

Why Do Away With Drug Holidays?

Dr. R.M. Bergh

No more pencils, no more books...no more pills for ADHD? With summer vacation weeks away, parents of kids with ADHD may be wondering whether their children should also take a 'holiday' from medication.

The question is: does treatment help kids outside the classroom? And the answer is, 'yes'. In fact, medication may be even more important over the summer holidays than it is during the school year.

Why? ADHD causes thinking problems that don't magically disappear when school closes. Having ADHD is like listening to a radio that isn't tuned just right – it's a struggle to hear anything through the haze of static. Medication tweaks the dial so the signal comes through loud and clear – letting kids with the condition think logically, and consider the consequences before speaking and acting. Those abilities help us avoid accidents – say, by looking both ways before crossing the street or safely merging into traffic on a bicycle. Consequently, medication may make the difference between life and death, particularly when teens with ADHD get behind the wheel. For instance, research suggests that young drivers with ADHD are two to four times more likely to be involved in traffic accidents (the leading cause of death amongst adolescents) compared to other teens, and three times more likely to suffer injuries. However, other studies demonstrate that people with ADHD drive much more carefully and safely when they're taking appropriate medication.

Treatment also helps curb other kinds of impulsive, risky behaviour – something that may become doubly valuable during the summertime, when many children aren't as closely supervised as usual. For example, one study that compared average teens to those with inadequately treated ADHD, found kids in the latter group started having sex at an earlier age, had more sexual partners, and were much more likely to become parents (38% versus 4%) or contract sexually transmitted infections (17% compared to 4%). Medication allows children with ADHD to

make thoughtful decisions, which may in turn prevent them from succumbing to all kinds of temptations, including experimenting with alcohol or drugs.

But that's not the only reason continue taking ADHD medication all year round. Perhaps the most important thing treatment does is

enable kids with ADHD to get along with other people both in and out of school: Being able to follow rules and think before blurting out the first thought that comes to mind makes a child seem 'nicer'. Why is that so crucial? Being liked by others makes you feel good about yourself, and kids with healthy self-esteem are less likely to develop behaviour problems as they move into their teens. This may be why, despite faring better academically, kids who only take their ADHD medication on school days are just as likely to end up with serious behaviour problems in adolescence as children who never receive treatment for their ADHD.

Still, some parents might say, 'we don't want to treat John Jr. over the summer because we can manage him at home.' Just ask yourself, 'what's better for my child – being managed by Mom and Dad, or managing him- or herself?' As parents, it's our job to help our children gradually learn to take care of themselves. And don't forget: kids learn lots of very important life skills outside the classroom. Being able to listen, pay attention, and follow instructions is just as important when you're doing a chore for the first time, babysitting your younger sister, playing a sport like baseball, or even learning how to do a summer job. Taking on these kinds of responsibilities, and carrying them out successfully, is what builds the confidence kids need to tackle the even bigger challenges life holds in store.

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Reference:

Explaining ADHD: A paediatrician talks to parents, by Dr R. M. Bergh. Gauvin Press, 2006.

