Reflections on Thirty-Five Years of Working with Children with ADHD

Is the Dandelion a Flower?

by Sam Goldstein, PhD

I GREW UP IN NEW YORK CITY; more precisely, in Brooklyn. New York City is a city fabled as a concrete jungle. For me, however, New York has never been a place absent navigable paths. Rather, I always considered New York as a city of building blocks and trails with lots of right angles. Other than designated green space, New York is a city of concrete and asphalt. Growing up in a high rise apartment, gardening in my family consisted of tending a row of plants my mother allowed to overgrow and take hold of a shelf in her dining room. On the street, any small green space was easily dwarfed by the sterile brick and stone all around.

I remember my mother taking me to our neighborhood park as a young child. During the summer months the park grounds were littered with button-sized yellow flowers that overnight turned to powder puffs—dandelions. Their bright yellow petals reflected the sunlight in a sea of ratty green that was part grass, and part who-knew-what. At least it wasn't asphalt or concrete. It was a place to play. When you fell down your knees were green but not skinned. I liked dandelions. I picked them for my mother. They were the flower I knew best.

It wasn't until my early twenties that I learned the truth about dandelions. Enrolled in graduate school, living with a group of other students in suburban New Jersey, I began my horticultural education. As part of our rent, each of us assisted in taking care of the grounds of the home. I quickly learned that all plants aren't created equal. In fact, there are more classes of plants than castes in India. Much to my surprise, I learned that these pretty yellow dandelions were in fact the lowest of the low—weeds, junk, trash. Somehow when suburbanites looked at dandelions they didn't see what I had seen. I am sorry to say that I too was quickly indoctrinated, finding myself pulling dandelions out of the yard whenever I spotted them, and I spotted them frequently.

Despite being among the undesirables, dandelions appeared to be the most hearty. They even grew through the cracks in the sidewalk. When other flowers withered and died for lack of water, sunlight, or because of a chill in the air, dandelions thrived. When mowed to a stub they quickly grew back. When pulled from the ground, as if by my some magician's trick, within a day they reappeared. As with many homeowners, I too have become obsessed about eradicating dandelions and other weeds from my yard. I own a half dozen gardening implements and have at least four bottles of, I am certain, toxic chemicals in my garage, all designed to rid my small piece of the earth of dandelions and other weeds.

Meet Maria

So what does this have to do with children with ADHD? I want to introduce you to Maria, a nine-year-old "dandelion." Maria was referred to me by her pediatrician a number of years ago, one of the nearly ten thousand children I have evaluated in my career. Maria was the eldest of her parents' two children. She was a fourth grader struggling in school, a beautiful child who had come to believe that she was not very smart and not very ap-

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preciated by teachers and classmates. As a preschooler, Maria struggled to become a good executive. She had difficulty keeping track of her crayons or keeping her bottom on the carpet square during group time. As such, she struggled to keep pace with the acquisition of new academic knowledge. She was falling behind in the rate at which she was learning to read, write, spell, and perform mathematics. School was becoming increasingly difficult.

Maria was not particularly overactive, but she was restless. She struggled to pick up cues in the environment and always seemed to be lagging behind her classmates. She had difficulty sustaining attention when tasks were boring, repetitive, effortful, or uninteresting. She sought out novelty yet struggled when tasks did not have immediate, predictable, valued payoffs. Provide Maria with a stimulating, interesting activity—one in which she could talk, move, and question—and she appeared nearly indistinguishable from her classmates.

Her parents were devoted to her. A working class family, their discretionary income had been directed at providing out-of-school tutoring support for Maria. Although Maria had benefitted from this support, she was still struggling in the classroom, not just to catch up but to keep up as well. Despite support, she began to fall further and further behind. Slow progress is not fast enough in our educational system. Slow progress makes a child conspicuously different in an educational system that values homogeneity over individuality.

At the time I evaluated Maria she was receiving two hours of resource or special education services per day. Maria disliked resource, complaining that she missed activities she enjoyed in the classroom. She acknowledged that the resource education was helpful but was concerned that the price of being different may be more than the help was worth. Going to special education somehow doesn't make children feel special or appreciated, I have learned.

My evaluation revealed that Maria was intelligent and did not suffer from serious neuropsychological deficits, but rather met full symptom criteria for the combined type of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. In the course of the evaluation, Maria explained to me that she would go to tutoring after school every day but didn't want to attend resource. When I asked her reasons, she responded, "People who go to resource aren't good at anything. I want to be good at something."

How would you respond as a parent, educator, or mental health professional if a child said this to you? For most of us, our first response is to intellectualize away the interpretation of the child, to explain that people go to resource to obtain help and that the criteria for special education service doesn't require being poor at everything. Yet, I was certain that Maria heard this before from other adults, including her parents and teachers, time and time again. On this day, instead of attempting to convince her this was a good thing, I empathized with her concerns and listened—sometimes the best course of action.

Raising resilient youngsters

Now you may wonder why I equate Maria—a child with ADHD, but like all children, a human being with strengths and weaknesses—with dandelions. Maria is not unlike the hundreds if not thousands of children I have worked with struggling through their childhood hampered by the symptoms and impairments of ADHD. Think about it. From the earliest incorporation of schools on this continent over two hundred years ago, up until the middle of the last century, children with learning, emotional, behavioral problems or any type of difference like ADHD that sets them apart, were seen and treated as the "weeds" of the next generation. Often decisions were made to not educate these children. Somehow like dandelions, the thought was they would survive, even thrive, absent education. Some did, but many did not.

I am always impressed, when I take a history from middle-aged parents who themselves struggled with the symptoms of ADHD in childhood, to discover the often circuitous paths they found to create purpose, happiness, and connections in their lives. It was not until fifty years ago that the American education system was legally mandated to provide appropriate education for all children, not just those who behaved well or were easiest to teach. If we truly recognize and accept our responsibility to prepare all children to become functional members of our society, a process that is essential to maintain our species, then we must provide educational services for all children.

If you believe that legislation can change hearts and minds, you're mistaken. You must come to view dandelions as flowers. We must accept the responsibility to nurture and support all children through their education. If we did so, life for children with ADHD would be better. If we did

so, we would view education not as a convenient, easy-to-implement activity for children doing well and as an afterthought when children like Maria struggle. If we all shifted our view, children with ADHD wouldn't find their way to my office viewing themselves as incapable, unconnected, and unintelligent.

We are now well aware that the treatment of ADHD must extend through childhood and for a significant percent, into adulthood. We now understand that symptom relief, while necessary and essential to help children with ADHD function within the systems we have created to educate them, is important but falls short of our goal. Symptom relief does not equate with changing long-term outcome for the better. With this in mind, we can all agree that we must identify those parental and educational practices that nurture the skills and stress hardiness necessary for all children, in particular those with challenges such as ADHD, to deal with an increasingly complex and demanding world.

We must find consistent, effective ways of educating and raising our children that will lead them to happiness, success in school, satisfaction in their lives, and solid friendships. For children with ADHD to realize these goals requires them to develop the inner strength to deal competently and successfully, day after day, with the challenges and demands they encounter. Let's find a way to focus on what is right, not just what is wrong in our children.

Regardless of ethical culture, religious, or scientific beliefs, we must strive to raise resilient youngsters. That is, youngsters capable of dealing effectively with stress and pressure; coping with everyday challenges; possessing the capacity to bounce back from disappointment, adversity, or trauma; learning to develop clear and realistic goals to solve problems, relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect. This is the foundation of a resilient framework. Numerous longitudinal studies of children facing adversity in their lives support the importance of this framework as a powerful force. The process of resilience explains why some children overcome overwhelming obstacles, sometimes clawing and scraping their way to successful adulthood, while others become victims of their earlier experiences and environments.

The concept of resilience offers an ethical and scientifically valid framework for raising and educating children. The tenets housed within this framework not only make sense but have been proven effective. The process embracing the concepts and methods associated with resilience has been objectively defined. There is increasing data reflecting the reliable measurement of these phenomena, increasing interest in attempting to effectively apply these qualities in children at risk (such as those with ADHD), and an emerging data base demonstrating effectiveness.

My colleague Dr. Robert Brooks and I have again and again focused on the importance of these protective factors, in a framework of positive psychology, in best shaping the life outcome for children with ADHD. Our emphasis on the best interests of children with ADHD, their rights and dignity, represents a bright star in our appreciation and understanding of the importance of preparing the next generation—everyone, including all of the Marias—for their future. As a society we must understand and deal effectively with the alarming trend of problems among our youth. In the end, no matter how effective and efficient our treatments are for ADHD, symptom relief we now know does not equate with changing long-term outcome. Commitment to what is right about children, appreciation of the forces that insulate and protect them, their ability to harness the power of resilience, can and must contribute to successful life outcome for children with ADHD.

Sam Goldstein, PhD, *is an assistant clinical professor at the University of Utah School of Medicine. For the last thirty years he has been the clinical director of the Neurology, Learning and Behavior Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. Dr. Goldstein is a former chair of the CHADD Professional Advisory Board. He has authored forty-four books, eight psychological tests, dozens of book chapters, and peer-reviewed research articles. He serves as the editor-in-chief of the* Journal of Attention Disorders *and co-editor-in-chief of the* Encyclopedia of Child Development. *Listen to his TEDx talk,* The Power of Resilience, *on YouTube.*

Fostering Resilience

Goldstein offers five strategies for fostering a resilient mindset in children:

- **Teach empathy by practicing empathy.**
Listen and obtain knowledge from your child, even though this is not easy to do. "Pay more attention to the heart," says Goldstein. Parents and educators can provide "bubbles of security" amidst the chaos, he says. He encourages us to be more sensitive when our children fail to meet our expectations. For example, a child who can't sit still in school, says Goldstein, quickly earns the labels of "immature," "hyperactive," "ADHD," and "disruptive." To the educators, he points out that more brain cells must fire for a child to sit still than to move. The empathetic response might be to simply let this child move more.

- **Teach responsibility by encouraging contributions.**
Goldstein emphasizes that children are born with a genetically programmed drive to help and to master skills, which we often fail to recognize and inadvertently strip away. We can encourage their sense of autonomy by encouraging them to help both at home and at school.

- **Teach decision-making by modeling problem solving that fosters self-discipline.**
Help children frame solutions by asking, "What's the problem? What options do you have? How can you break this up into steps?" As children become interested and involved, their self-discipline will increase. Goldstein emphasized the importance of self-discipline by talking about a study that tested the ability of four year-olds to resist cookies. It turned out that "cookie waiting" was a strong predictor of several variables of future success in school and in life.

- **Teach optimism by offering encouragement.**
When giving feedback, always start with the positive. Instead, we sometimes get into what Goldstein calls a "dance of dysfunction" by using negativity and coercion in response to our children's undesirable behaviors.

- **Teach competency by providing opportunities to practice.**
All children need "islands of competency," special skills and talents to use to their advantage in life. What's your child's special talent? As he or she works to refine it, offer reminders that mistakes are an opportunity to learn.