Doing Anything That Needs to Be Done to Help Children

A review of

Dyslogic Syndrome: Why Millions of Kids Are “Hyper,” Attention-Disordered, Learning Disabled, Depressed, Aggressive, Defiant, or Violent—and What We Can Do About It

by Bernard Rimland


$19.95

Reviewed by

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Bernard Rimland (1928–2006) is universally respected for his research and advocacy in autism. First and foremost, his pioneering work is responsible for vanquishing the cruel but previously pervasive notion that autism was caused by cold, rejecting parents, the then famous “refrigerator mothers.” Rimland's early interest in autism was triggered by personal experience. Although he had recently earned his PhD in psychology, he had not even heard of autism until he began researching the possible reasons for his first child's difficult behavior. Subsequently devoting his career to autism, Rimland published his groundbreaking Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and Its Implications for a Neurological Theory of Behavior in 1964 and then went on to establish the influential Autism Society of America. He advocated for children with autism all his life.
The book that is the subject of this review, *Dyslogic Syndrome: Why Millions of Kids Are “Hyper,” Attention-Disordered, Learning Disabled, Depressed, Aggressive, Defiant, or Violent—and What We Can Do About It* was published about two years after Rimland's death. It is a continuation of his crusade to absolve parents of guilt. His purpose in writing this book is to express his belief that almost all of the problem behaviors we see in children are the result of brain dysfunctions caused by the toxic modern environment. Rimland posits causal connections between these problem behaviors and environmental factors such as pollution, poor nutrition, prescription drugs, and, finally, childhood immunizations.

As signaled by the long list of problems included in the subtitle, Rimland is discussing problem behaviors associated not only with autism but with every possible childhood disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). His main point is that any of these symptoms is likely the result of physiological damage or contamination.

Biologists informally categorize themselves as lumpers or splitters. Lumpers are biologists who are comfortable grouping species that splitters think should be completely separate. In this book, Rimland presents as a committed lumper. He argues that a wide range of diagnoses should all be considered *dyslogic syndrome*. On page 29, the specters of school shootings, fatal gang activities, and murdered grandparents are held before the reader as examples of what the dyslogic syndrome can do. On page 30, the reader is told that learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and other problems that Rimland estimates could affect approximately one in three families in the United States come under the very wide umbrella of dyslogic syndrome. A bulleted list of 14 of the symptoms of this disorder include failures in judgment, selfish or narcissistic behavior, impulsivity, short attention span, “catastrophic” reactions to minor upsets, poor social skills, deficits in abstract thinking, and lack of empathy (pp. 34–35). What parent or teacher, especially one in the self-selected group reading this book, would not recognize several of these symptoms?

This book is written for the general reader: parents, teachers, any nonprofessional who is interested in children's behavior problems. Some of the real-life examples make very interesting reading but, for someone who is not used to insisting on empirical data, these informal reports can encourage faulty reasoning. Personal experience and friend-of-friend stories are substituted for scientific data. Often, the book reads as if the undergraduate dictum “correlation is not causation” had never been articulated.

Although the book has an engaging style appropriate to its general audience, it has several related characteristics that cause the professional reader some frustration. The quality of the research cited tends to vary wildly. Citations can be vague, and references are frequently made to conference presentations, press releases, or research carried out by commercial companies. For example, the study cited as the main support for Rimland's claim that removing junk food from the school cafeteria results in dramatic improvement is authored by National Oven Bakery (p. 96), the company that catered the lunches for the school system in question.
It would be absurd to argue that the environmental pollutants that Rimland discusses should not be subjects of great concern. Exposure to lead will cause neurological damage. Children deserve healthy food and excellent health care, although little research has indicated a direct link between behavior and vitamin therapies or yeast-free diets. Psychologists and medical researchers should continue to investigate all possible side effects, although the direct relationship with autism is highly questionable.

But, as important as it is to investigate new approaches, it is equally important to emphasize what has already been empirically shown to work. In 189 pages of text, applied behavior analysis (ABA) is not mentioned until page 157, and only one page is devoted to that topic. The effectiveness of ABA was established by empirical studies done in the 1960s (O'Donohue & Ferguson, 2006), and so the decision to emphasize unproven treatments at the expense of established, efficacious approaches, especially in a book aimed at parents, is unfortunate.

Rimland devoted his career to advocacy for children with autism and their families. Through his tireless work, he changed the direction of both psychology and psychiatry. Never again will a parent be faced with the label \textit{refrigerator mother} on the day she learns that her child has autism. Few people can claim as far-reaching and humane legacy as that.

In considering the shortcomings of this small book, the reader should also keep in mind its posthumous publication. This book must have been written at least three years before its publication, and we cannot know what changes Rimland would have made in light more recent developments in the field.

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