

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #224: ADHD Medication and Addiction: Myth vs. Fact

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Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: Today I'm here with Katie and Mallory and we're going to be talking more about ADHD and medications in this episode. So, we're diving into one of the biggest fears that we hear from parents about medication, which is, could stimulant medication increase my child's risk for addiction or substance abuse later in life? And honestly, we really understand why parents are worried about this. So, a lot of parents hear the word stimulant and immediately think, oh my gosh, am I drugging my child? Am I increasing their risk that they're going to have a substance use problem because I'm giving them this medication early on? Again, this is in my office when I talk with parents, it's a common fear that I hear from parents of kids who are adopted. So, there's maybe a strong family history of substance use a lot of times on both sides of the family and so parents are really concerned when there's that history of is this

going to increase this problem later on in life? So, this is a really important question. I know a lot of you have.

Katie: Yeah. Another piece of this puzzle is that there's a lot of strong opinions online right now. And I feel like we're kind of biased because we're online a lot, we work online. So, I feel like we get the best and worst of that world a little bit.

Lori: And it's not just social media or online, it's the media itself. You know, we just talked recently about like a New York Times article that had just come out. And so, it's, I mean, it's the media in general that, you know, kind of has a very biased opinion, I think, about medications and negative impacts of them.

Katie: Yeah. And a lot of what they're sharing truly does make ADHD medication sound terrifying. And obviously there's people out there making it sound like this magical solution that's just gonna fix everything. But I do think that the noise coming from the anti-medication side is a lot louder. And most of us are just somewhere in the middle, trying to figure out what treatments are gonna be safe and effective, what's gonna help my kid get to develop the skills and live a really happy life. Like that's where we're all at is how do we best support our kids. And sometimes those really strong opinions, those things that the algorithm really rewards, that's not the nuanced approach. So that's what we're trying to take here.

Mallory: Yep. So, today's episode is not about convincing anyone to medicate their child, but we get that medication as a very personal decision and that every child is different. But some things that we want to talk really honestly about today in today's episode are ADHD and substance use risk, what long term studies actually show about ADHD medications and substance use risk, and why researchers are increasingly talking not only about the risks of medication, but also the risks of significant untreated ADHD or not using medication or accessing other supports. So, if you missed our last episode, episode 223, we highly recommend checking that out. In that episode we kind of set the stage for these medication conversations. We talk about what the research says when it comes to brain development and stimulant medication. It is a little bit technical, but it's totally worth it. We'd love to know what your thoughts are about this series. If you'd like some more deep dives when it comes to ADHD medication myths and facts. And as always, if you're loving the podcast, we would love for you to leave a five-star review wherever you listen. It's the best way for us to reach

more families like yours and get this really solid evidence-based information out there to the world.

Lori: Yes. And before we talk about medications and the increased risk and things like that, we want you to understand something really important. Having ADHD itself is associated with an increased risk for substance use disorders and impulsive behaviors across the lifespan. And I know that is not what you want to hear as a parent and you know, sometimes on the podcast and when we're sharing kind of research, it's not happy stuff, but it is the truth and the reality. A few reasons kind of why that might be research kind of suspect, researchers suspect that it might be related to the impulsivity that goes along with ADHD, emotion regulation challenges, kind of those reward seeking and sensation seeking behaviors that we see in people with ADHD, and sometimes people trying to self-medicate untreated ADHD symptoms. It does not mean that kids with ADHD are destined to struggle with addiction, but it, we are kind of bringing up that topic that not treating ADHD isn't neutral. So, it is something that we kind of talked about in our last episode a little bit. But again, ADHD itself is associated with that increased risk of substance use.

Katie: And as someone who has ADHD, this makes complete sense to me, right. Because if you think about the parts of ADHD that can be really challenging: sleep, waking up in the morning, you know, whether it's falling asleep and then you're so tired because you couldn't fall asleep, now you need to wake up, what are you going to do? And that is where we do see, as you mentioned, Lori, more kind of self-medication. Like that's what we mean. So, I need to take it, maybe starts with like a Tylenol PM or whatever it is. But that, those...

Lori: I feel like I'm being called out here.

Katie: I know, you know, I hate to do it. No, I'm just kidding. But I feel like it is really important to normalize that and say it makes total sense why. Because these are things that are hard and maybe if you have ADHD, you're someone who procrastinates and so you're waiting till the last minute to do things. I don't know. No one here is called out by that at all. But when that happens, then you're going to have more anxious feelings as you go into a presentation that you're not prepared for or whatever. So, you do see all kinds of different things. And I mean I drink caffeine and I do think that's why, because my brain is like, hey, let's wake up, let's get going, because maybe I didn't fall asleep that well the night before. So again, we know that there's a real brain-based reason why this is happening. But when you're

trying to figure out whether ADHD meds, stimulant medication is the right fit, we know that a lot of times there's one partner that's kind of questioning this. If my child takes stimulant medication as a child, are they going to be at greater risk for substance abuse in the future? So, let's answer it. What do we think?

Mallory: Okay, well the short answer is no. Of course we're not just going to leave you at that. So, the longer answer is that many studies are showing that the opposite is actually true. So, the research does not show that appropriately prescribed stimulant medication increases later risk for substance use disorders. So, there's one really important study, and we actually talked about this study in the last episode, the multimodal treatment study of children with ADHD or the MTA study, did this long term follow up on the children who are a part of that study. And what they found was really important in that there was no evidence that stimulant treatment increased later alcohol, nicotine, marijuana or other substance use.

Lori: Yep. And again, kind of looking at other large studies that were more recent. So, there was another very large study out of Sweden in 2014, 38,000 people included in this. And the main question they were trying to answer with this study was, does taking ADHD medication increase the risk of later substance use? And the outcome of that was actually, again, the opposite. People receiving ADHD medication had a 31% lower rate of substance abuse related challenges compared to individuals who were not receiving medication treatment. The longer the duration that they received stimulant medication treatment, there was an even lower risk associated with that. It's important to talk about the fact this was an observational study, so they weren't like controlling and placing people in different groups. So, we can't necessarily talk about cause and effect, but it is a very large study. It used real world data and they were able to control for a lot of different factors that other studies weren't necessarily able to do. So, it does really have strong evidence and strong support for that idea that stimulant medication actually reduces the risk of substance use later on in life.

Katie: And this is such a huge thing, right. Because as we're trying to conceptualize this, like I said, none of us have that crystal ball to see, like, what's the future going to look like. So, we can look to data like this where you have thousands of people and say, okay, so the trend overall is that there's actually a lower risk of substance use and abuse when you have that ADHD treatment at a younger age. And the longer treatment, the better. So just recapping that, because that's really, really important. So, looking at another study in 2025, was

published in Sweden and that looked at over 150,000 people with ADHD. And I love that this study covers such a broad range of ages. So, this was actually people from ages 6 up to 64. And this study is really interesting because the researchers actually looked beyond just substance use. So, they were actually looking at real world outcomes during periods of time when people were taking ADHD medication versus periods of time when they were not. And what they found is that during the time that they were receiving medication treatment, individuals with ADHD had a huge decrease in these types of situations. So, we saw a 17% decrease in suicidal behaviors, a 15% decrease in substance misuse, a 12% decrease in traffic accidents, and a 13% decrease in criminal behavior. So that's comparing the same group of people when they were taking medication and receiving that treatment versus when they were not.

Mallory: And for individuals who had already experienced things like multiple car accidents, multiple incarcerations for criminal behavior, those improvements when on medication were even larger. So, during the periods when those individuals were taking medication treatment, they found a 25% reduction in substance misuse and a 25% reduction in criminal behavior. So, this really challenges the idea that untreated ADHD is somehow safer or a more neutral option. Like even people that had already experienced these car accidents, these incarcerations, we saw an even bigger improvement when they were taking medication.

Katie: I love that. And it's such a good reminder that there is hope. So even if you or someone that you love or, you know, even your child, your teen, your adolescent is struggling with some of these things, getting that correct support can really make a huge difference.

Lori: Again, this doesn't mean that medication is a magic potion that's going to help everything work perfectly and it's not going to work for every child and it's not going to be appropriate for every family situation. But many parents, I think, are reluctant to even try medication because of this kind of myth that it is going to lead to substance misuse later in life and that really does, that is really not supported by the research. And it also makes me think of, there's a lot of people online that joke about if stimulant medication was so addictive, why do people with ADHD almost always forget to take their medication? Which I can speak to. When I was taking medication, I frequently forgot to take it. I don't know about you, Katie.

Katie: Yeah, I always have to laugh when I see that people are like, oh, you know, stimulant meds are so addicting. And I'm sitting here with my second alarm of the day to remind me to take my medication that I'm supposedly so addicted to. Actually, as we're saying this, I don't think I took mine this morning. It was chaos. So, I think I just silenced the alarm and moved on. So, yeah, I definitely can speak from personal experience that it's not something that you become addicted to and it's really important for us to have that knowledge for when people say things, you know, that are just completely inaccurate.

Mallory: Yeah. So, our key takeaway today is this, the research does not support the idea that appropriately prescribed ADHD medication increases later substance use risk. In fact, growing evidence suggests that effectively treating ADHD may help reduce some of those long-term risks associated with untreated ADHD, including substance misuse, but also car accidents and other real-world impairments. So just remember, medication is not a moral decision, it's a medical decision. And you're not failing your child if you ask questions, if you take your time and you carefully consider all of your options.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!