



THE MEDICATED CHILD



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In recent years, there's been a dramatic increase in the number of children being diagnosed with serious psychiatric disorders and prescribed medications that are just beginning to be tested in children. The drugs can cause serious side effects, and virtually nothing is known about their long-term impact.

In *The Medicated Child*, FRONTLINE confronts psychiatrists, researchers and government regulators about the risks and benefits of prescription drugs for troubled children. The biggest current controversy surrounds the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Formerly called manic depression, bipolar disorder was long believed to exist only in adults, but, in the mid-1990s, bipolar in children began to be diagnosed at much higher rates, sometimes in kids as young as 4 years old.

Like many of the 1 million children now diagnosed with bipolar, 5-year-old Jacob Solomon was initially believed to suffer from an attention deficit disorder. His parents reluctantly started him on Ritalin, but over the next five years, Jacob would be put on one drug after another. "It all started to feel out of control," Jacob's father, Ron, told FRONTLINE. "Nobody ever said we can work with this through therapy and things like that. Everywhere we looked it was, 'Take meds, take meds, take meds.'"

DJ Koontz was diagnosed with bipolar at 4 years old, after his temper tantrums became more frequent and explosive. He was recently prescribed powerful antipsychotic drugs. "It is a little worrisome to me because he is so young," says DJ's mother, Christine. "If he didn't take it, though, I don't know if we could function as a family. It's almost a do-or-die situation over here." DJ's medicines seem to be helping him in the short run, but the longer-term outlook is still uncertain. "What's not really clear is whether many of the kids who are called bipolar have anything that's related to this very well-studied disorder in adults," says Thomas Insel, the director of the National Institute for Mental Health. "It's not clear that people with that adult illness started with what we're now calling bipolar in children. Nor is it clear that the kids who have this disorder are going to grow up to have what we used to call manic-depressive illness in adulthood."

While some urge caution when it comes to bipolar in children, FRONTLINE talks with others who argue that we should intervene with drug treatments at even younger ages for children genetically predisposed to the disorder. "The theory is that if you get in early, ...we [might] delay the onset to full mania," says Dr. Kiki Chang of Stanford University, " ...so that these children never do progress to full bipolar disorder."

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CREDITS

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