

Medications

Is Medication OK?

Deciding to use medication to treat the symptoms of a mental health disorder for children younger than 5 years old is a complicated process. Parents and health care providers must work together to determine when using medication is the best course of action.

If a child's behavior is interfering with his or her ability to form and maintain relationships and other treatments have not worked, parents may decide to ask their doctor about the benefits of medication. While medication is not the first or only option for a young child with a mental health disorder, medication may be necessary in combination with other therapies to help a child cope with the symptoms of their disorder, build self-esteem, and continue their healthy emotional development.

Is Medication Safe for Young Children?

Each family must determine for themselves if the benefits of medication outweigh the potential risks. There is not a lot of research about the effects of psychiatric medications on young children—even those medications that have been used for children for a long time. If a parent does decide to add medication to their child's treatment plan, it is very important to find the most suitable and effective medication and the correct dosage. Parents must work closely with the prescribing doctors to fully understand the use of any medication.

When a child is put on medication, it is very important that parents observe and keep notes of what they see so they can report any changes in the child's behavior to their doctor. Because not all medications affect the body the same way, parents should also make sure they know what to do if a dose is missed. A doctor should also be consulted if the parent decides to stop using medication—stopping medications suddenly can be dangerous.

Stigma

Some children don't want others to know that they are taking medication. If a child does begin to take medication, parents should watch for signs of this and respect the child's privacy. This will also lessen the possibility that a child will be teased or made fun of by their brothers and sisters or their friends. It may help to use a subtle, nonverbal signal as a reminder that it is time for medication. If your child is in a daycare setting or preschool, you may want to suggest that similar strategies be used there if medication must be given during school time.

When Considering Medication, Consider These

- Which symptoms will the medication help?
- Which symptoms will it not help?
- Are there side effects?
- Is there a risk of a bad reaction?
- What is the proper dosage and when should it be given?
- Does missing a dose or stopping the medication matter?
- Can the medication be taken with other medications (such as those given for asthma or diabetes)?
- How many doses must be taken before the medication will be effective?
- How will I know if it's working?
- Who should I call if there is a problem?

Keep Detailed Notes

- Are there side effects?
- Are the symptoms better or worse?
- When does the medication wear off and how can you tell?
- Questions you want to ask the doctor.

