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Children 'believe ADHD is contagious'

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CHILDREN have alarming misconceptions about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder including that it is contagious, an academic warns.

Queensland University of Technology sociology of education researcher Beryl Exley today urged parents, teachers and doctors to bust the stigma surrounding ADHD.

In addition to believing they could catch ADHD, Dr Exley said children also commonly thought increasing medication improved behaviour and that sufferers were "anti-intellectual".

She said myths about ADHD could stem from confusion among medical researchers who couldn't agree on exactly what the condition was, nor appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

Dr Exley also said recent hype about the "behaviour crisis" in schools and the side-effects of medication didn't take into account the emotional strain on young sufferers themselves.

"There's something in the labelling that is very disabling to young people," said Dr Exley.

"We're not talking about evil monsters, or unlovable children ... these kids are often the most creative in the classroom.

"They are really struggling to understand what's happening to them as well."

She said children with ADHD needed to understand that medication wasn't a "cure-all" and there were other alternatives available.

"Children don't necessarily understand what their supposed condition is, nor why they are on medication, what the medication is supposed to achieve and what the alternatives are," Dr Exley said.

"Many children also seem to think if they have more medication, they might be better behaved ... this could see children growing up thinking medication might have all the answers.

"But medication isn't quite the solution that it's pitched to be ... children who are medicated still experience tensions in their social relationships."

She said alternatives to medication included managing behaviour by using role-playing to improve social skills and positive reinforcement to boost self-esteem.

Dr Exley also encouraged schools to provide spaces that were quiet and uncluttered to support students with ADHD.

"They need a time-out zone that's not a discipline space but a place to catch their breath and re-enter the classroom," Dr Exley said.

"Also, more flexibility in curricular content and the pacing of learning would help so the children don't have to keep pace with traditionally structured lessons that may not interest them or may take place when their mind isn't on the job."

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