHD Doesn't Mean Disaster

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A Focus on the Family book published by
Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Swanberg, Dennis, 1953-

Why ADHD doesn't mean disaster / Dennis Swanberg, Diane
Passno; with medical contributions by Walter L. Larimore, M.D.
p. cm.

"A Focus on the Family book."

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 10: 1-58997-306-2

ISBN 13: 978-1-58997-306-0

1. Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder—Popular works.

I. Passno, Diane. II. Larimore, Walter L. III. Title.

RJ506.H9 S93 2003

618.92'8589—dc21

2003001351

Editors: Mick Silva and Kathy Davis

Cover Design: Joe Sapulich

Cover Photo: Getty Images

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 11 10 09 08 07 06

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ONE



ADHD: A Dividend—Not a Disaster

Several elements of the ADD mind favor creativity . . . the term “attention deficit” is a misnomer. It is a matter of attention inconsistency. While it is true that the ADD mind wanders when it is not engaged, it is also the case that the ADD mind fastens on to its subject fiercely when it is engaged. A child with ADD may sit for hours meticulously putting together a model airplane.

—EDWARD HALLOWELL, M.D. and JOHN RATEY, M.D.¹

Once upon a time there were two old ladies who lived in a shabby little house near a railroad switchyard. At one time, the living room with its big picture window had been their favorite place to sit. However, the view from their window had become increasingly depressing over the years. No matter how hard they tried to keep the window clean, it was always dirty from the activity in the train yard.

One day, they hired a skilled artist to paint a forest landscape over the glass. When he had finished, the afternoon

light shone through the window on a beautiful woodland scene. The living room had become more beautiful than ever! And the two old women had a brand-new perspective on life.

Parents of ADHD kids need much the same thing. Yet far from simply “painting over” the challenges of ADHD, many parents could use a completely new perspective about their children. We would all like to have the “don’t-rock-the-boat” kid; we don’t want our lives in constant turmoil. But as with many things in life, the more effort that’s required, the more rewarding the successes will be. In order to get that new perspective, we desperately need to see the benefits and to tap into the dividends of ADHD’s unique characteristics.

The last thing in the world parents want to learn is that their beloved little bundle of joy has a prognosis that might limit his opportunities, particularly when he’s just starting out. The stereotype ADHD has given to these kids is simply awful. And most parents lack either the understanding or the confidence to challenge the conventional thinking. There is a lot of hype surrounding this issue. Is it a real condition? Aren’t ADHD kids just unruly, undisciplined, or unloved? Shouldn’t we just stop feeding them so much sugar and expect them to pay attention in class? Is this all part of some conspiracy to drug children into submission?

The truth is out there. Every parent knows that stereotyping kids is dangerous and deceptive. It can do unseen damage to a child’s understanding of who he is and what he is able to accomplish in life. As early as kindergarten, if a child is told that he has a mental disability and he begins to feel he is destined to fail, he will begin to live up to the expectation. He will become the classic underachiever. And as these kids become teenagers, their lack of self-respect can take on a desperate quality, putting them at risk for undesirable behaviors such as substance abuse or even suicidal feelings. Finding the hope behind the mask of ADHD is imperative.

Diane has a goldfish that will probably outlive everyone in her family. This 29-cent prize had been in a bowl on the kitchen sink for the past six years, swimming around and around in a tight little circle. One day, she moved Sgt. Pepper to a huge tank, six times the size of his old domain. For the first several days, he continued to swim in the same tight little circles the size of his old bowl. He didn't understand that his world had expanded. In a similar way, a child who becomes "that ADHD kid who drives everyone nuts" may never understand what he can accomplish with his unique set of gifts. And if he is never given permission to be anything different, most likely he never will.

Well, that's why we think it's time to expand the bowl in which ADHD kids have been placed. In the following chapters, we want to offer:

- encouragement for you, your family, and your child or children diagnosed with ADHD;
- the positive side of ADHD—the gifts and abilities of these uniquely created people; and
- a new perspective for any of you—parents, caregivers, and educators—who have the privilege—that's right, the *privilege*—of having an ADHD kid in your life.

Walt is a physician. Diane and I (Dennis) are parents of ADHD kids. And I've had ADHD all my life, so I also speak from firsthand experience.

This book has been a particular passion of mine for years. It has been my privilege, first in the pulpit, and later as a public speaker with my own television program, to overcome the barriers ADHD poses and find the benefits. None of these successes were even on my radar screen when I was young and struggling simply to get through another day at school. But if I can make it, anyone can. I hope to encourage those of you who are having similar difficulties raising a kid like I once was.

Even so, our main purpose for writing this book is to

encourage you and help you consider that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder can be a *dividend* rather than a disease or mental disability. It can be turned into a blessing rather than a curse, an asset rather than a handicap. Sure, there will always be challenges and frustrations associated with something out of the ordinary like ADHD. But by the time you finish this book, we hope and pray that no matter whether you have ADHD yourself, or are the parent of an ADHD child, you will see your future from a hopeful new perspective.

TWO



All about Dennis

Impulsivity . . . spontaneity, little tolerance for boredom, in addition to daydreaming, are listed as identifying characteristics of creative individuals. . . . Given that some highly creative children engage in “disruptive, attention-seeking behavior” in the classroom, it is not surprising that they are not valued by their teachers as much as more conforming, less creative students.

—BONNIE CRAMOND, PH.D.¹

When I was a kid, I loved to listen to the radio, watch TV, or take in a movie—*anything* rather than read a book. I wanted to see action, feel it, smell it, and handle it! That was much more exciting than sitting and trying to comprehend words on a page. I loved to play cowboys and Indians, especially with my toy soldiers. I was a huge Roy Rogers and Dale Evans fan, and I would relive their episodes in my backyard, adding a few lines of dialogue myself. I could entertain myself for hours this way.

The Wizard of Oz was my favorite movie, and I would imitate the characters by putting myself in their shoes. I made up my own scripts in which I imagined myself dealing with their difficulties and accomplishments. I loved acting out all the parts, even though I was an audience of one.

I had a big imagination. Every season of the calendar year was embellished in my fantasy world. Christmas and Easter were especially wonderful. Maybe that's why I became a pastor. I was always able to understand the thrill and mystery of what God accomplished on those days.

My favorite thing to do was listen to stories from the older folks in my family. Everything for me had a story line—the truth or lesson I could hang my hat on forever. I would sit on the floor by the old folks at reunions and listen to them talk about their experiences, struggles, and achievements. I was enthralled. In hindsight, if the same stories had been in book form, I never would have read them. It was the hearing of the stories that held me captive.

Even now, over 40 years later, I can recall stories told by my daddy and my grandpa. My favorite story was about two boys named Piggy and Hoggy who lived with their disabled parents in an abandoned boxcar. The two boys would walk to the main highway to sell peanuts. An old cardboard box served as their stand, and they made just enough money to make ends meet.

One day, a traveling evangelist stopped and bought some peanuts. The preacher invited them to a revival that evening, but the boys declined, embarrassed that they had no church clothes to wear. The preacher nodded and took them across the highway and bought them each a pair of jeans, shirts, and coats and ties—the first new clothes they had ever owned. The preacher even offered to give them a ride to the meeting.

When they got to the tent meeting that evening, the boys were so captured by the Bible stories they sat riveted to their seats, and at the conclusion they gave their lives to Jesus. The local pastor offered his church for the traveling evangelist to baptize the new converts the following week.

Years passed and the evangelist returned to hold another revival meeting. During the two decades he was away, he'd

become a successful senior pastor of a large congregation in a big city back East. But he still loved the tent meetings in smaller towns. The pastor of the local church had changed since he had been there last, but the church had grown, and the traveling evangelist was treated to a tour by the new pastor.

The evangelist couldn't get over how much the old church had grown. In one of the packed Sunday school classes, the evangelist asked to meet the teacher, a young man who was obviously enjoying his ministry.

"Don't you remember me?" the Sunday school teacher asked.

The evangelist frowned.

"I'm Piggy!" exclaimed the young man.

Well, the old evangelist couldn't believe it! Tears flowed down his wrinkled face. He'd thought about the two boys he'd baptized many times over the years and prayed for them. Piggy's enthusiasm for the gospel was greater than he could have ever imagined. During the days that followed, the evangelist learned that Hoggy had become a preacher as well. The Lord had shown the evangelist the visible results of his labor, and he returned to his own congregation with renewed enthusiasm for his work.

Now, you might think that's a pretty hokey story. But I used to ask my daddy to tell it time and again. Deep down, I wanted to be that kind of man, someone who could help others, someone with a life-changing touch. I still identify with Piggy and Hoggy because I've known a lot of people like that old evangelist who have helped me through the years. Even as a young boy, I knew what it was like to be the recipient of kindness. And who knows? Maybe that story was the beginning of my own journey to becoming a pastor.

When I entered grade school, I was always more interested in friendships than in reading and writing. I was thrilled to have 24 new friends because now I had a captive

audience to entertain! It was my goal to make sure everybody in class had FUN, FUN, FUN! I would act like I was the Lone Ranger, or I would imitate TV characters—Paul Lynde, Don Knotts, and Andy Griffith. At recess I would imitate television sports announcers. I learned all the facial expressions, and early on I learned that I could make people laugh—especially when I imitated the teacher and the principal.

It was inevitable I guess: The class was so busy watching me that my teacher did something that first year of school that was repeated every year, even through graduate school. My teachers always said, “You’re going to be my helper and sit right next to my desk!” After that, the audience was always behind me. I decided that the only way to make it in school was to woo my teachers. I knew I was a tough one to handle, but I could make them laugh! And even though they



Dr. Larimore: Allen’s mother brought him to my office because he was failing second grade. His IQ testing was, according to her, “off the chart.” Yet, because of his easy distractibility, he was frequently berated by his classmates and his teacher as a goof-off. His principal wondered aloud to Allen’s mother if he wasn’t doomed to be an “anarchist”—one who simply refused to follow the rules. Because of this intensely negative feedback from educators and students, Allen had incredibly low self-esteem. He withdrew and began to keep to himself. As a result he had few friends.

I smiled to myself as Allen’s mother told me the story. Not only was I fairly certain of the diagnosis, but I knew I could give her and her son help and hope.

Allen fidgeted in the corner chair. I rolled my chair over to him and began to ask him a series of questions. Then I did a brief exam, ordered some lab work, and gave Allen’s mom a questionnaire for herself and her husband and another for his teacher. When all the studies were com-

always wrote on my report card, “Talks too much,” in many ways I knew I was refreshing to them. Once in a while I’d have to pay the price and sit in the corner, or go to the principal’s office, or do extra laps for a coach, even though they were laughing. I didn’t fit their mold, but I made them laugh.

I was the life of the party, but I wasn’t cutting it in school. In elementary school, I wanted to be first: the first to finish the test, the first to read through a book. But my answers were not always correct, and I didn’t understand what I had read by the time I finished. I couldn’t seem to concentrate long enough to comprehend anything. I would daydream. I would become interested in the room, the ceiling, the activities outside the window, or the ballgame I was to play that night at the park.

I think the turning point in my life occurred in the third



pleted, we had our diagnosis. He clearly and unequivocally met the diagnostic criteria for ADHD.

We talked about all of the available treatment options, both standard and alternative. Allen and his mom chose a trial of medication and agreed to some family counseling. With the help of the counseling, Allen’s parents and siblings learned how to appreciate his unique giftedness and found more effective ways to communicate with him.

Medication dramatically helped Allen concentrate in the classroom. His parents and teacher were able to negotiate a number of highly effective changes. Allen’s mom said, “It was like the family, the counselors, the teacher, and the school all had to learn about Allen’s unique wiring. We learned from each other, taught each other—and we were all beneficiaries of the effort.”

“Was it worth the cost and time?” I asked.

She smiled as she thought about how to frame her response. “My child is worth every moment, every struggle, every cent.”

grade. The entire class took a series of achievement tests to see how we compared with other students in the state. I can still remember the anguish of that ordeal. My teacher announced to the class, "Dennis Swanberg didn't do very well." I made a joke out of it, but deep down, it hurt. I began to wonder whether I was retarded or just plain dumb. Was I truly different from other kids? Did I belong in Special Ed?

By the time third grade rolls around, the cream is beginning to rise to the top. The brains of the class are revealed, and every kid knows where he or she stands. Kids begin to label each other as smart or dumb. I found my self-image beginning to crumble, and life seemed a lot more complicated than it had ever been before.

It was in third grade that I started to become "street



Dr. Larimore: Many ADHD children will have difficulty finishing tasks or remembering details, focusing on a book or assignment, or even remaining seated for more than a few minutes. Although this lack of concentration is often seen as a problem, the opposite side of the coin is often unrecognized: These kids usually have the special ability of what ADHD experts call "multiple-track cognition." They have a much higher awareness of their surroundings and environment. They can both see and recall details that their non-ADHD peers completely miss.

Adolescents and even adults with ADHD are at increased risk for job and relationship failures. Some with ADHD appear to be driven from within as they race wildly from one thing to another. They are usually very bright and creative, yet many uninformed observers view them as lazy, disruptive, and terribly disorganized. They mentally process a multitude of thoughts simultaneously. To a logical thinker, ADHD thinking may seem jumbled and disorganized. But even though the conclusions of the ADHD individual may seem illogical, they can be unusually creative—even groundbreaking.

smart” to compensate. I used humor to cover the pain I was feeling about being different from the other kids. Matthew 10:16 says, “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves,” and now as I look back, I think that describes me at that time of my life. I had to develop the cleverness to get around the “minefields” in the academic classroom every day, but do it without injuring anybody else’s feelings.

I learned to intentionally get to know my teachers and make sure they knew me. I would talk to them before and after class, visit with them during their office hours, and ask them for help when I was really stumped. If I felt they liked me, I would work all the harder just to please them. They would often give me the benefit of the doubt when I struggled with an answer in class because they knew how hard I was working. They wanted me to succeed because I had taken the time to nurture a relationship.

I found that I could really shine in subjects like English and journalism if the teacher allowed me to give a verbal rather than a written report. I covered all the same material when I gave the report, but I didn’t have to struggle to get it down on paper. I got great grades when they let me do this because I’d add humor to get the point across. The result was that my reports were really entertaining, rather than just informative or factual.

When I gave a verbal report, the teacher and the class were so entertained that I suddenly felt like a winner rather than a loser. And my image began to change: My friends started to think that maybe I wasn’t the dummy they’d thought I was. To this day, I use the same technique I did back then to prepare for a performance: I tape-record what I want to say, transcribe it, and then make changes to the routine as I study the result.

Another way I got around the minefields in the classroom was doing the exact opposite of what they tell you to do in business management seminars: I would do all the little

things first—knock out all the small things cluttering up my desk. This freed my mind to do the big things without any distractions. Also, I would not study for an exam until the night before a test because I learned that I would forget the material if I prepared too far in advance. Again, this is probably the opposite of what a student without ADHD would do, but I was fighting to survive in school!

No one knew how badly I was hurting inside because of my struggle to survive in school. I didn't think my parents would understand. My conduct in school seemed to be more important to them than my education. I felt very much alone a lot of the time, and I didn't know anybody to turn to for encouragement or emotional support. I guess I could have shared some of these feelings with a few of my favorite teachers, but I shoved them all inside, and it wasn't until my own son was tested for ADHD years later that I was finally able



Dr. Larimore: Les Linet, M.D., a psychiatrist at the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City, has written, "If I was in charge of renaming ADHD—and I'm not—I would call it 'search for stimulation' disorder."² She goes on to point out, speaking of a young boy (Timmy) with ADHD, "Just as nature hates a vacuum, so, too, [his] nervous system hates sensory deprivation. So, if Timmy doesn't get stimulation, he will seek it out. This would explain Timmy's excessive need or, perhaps better put, his thirst for any stimulating information or event. Timmy wants to do well. He wants to make his parents proud of him. But he just can't seem to do this, because of his excessive need for stimulation."

At the most basic level, those with ADHD have difficulty with regulation of focus and attention. So that means they can be very under-focused at times, when the tasks are boring or repetitive. When their brains are really connected with what they're doing, they're over-focused. They easily flip-flop back and forth.

to express the pain I had kept hidden for so long. (But that's a story for a later chapter.)

If I'd had a tutor, it would have been a godsend. But I didn't, so I just began to float through the system, filling in the gaps with humor and sports. ADHD wasn't even in the vocabulary back then, and I think everybody just thought of me as a goof-off. They didn't know how much I ached inside, how much it bothered me that I wasn't like everybody else in the classroom. Why did academics come so easily to them and not to me? I studied and worked harder than any of my friends, and I was just not making it!

I did just well enough to be passed on to middle school, but the English, math, and science courses were tough for me. Again, I learned "the system," put my personality into overdrive, and made it work. But by the time I got to high school, I could no longer hide my weaknesses. I decided that anyone as stupid as I was couldn't go to college, so I took courses for the non college-bound students.

The funny thing is, even though I was struggling with all this internal turmoil, the tactics I used to survive paid off! I was a class officer; I helped start a chapter of Fellowship of Christian Athletes at my school; I was a Rotary honorary Youth of the Month winner as well as a Kiwanis Award Teenager and an Optimist Club Youth Award winner! And I was asked to speak and perform all the time!

I will never forget the night of our football banquet after our team had won the Texas State Football Championship in 1970. The Lt. Governor of Texas was there to speak, but the coach asked me to say a few words to the audience beforehand. I did a whole handful of imitations of entertainers popular at that time and even included an imitation of the head coach. The audience howled, and the headlines in the newspaper the next day read, "Swanberg Steals Show!" My ADHD was the reason I could get up and entertain a crowd.

However, athletics was really what saved me. I played

football and baseball and was All District in both sports. I would never have had the opportunity for the success I enjoy today if a football scholarship hadn't gotten me into college. I could never have become a pastor or a speaker or have had a successful television show if it had not been for that athletic scholarship!

God had a plan for my life. But sometimes, late at night when sleep eludes me on the road, I hang my head in my hands and wonder what would have become of the ol' Swan if I had been uncoordinated and never set foot on an athletic field. The academic system would have doomed me, and it's very likely I would not have lived up to my potential or been able to use the gifts God gave me to help others.

In the next chapter, we'll hear from Diane and her daughter Danielle, who was diagnosed with ADHD in college.

Lessons Learned

1. Overactive kids may have untapped creativity.
2. Underachieving may be a mask ADHD children wear.
3. Some ADHD kids learn to cope in school by becoming "street smart" and learning the system. It is their way to survive in a "hostile" environment.
4. Although ADHD kids often have the tendency to become underachievers, they may put in longer hours and work harder than other students.

Reflection

Diane: In the next chapter, you will read about my daughter Danielle. But one memory in particular stands out from when she was in the first grade. Her teacher tried to tell me about Danielle's inability to understand verbal directions. "She asks way too many questions about every assignment. It's wearing me out!" Since this particular teacher was new to the school and always looked frazzled, I decided—some-what stupidly in hindsight—that it was her problem rather

than Danielle's. I never bothered to dig any deeper, never even talked about it with Danielle.

Questions for Parents

Have you had a good talk with your child lately, eyeball to eyeball? Do you know what is really going on in his head, how he really feels about his teacher, his school, and his friends? Have you assured him that you are a safe confidant? Does your child understand that you care about the trouble he is having in school, both academically and socially, and that God is in the business of answering prayers? Does your child know how much God loves children?

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

What can mortal man do to me? ... Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record? Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.

In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise—in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

What can man do to me? (Psalm 56:3-4; 8-11)

Appendix I

American Academy of Pediatrics Guidelines

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has now released national guidelines on the diagnosis, evaluation, treatment, and management of ADHD.¹ They recommend that parents have the diagnosis of ADHD confirmed by a professional using specific (e.g., DSM-IV) diagnostic criteria *and* a parent and teachers' rating scale such as the Conner's Scale.

They recommend that you be sure your child's doctor evaluates your child for the potential risk of additional psychiatric disorders. Then, after the diagnosis has been made, they recommend that you consider the risks, benefits, and costs of either behavioral or medication therapy.

The AAP recommends that you be sure your child is scheduled for frequent follow-up evaluations with your child's doctor, as ADHD can be chronic and requires a long-term approach to management.

They remind us that treatment approaches and regimens almost always will need to be adjusted over time, as your child grows and as her social situation changes—such as changes in school, teachers, or classrooms.

Finally, they conclude that we should be sure to use a teamwork approach to care that includes the child and teachers, pastors, coaches, and other significant people.

The AAP guidelines for the diagnosis and evaluation of ADHD, as well as the treatment options and goals, are available for professionals and parents (www.aap.org/policy/ac0002.html) (www.aap.org/policy/s0120.html). A downloadable handout for parents which summarizes these technical papers and guidelines is also available at the Web site (www.aap.org/policy/ADHD.pdf).

Appendix II Resource Groups

Here are a few resource groups you can count on for timely, accurate, and reliable information.

CHADD—Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

8181 Professional Place, Suite 150
Landover, MD 20785
800-233-4050 or 301-306-7070
www.chadd.org

A non-profit, national, parent-based organization that provides support and disseminates information on attention deficit disorders to children and adults with ADHD. CHADD has over 32,000 members and more than 500 chapters nationwide.

Publications: *ATTENTION!* (Quarterly magazine); *CHADDER* (quarterly newsletter).

Attention Deficit Disorder Association

P.O. Box 543
Pottstown, PA 19464
484-945-2101
www.add.org

The Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA) is a non-profit organization comprised of ADHD support group leaders, parents of ADHD children, and adults with ADHD. ADDA lends its experience to providing educational tools and resources, and advocating on behalf of those afflicted by ADHD and their families.

National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health

6001 Executive Blvd., Rm 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892

301-443-4513

866-615-6464

www.nimh.nih.gov (click on the “search” button, enter “ADHD”, and then hit “enter”)

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), conducts and supports research that seeks to understand, treat, and prevent mental illness. Information on NIMH-sponsored meetings, workshops, and symposia is available on the Institute’s Web site.

National Mental Health Association

2001 N. Beauregard St., 12th Floor

Alexandria, VA 22311

800-969-6642

www.nmha.org/ (click on the “search” button, enter “ADHD”, and then hit “enter”)

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) has national, state, and local chapters that provide information and support.

A publications catalog is available on request. Serial publication: *The Bill* (monthly newsletter)—news of conferences and workshops, current mental health legislation, and media activities.

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

P.O. Box 1492

Washington, DC 20013-1492

800-695-0285

www.nichcy.org

This organization provides information on the educational and legal rights that you have—state by state. It also has excellent parent guides for ADHD and learning disabilities.

A.D.D. Warehouse

300 Northwest 70th Avenue, Suite 102

Plantation, FL 33317

800-233-9273

www.addwarehouse.com

An excellent supplier of ADHD information and educational resources.

Online Newsletter by David Rabiner, Ph.D.

www.HelpforADD.com

Updates on all the recent studies pertinent to ADHD.
Solid and sensible.

Notes

Note: Notes marked with an asterisk () indicate information obtained from the National Center for Biotechnology Information Web site, PubMed (service of the National Library of Medicine, National Institute of Health). (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=PubMed)*

Chapter One

1. Edward Hallowell, M.D. and John Ratey, M.D., *Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping With Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood through Adulthood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

Chapter Two

1. Bonnie Cramond, Ph.D., "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and creativity—What is the connection?" *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 28, no. 3 (1994): 193.
2. Les Linet, M.D., "The Search for Stimulation: Understanding Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder," *Healthology Press*, February 2002 (www.abcnews.go.com/sections/living/Healthology/understand_adhd020221.html).

Chapter Three

1. Thom Hartmann, Janie Bowman, Susan Burgess, eds., *Think Fast! The ADD Experience* (Grass Valley, Calif.: Underwood Books, 1996).
2. R. J. DeGrandpre, *Ritalin Nation: Rapid-Fire Culture and the Transformation of Human Consciousness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).