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Are food additives making your children naughty?



The subject of children's behavioural problems is an emotive one, affecting many people across the country. Here Andy Chrysostomou looks at the link between artificial food additives and childhood behavioural problems.



Having problems with your children's behaviour? Are your kids getting poor school reports? Are you finding your children increasingly argumentative and uncooperative? Are you questioning your parenting skills? Are you at your wits end? Well, you're not alone. According to government figures, between 2.4% and 5% of the population suffers from ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), with an unknown

number suffering from the less severe hyperactivity conditions. When children suffer from either of these two conditions, the knock-on effects are felt by the entire family. A disruptive child can cause problems both within the family and at school. Not only does their behaviour affect their education and home-life, it affects their siblings and classmates.

Children's behavioural problems are not only a major concern for many parents, there is a growing problem in schools too. Once a child is tagged a 'problem' child, their chances of getting a good education and therefore a good career are severely curtailed. The ability of

teachers to simply do their job effectively is hampered by unruly children, to the detriment of all the other pupils. Many more children are being labelled with terms such as 'Hyperactivity' and 'ADHD' and are often referred for medical treatment, usually in the form of drugs such as Ritalin (methylphenidate) or Adderall (dextroamphetamine) or Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine). The drugs do control the behavioural problems, but they also have side effects, some of which are possibly worse than the condition itself. According to the Food and Drug Administration in the USA, Ritalin can cause psychotic episodes, violent behaviour, paranoid delusions and psychological dependence, as well as a host of other minor symptoms.

The first problem many parents face is how to know the difference between 'naughty' and 'hyperactivity' and 'ADHD'. The government's Food Standards Agency (FSA) describes hyperactivity and ADHD on its website as:

"Hyperactivity is a general term used to describe behavioural difficulties affecting learning, memory, movement, language, emotional responses and sleep patterns."

"Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is more than just hyperactive behaviour. It is linked to a specific pattern of behaviour, including reduced attention span and difficulties concentrating such that they affect the child's ability to learn and function at home and at school."



Even with these definitions, it is still difficult for parents to know whether their children are just being naughty or they actually have hyperactivity or ADHD. While there are many factors that can contribute to a child's behavioural problems, it has been shown by a number of scientific peer-reviewed studies that food additives can be a major contributory factor in childhood behavioural problems.

The most recent of these studies was undertaken at Southampton University and funded by the FSA. The findings of this study were submitted to the FSA to inform government policy. The study used 153 3-year old and 144 8/9 year old children from a diverse social and economic background and encompassing a range of behavioural patterns, from well-behaved to hyperactive. The children were put on a diet of zero artificial food colour and additives (AFCA). The children were given an orange juice drink daily, with some children receiving just the drink, while others were given one of two groups of AFCA's in their drinks. The parents, teachers and assessors were not aware which children had which drink. The children were evaluated through observation and tested using standard measures for hyperactivity and ADHD.

The results of the study show that certain artificial food additives and preservatives when used in combinations typically found in children's snack foods and drinks can adversely affect children's behaviour and increase hyperactivity and ADHD symptoms. The study also showed that the effects are not limited to children with ADHD or hyperactivity, but are witnessed in children across the range of behavioural patterns and socio-economic backgrounds. So, the bottom line is, your child's poor behaviour could be attributed to the AFCA's in their diet, which would mean if you removed these chemicals from their diet, their behaviour should improve.

The easiest way to avoid these chemicals would be for the government to ban their use in food and drinks or the manufacturers to voluntarily stop using them. This is the one thing that could help to reduce behavioural problems amongst children across the board. This would seem an obvious and effective solution, but the government through the FSA is instead advising parents to check the labels on food and drink cartons for any of these additives and avoid giving them to children displaying behavioural problems. Unfortunately, there will be many parents that will shy away from taking away their children's chocolates and fizzy drinks, especially when they start crying or screaming, rendering the advice useless.

And of course there are a minority of parents that take little or no interest in their children, for whom this advice will be worthless.

It would be easier all-round and much more effective if food and drinks directed at children had these chemicals removed. Despite calls for stricter regulation and even an outright ban of AFCA's by a number of organisations concerned with children's welfare, the government approach is to allow the food industry to regulate itself, and has so far refused to impose legal requirements on food manufacturers to reduce or eliminate these chemicals. This is hardly surprising given that the global food and drink additives industry is worth around £12.4 billion a year.

What this means is, it is up to parents to monitor their children's diet and ensure any product containing these chemicals is off-limits. If enough parents do this, the food and drinks industry will have to take note. The only way to get manufacturers to listen and act is through consumer action. By spending your money on healthier alternatives, by boycotting products containing AFCA's, you can help persuade the manufacturers to remove them from your children's food and drinks.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Children's Food Campaign
Tel: 020 7837 1228
Email: richard@sustainweb.org
Web: <http://www.sustainweb.org>

Hyperactive Children's Support Group
Tel: 01243 539966
e-mail: hyperactive@hacsg.org.uk
Web: <http://www.hacsg.org.uk>

Young Minds
Tel: 0800 018 2138
e-mail: enquiries@youngminds.org.uk
Web: <http://www.youngminds.org.uk>

adders.org
Tel: 08709503693
e-mail: support@adders.org
Web: <http://www.adders.org>

ADDISS
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e-mail: info@addiss.co.uk
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Web: <http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk>

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AFCA'S TO AVOID

- Sunset yellow (E110)
- Quinoline yellow (E104)
- Carmoisine (E122)
- Allura red (E129)
- Tartrazine (E102)
- Ponceau 4R (E124)

* Source: Food Standards Agency Website

