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What's Wrong with My Child?: Navigating Through the Maze of Diagnostic Information

Sandra Surace

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At least six million American children have difficulties that are diagnosed as serious mental disorders, according to government surveys - a number that has tripled since the early 1990s. But there is little convincing evidence that the rates of illness have increased in the past few decades. Rather, many experts say it is the frequency of diagnosis that is going up, in part because doctors are more willing to attribute behavior problems to mental illness, and in part because the public is more aware of childhood mental disorders (NY Times, 2006). According to the US Attorney General, "Mental disorders are characterized by abnormalities in cognition, emotion or mood, or the highest integrative aspects of behavior, such as social interactions or planning of future activities." The process of diagnosing these disorders comes with a great deal of controversy. Before a diagnosis is accepted the practitioner must be able to explain how the behaviors differ from normal developmental behaviors. In Hope's case medical treatment would not be effective in reducing symptoms because her environment never changed. The sexual abuse never stopped and Hope was merely medicated into submission. Once the need for medications for such a young girl reached three the psychiatrist should have started asking other questions. However, since psychiatry categorizes the individual, once labeled, it stops questioning the diagnosis as being potentially 'false' and, thereby, confines treatment to the social standard of normal.

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