

Beware of Your Child's Label

Labels have meaning. Labels of the latest fashion are important to both children and adults (e.g., clothes, shoes, and electronics). Adults at times may satisfy the need for high fashion with an occasional knockoff instead of an expensive brand name merchandise. However, some labels have far greater consequence than just being out of step with the latest trend in fashion. These labels can have serious impact on your child's well-being. An unnecessary psychiatric label can erode your child's confidence, self-image and under mind his or her ability to succeed.

Psychiatric labels have consequences. Mental health professionals who work with children routinely have to diagnose (or name) the problem they perceive in children. For example, a child who argues, refuses to follow rules, and gets into fights with others could be diagnosed as defiant. The psychiatric term is Oppositional Defiant Disorder commonly referred to as ODD. Being labeled a "defiant" person creates a negative perception of how teachers and students are likely to perceive your child. In their minds the label is your child, and your child will be judged according to the label rather than who he or she really is. Additionally, children who are labeled often come to believe the label is who they are. Once a label has been assigned children begin to explain poor behavior or underachievement in school as a result of a psychiatric label (example, "I don't do well in school because I have ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder). The label often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Psychiatric labels affect self-image. While a diagnosis may be warranted in treating severe conditions (such as schizophrenia, major developmental delays, substance abuse), diagnoses are often counterproductive in dealing with common problems. Most experts agree that psychiatric diagnoses are very subjective. For example, a child whose parents are separating may feel angry and as result act out in school. It's important to remember that children more often than not are reacting to problems created by the adults in their lives. A child who argues and gets into fights may be desperately trying to adjust to a situation at home that they have no power to influence. It's pointless for children to be labeled for problems they did not cause. In addition, a psychiatric label can have a negative impact on a child's self-image and create a false image in the mind of others.

Advocate effectively for your child. Consider the following steps if counseling is necessary for your child. First, inform the counselor you want to be an active part of the solution. Second, let the counselor know because you are the expert of your child's life you want your perspective to be included in his or her treatment. Third, ask if a diagnosis is necessary. If the answer is yes, say you want to participate in that process by providing information about key events in your child's life. Fourth, ask the counselor if he or she is willing to use the LEAST negative diagnosis if one is necessary at all?

Collaborate with counselors. Approach mental health professionals as people who are committed to the well-being of your child but who may need your expert advice about your child's life. Mental health professionals are dedicated and hardworking people, and most are aware that psychiatric diagnoses are quite often influenced by personal opinion. Let them know that you want to be a part of the solution, and you don't want your child's behavior described in a way that creates additional problems by putting a negative label that can have a lasting impact. Most mental health practitioners will welcome your involvement as a concerned parent or guardian. Collaborate with them; be active and respectful. Both you and your child can have a valuable experience from counseling.

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