

Doctors worry psychiatric drugs could be harmful to children

CHICAGO (AP) — When he was a toddler, Heath Barker was nicknamed "the red tornado" for his auburn hair and his penchant for tearing things up and jumping off the furniture. When he was just 4, he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and prescribed Ritalin.

A study of more than 200,000 preschool-age children shows this was no isolated case.

The number of 2- to 4-year-olds on psychiatric drugs including Ritalin and anti-depressants like Prozac soared 50 percent between 1991 and 1995, researchers reported in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

Experts said they are troubled by the findings, because the effects of such drugs in children so young are largely unknown. Some doctors worry that such powerful drugs could be dangerous for children's development.

Heath's mother has anecdotal evidence suggesting — as the researchers do — that the number of youngsters on psychiatric drugs is still rising. Through her involvement in Internet support groups for parents of children with behavior problems, Michele Barker said she is hearing of more and more 3- and 4-year-olds being put on drugs like Prozac.

"It's become a quick fix," said Barker, 39, of Hot Springs, Ark.

Although the study did not examine reasons for the increases, Julie Magno Zito, the lead author and an assistant professor of pharmacy and medicine at the University of Maryland, suggested a few possibilities.

With an increasing number of children attending day care, parents may feel pressured "to have their children conform in their behavior," Zito said. She also said there is a much greater acceptance in the 1990s of psychoactive drugs.

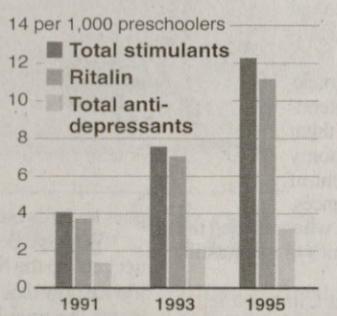
Dr. Joseph T. Coyle of Harvard Medical School's psychiatry department said the study reveals a troubling trend, "given that there is no empirical evidence to support psychotropic drug treatment in very young children and that there are

valid concerns that such treatment could have deleterious effects on the developing brain."

"These disturbing prescription practices suggest a growing crisis in mental health services to children and demand more thorough investigation," Coyle wrote in an editorial accompanying the study.

Drugging the young

A study found that the number of 2- to 4-year-olds on psychiatric drugs, including stimulants such as Ritalin and anti-depressants such as Prozac, jumped between 1991 and 1995.



Note: Results shown are for 151,675 preschoolers in one Midwestern Medicaid group.

Source: Journal of the American Medical Association

The authors reviewed Medicaid prescription records from 1991, 1993 and 1995 for preschoolers from a Midwestern state and a mid-Atlantic state; and for those in an HMO in the Northwest. The states were not identified.

Use of stimulants, anti-depressants, anti-psychotics and clonidine — a drug used in adults to treat high blood pressure and increasingly for insomnia in hyperactive children — were examined. Substantial increases were seen in every category except anti-psychotics, though in some cases the actual num-

ber of prescriptions was quite small.

The number of children getting any of the drugs totaled about 100,000 in 1991, and jumped 50 percent to 150,000 in 1995. That year, 60 percent of the youngsters on drugs were age 4, 30 percent were 3 and 10 percent were 2-year-olds.

The use of clonidine skyrocketed in all three groups. Although the numbers were small, the researchers said the clonidine increases were particularly remarkable because its use for attention disorders is "new and largely uncharted." They noted that slowed heart beat and fainting have been reported in children who use clonidine with other medications for attention disorders.

Dr. David Fassler, chairperson of the American Psychiatric Association's council on adolescents and their families, said the medications studied "can be extremely helpful for some children, even quite young children." But they should be prescribed only after a comprehensive evaluation and in conjunction with other therapy.

Their use is increasing in part because doctors are getting better at diagnosing behavior disorders at an early age, Fassler said.

However, because their effects on younger children and their development aren't known, Fassler said, the Food and Drug Administration has recently instructed pharmaceutical companies to study the connection.

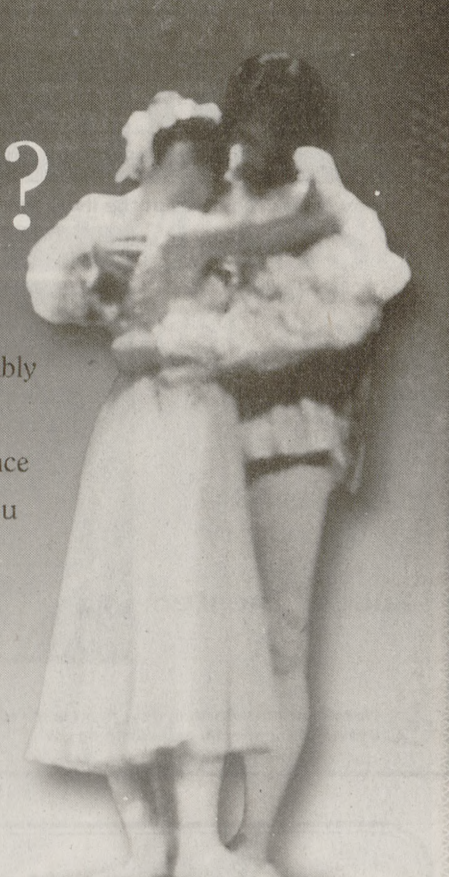
Barker said Ritalin calmed her son and helped him do well in school. But it also stole his bubbly personality, so she took him off it after four years.

"He started becoming the so-called zombie," she said. The family altered his diet and tried nutritional supplements instead.

Now almost 12 and drug-free for nearly four years, Heath is repeating fifth grade and has some learning difficulties. But his mother said he seems happier, and so is she.

"I don't care if he's not an honor roll student," she said, "because he's healthy."

Have Your Date Yet?



Most of you have read it. Many of you have probably seen the movie with Leo. And some of you may have even seen the play. But now is your chance to experience William Shakespeare's story as you never have; danced by one of the world's most acclaimed ballet companies.

But no one should watch *Romeo and Juliet* alone. Bring a date. Who knows? It could be the most romantic thing you do all year...

ROMEO AND JULIET

Ballet de l'Opéra de Bordeaux

Friday and Saturday,
February 25 & 26 at 7:30 PM
Sunday, February 27 at 2:00 PM

Student Tickets Start at \$14.50!

Season Without Boundaries
MSC OPAS
1999-2000

For the best seats, call the MSC Box Office at 845-1234. Or order on line at opas.tamu.edu.

Season Media Partners:



Want to learn more?

Join us prior to the performance for a Patricia S. Peters Lagniappe Lecture in the MSC Forsyth Center Galleries at 6:30 PM. Sponsored by the OPAS Guild.

Wanna play?
Play it safe.

get
FREE CONDOMS

at > www.drDrew.com