

Kids and Medications

THE ISSUE: The share of children under 18 on a regular prescription for ADHD, depression, or other mental health issues grew from 133,000 a year in 1987 to **3 million a year by 2021**. These drugs can be lifesavers for some kids, helping them manage symptoms and live fuller lives. But relying on these medications long-term, especially during a child's growth years, comes with risks.

- Potential side effects from these medicines include everything from diabetes to suicidal thoughts, and can create long-term dependency.
- Parents and doctors should consider, on a case-by-case basis, how to support the health of children and teens, either alongside medications or instead of them, to avoid these potential downsides.

THE CONCERNS: The numbers tell a striking story about how common these medications have become:

- **Antidepressants:** In 1987, approximately 133,000 adolescents (ages 12–17) were prescribed antidepressants. **Teen antidepressant prescriptions have jumped by 1,400%** between 1987 and 2014, reaching more than 2 million teens on antidepressants in 2022—a 15-fold increase.
- **ADHD Medications:** A **study** found that from 1987 to 1996, the use of stimulant medications for ADHD among children aged 3 to 17 increased by 300%, from 0.6% to 2.4% of this population. According to the CDC's **2022 National Survey of Children's Health**,

which was just released last year, about 3.8 million children aged 3 to 17 were taking ADHD medications—up from 3.35 million in 2016—reflecting a 13% increase.

- **Antipsychotics:** Antipsychotic use among U.S. kids and teens is growing, and it's something parents should definitely keep on their radar.
 - ❑ **Recent U.S. data from a 2024 analysis of over 42,000 youth** shows that nearly 28% of children and teens with a mental health visit filled a psychotropic medication prescription in any given month between 2019 and 2021.
 - ❑ Antipsychotic prescriptions surged by 42% in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic—and that spike remained steady through 2021.
 - ❑ Across multiple studies, up to three out of four of these prescriptions are written off-label for uses not approved by the FDA, such as disruptive behavior or anxiety, not just serious conditions like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.
 - ❑ These numbers highlight the mental health challenges our kids face, but they also signal the need to question heavy reliance on these drugs.

THE RISKS:

These medications come with significant risks:

- **Antidepressants** carry a black-box warning for increased suicidal thoughts in some kids.
- **ADHD stimulants** can cause appetite loss, sleep problems, and potential dependency.
- **Antipsychotics** are linked to serious issues like weight gain, diabetes, and movement disorders.

These risks make it clear why long-term reliance on these medications isn't ideal.

SOLUTIONS:

The good news is that alternative approaches can sometimes manage these conditions as effectively as medications. These approaches can work alongside drugs when needed or, in some cases, reduce the need for them altogether. Here's what research suggests:

For ADHD:

- **Behavioral Therapy:** Parent training and classroom strategies can **improve behavior and focus**, often as effectively as medication for younger kids.
- **Organizational Skills:** Teaching kids how to plan and stay on task builds independence and reduces symptoms.
- **Exercise:** **Regular physical activity** boosts attention and mood, offering a natural way to manage ADHD.

For Depression:

- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** This therapy helps kids **reframe negative thoughts and develop coping skills**, often matching or outperforming antidepressants.
- **Family Therapy:** Involving parents and siblings can strengthen support systems and reduce stress at home.
- **Mindfulness Practices:** Simple techniques like deep breathing or gratitude exercises can **lower anxiety and improve mood**.

These strategies don't mean abandoning medications entirely—sometimes they're necessary. But combining them with non-drug approaches can lead to better outcomes with fewer risks.

- For example, a **study** from the University of Pittsburgh found that CBT combined with medication was about 30% more effective than medication alone in treating adolescent depression.

Similarly, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends behavioral therapy as the first-line treatment for children under age six with ADHD, noting it can be as effective as medication, with fewer side effects and more long-lasting benefits when parents are involved.

- Still, only **about half of young children** diagnosed with ADHD actually receive behavioral therapy as part of their treatment.

CONCLUSION: Medications can be a critical tool for managing ADHD, depression, anxiety, and behavioral health challenges in children and teens, but they shouldn't be the only answer. With growing concerns about side effects, dependency, and unknown impacts on developing bodies,

rethinking long-term medication use in children and teens has become a pressing priority. The focus needs to be on finding the right balance to support their long-term mental and emotional well-being. By embracing therapies, lifestyle changes, and family support, parents and doctors can help children and teens thrive with less reliance on medications.

SOURCES

[Antidepressant Use in Medicaid-Insured Youth: Trends, Covariates, and Future Research Needs | Frontiers in Psychiatry](#)

[Antidepressant Dispensing to US Adolescents and Young Adults: 2016–2022 | Pediatrics](#)

[National Trends in the Use of Psychotropic Medications by Children and Adolescents, 1987 and 1996 | Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#)

[ADHD Prevalence Among U.S. Children and Adolescents in 2022: Diagnosis, Severity, Co-Occurring Disorders, and Treatment | Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology](#)

[Data and Statistics on ADHD | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[Trends in Prescription Medication Use Among Children and Adolescents-United States, 1999-2014 | Journal of the American Medical Association](#)

[Antidepressants Side Effects: Pediatric Mental Health Minute Series | American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[Antidepressants for Children and Teens | Mayo Clinic](#)

[Medication for Kids with Depression | Child Mind Institute](#)

[Adverse Effects of Antidepressant Medications and their Management in Children and Adolescents | The Journal of Human Pharmacology and Drug Therapy](#)

[Antipsychotic Medication Prescribing Trends in Children and Adolescents | Journal of Pediatric Health Care](#)

[Treatment of Pediatric Patients | Current Psychiatry](#)

[ADHD Medications for Children and Adults | HelpGuide.org](#)

[Prevalence of psychotropic medication use among U.S. children and adolescents, 2013–2020 | Pediatrics](#)

[Psychotropic medication use among youth in the United States before and during the COVID-19 pandemic | JAMA Network Open](#)

[Psychotropic medication administration in pediatric emergency department visits | Pediatrics](#)

[National Trends in the Use of Psychotropic Medications by Children and Adolescents, 1987 and 1996 | Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#)

[Data and Statistics on ADHD | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

 **IndependentWomen**[®]

IWF.ORG