

The punishment mindset and school discipline

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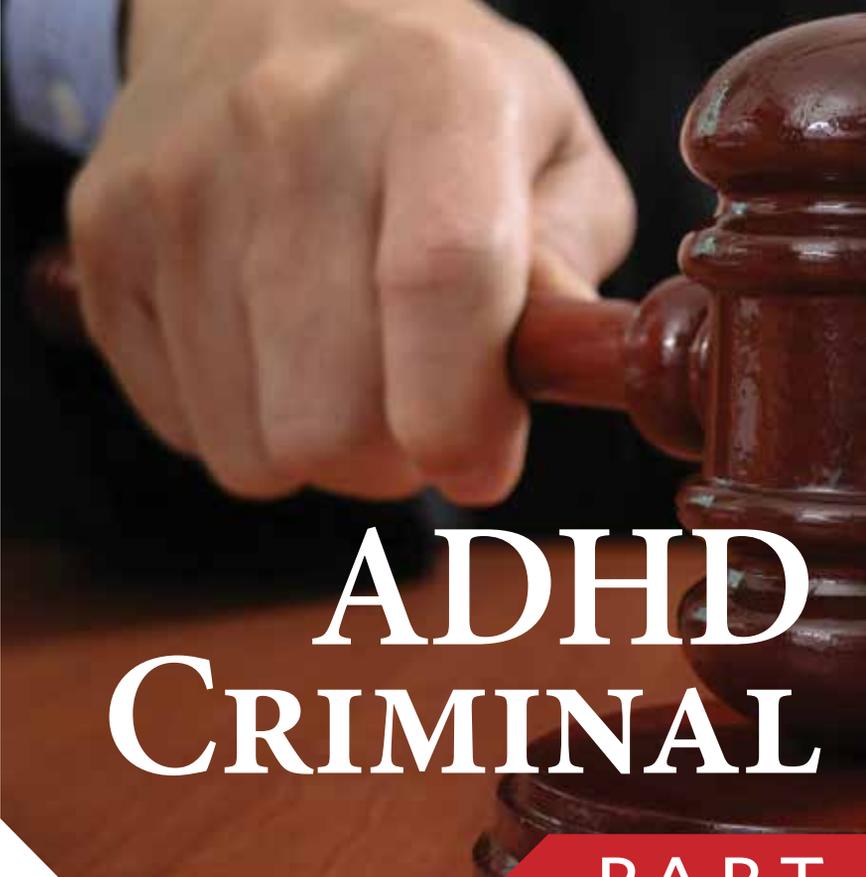
INDIVIDUALS WITH ADHD or similar disorders have brains that function differently, in some respects, from the brains of neurotypical individuals. To many readers of this magazine, that is well known and understood. These are our children, our students, our siblings, our parents, and even ourselves.

But there are many people who interact with individuals with ADHD and similar disorders who do not yet understand neurodiversity. They may believe that ADHD is not real; they may think an ADHD diagnosis is a convenient excuse for bad parenting; they may think that all brains are the same and that everyone can be “whipped into shape” with the right combination of carrots and sticks.

We know that some behaviors of people with ADHD stand out, cause disruptions, and attract the attention of people in positions of authority, such as teachers, principals, security guards, police, judges, and so forth. When the people in authority do not have an understanding of neurological differences and have not been trained to remain calm and to look behind the disruptive behaviors for what might be prompting them, situations can escalate. The consequences of escalation can be life changing for the individuals involved, especially if the juvenile or criminal justice systems are brought into the picture and if there is the absence of understanding and compassion in the school and community.

This article tells a difficult story. It describes some of the ways we got to the place where between 25 and 50 percent of individuals in jail or prison in the United States (and other countries) are believed to have ADHD, most often undiagnosed and untreated. But this article and especially the one to follow in the next issue also tell the hopeful story of how the tide seems to be turning. There is growing understanding of ADHD, thanks to programs like global ADHD Awareness Month in October and the dedicated work of an ever-growing number of ADHD professionals and volunteers. Old beliefs that led to heavy-handed policies are proving to have been misguided and those policies are starting to change.

Parents, teachers, attorneys, coaches, and others are learning about ADHD and educating their friends, families, neighbors, school officials, and criminal justice departments. Programs such as CHADD’s Parent to Parent and



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Teacher to Teacher are teaching the facts about ADHD and how best to support individuals with this type of brain. Communities are coming together to create programs of restorative justice with the support of police and the courts to offer individuals an opportunity to correct and learn from mistakes in judgment.

Part two will describe some programs that are addressing this challenge here and abroad and will suggest ways to get involved on the local level to foster a more compassionate and positive community approach. In part one, we’re looking at some of the factors that have led to the statistics mentioned above, and we’re starting with what has been called the school-to-prison pipeline.

The punitive approach

It is a sad fact that some schools in the United States suspend children as young as preschool, with black children suspended in disproportionately higher numbers (3.6 times more often than whites), according to a study from the US Department of Education that used public school data from the 2013–14 school year.

At the same time, there is an underdiagnosis of ADHD in black children, which a 2016 study suggests leads to their over-punishment and to their over-representation in what is called the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Kids with diagnosed behavior problems, including ADHD, are the most likely to be disciplined. Students with disabilities who are served by IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) are twice as likely to receive one or



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more out-of-school suspensions, with two-thirds of those students having been placed in restraints and seclusion.

It doesn't make sense to punish children for behaviors over which they have little or no control. The impulsivity of an ADHD child is often perceived as a willful choice the child has made rather than the result of an immature or differently wired brain. A teacher's failure to properly understand or interpret such behavior can result in escalation of the situation and subsequent punishment.

Children who are put out of school on suspension are children who are not learning. They are six times more likely to repeat a grade. One study found that students who repeat a grade are 68 percent more likely to drop out of school, so they will need extra support to succeed. Students who have dropped out, who have been expelled, or who are temporarily out due to suspensions are likely to get into trouble by being in places they shouldn't be without supervision. Clearly this does not serve the student or society well.

One factor that has contributed to some children moving from school disciplinary action to juvenile justice and on to prison is that many schools have outsourced their discipline to the courts and the police. Inside the schools of the United States are between 14,000 and 20,000 sworn law enforcement officers—police, who are working with the title of School Resource Officer (SRO). These individuals are trained as full police officers, but they are not likely to have received specialized training in youth development and working with young people. Schools with SROs often move students quickly from misbehavior to punishment

(including suspension or expulsion or even being turned over to the juvenile justice system), often for infractions as minor as causing a teacher to feel disrespected. Sometimes there is little or no time spent trying to understand what underlies the behavior, and the punishment is often disproportionately harsh.

Moving away from failed policies

There is no evidence that harsh punishments or removing young people from school actually benefits schools or young people. People are finally waking up to that fact. There is evidence, on the other hand, that the zero-tolerance policies that began in the “tough on crime” era of the 1980s have actually made schools less safe. Expulsions and suspensions disrupt the educational

process for students who are then more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Sending a teen to juvenile detention, where social connections are made with other troubled youth, puts him or her on a track that often leads to not completing high school and to ending up in prison as an adult.

Fortunately there is evidence that the failure of zero-tolerance policies adopted by schools decades ago is finally being acknowledged. We also now know that is especially important to keep young people in school when they are having behavior problems if we want to help them become contributing members of society.

There is a welcome and growing movement toward Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and restorative practices or restorative justice. Some schools have adopted proactive programs such as Dr. Ross Green's Collaborative Problem Solving model that is based on the understanding that “Kids do well if they can,” as opposed to the more traditional view that “Kids do well if they want to.” The latter philosophy often leads to a punishment mindset, and we have seen where that takes us.

In part two of this series, we will look at some programs in community, school, and prison settings that are taking a nonpunitive approach. These programs are educating, supporting, nourishing, and giving hope. 📍

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