It Really Is All about the Child:

An Interview with Dr. Edward Hallowell

By Dane L. Peters

IN A DECADE WHEN BRAIN RESEARCH HAS HELPED US UNDERSTAND LEARNING difficulties in children, and we have seen increased media attention on the use of medications to treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children and adults, Dr. Edward (Ned) Hallowell has worked tirelessly to educate the medical profession, parents, educators, and particularly the media about the disorder. He has also worked to keep the well-being of the child at the forefront of debates, misunderstandings, and parental anxieties.

Finding the Heart of the Child: Essays on Children, Schools, and Families (Association of Independent Schools, 1993), Hallowell’s first book of the 20 he has written to date, should give you an insight into this child-centered physician’s synchrony with Dr. Montessori’s philosophy. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist, has championed the child for some 30 years now.

I had the opportunity to talk with Hallowell about his work and his upcoming Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambusch Lecture at the American Montessori Society Annual Conference in Orlando, FL, in March 2013.
ON LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Peters: You catapulted ahead as the expert on attention deficit disorder (ADD) and ADHD with your 1995 New York Times Best Seller *Driven to Distraction*. It might be helpful to our readers to begin by differentiating between the two disorders.

Hallowell: It’s very simple. It is the presence or the absence of hyperactivity. You can have the condition with hyperactivity, which technically is ADHD-combined type, or you can have the condition without hyperactivity, which in the *Diagnostic Manual* is still primarily ADHD. But, technically, there is no ADD, just ADHD inattentive type.

So, the practical importance is that you absolutely can have ADD without being hyperactive, and that’s more common in girls; the female version tends to be without hyperactivity and without disruptive behavior.

Peters: Are there dietary issues related to ADHD—that is, foods, beverages, supplements that promote or inhibit it?

Hallowell: Sure. What you eat always influences how you think and how you behave. So yes, if you eat a healthy diet, the symptoms will be less bothersome. The old notion was that [ADHD] was caused by diet, a theory most people now don’t subscribe to. In any case, I advise all my patients to eliminate additives, junk food, and sugar. Not eliminate sugar, but cut way back on it, just because to do so is better nutrition in general, and certainly for some kids sugar exacerbates the symptoms.

Peters: Please talk a bit about medications and how they can support or hinder children with learning differences, and include a child’s response to medication at different ages.

Hallowell: Age doesn’t matter—if it works, it works—and you can start it as early as 4 years old. My oldest patient was 86. When stimulants work (and now we’re talking ADHD, because they have no impact on dyslexia), they work, and they are a godsend—stimulant medications such as methylphenidate, amphetamine, Ritalin, or Adderall. When one works it’s fantastic, it’s amazing. It’s like eyeglasses. These medications work about 80 percent of the time, so 20 percent of the time they do not. The real problem is most people are afraid of these medications. The medical facts are that they are safer than aspirin, but aspirin kills thousands of people every year, and we sell it over the counter. These [stimulant] medications are controlled substances and many doctors are afraid to prescribe them, which is a shame because it means people who could benefit don’t get the benefit. Nine out of ten patients who come to see me, the first thing they say is, “I don’t want to use any medication.” There is massive ignorance in the general public about medication and a huge misinformation bias.

Peters: We often hear “sensory integration” and “auditory processing” in relation to children with learning differences. Are these the educational buzzwords of the day or are they terms we genuinely need to understand in working with children with learning issues and their parents?

Hallowell: They are real phenomena in ADHD. It’s usually these kids who are hypersensitive in one sensory domain or another—hypersensitive to touch, certain clothing, sounds, or smells. With auditory processing, these kids often have trouble processing what they hear and making use of what they hear. So they’re both real and important to recognize.

Peters: Can you talk about what you mention online about the “hard work” people with ADHD must do? Describe this hard work in specific terms.

Hallowell: If you have ADHD, the hard work is learning to do executive functioning, i.e., learning to get organized, learning to remember your homework assignment, learning to hand in your homework after you’ve done it. You can write a brilliant paper but leave it at home. It’s learning to stay on track and finish one thing before you start another thing. It comes naturally to people who don’t have ADHD, but for people with ADHD, it doesn’t come naturally at all. It takes a lot of practice, and that’s the hard work.

Peters: What is the incidence of learning differences in boys and girls?

Hallowell: Roughly the same. You keep saying learning differences, but we’re talking about ADHD, because dyslexia is another story, and foreign language is another story, and math is another story. So with ADHD, the books will tell you 5 percent. I think it’s more like 15 percent of the population, and it used to be that it was ten to one, boys to girls; but now, it is more even as we recognize the non-hyperactive syndrome. But, then, dyslexia is even more common.
ON MONTESSORI

Peters: As the Dr. Nancy McCormick Rambusch lecturer at the AMS 2013 Annual Conference in Orlando, FL, your address, “Igniting Every Child’s Full Potential,” will draw on brain science, performance research, the wisdom of thinkers including Dr. Howard Gardner and Dr. Seuss, and your own experience to illuminate ways to guide distracted children. How will you use this opportunity to promote the good work you have been doing with children over the past 30 years?

Hallowell: Honestly, I think it is as much to promote the good work that Montessori schools have been doing with children with ADHD . . . and other kids, by the way. Because there is just tremendous overlap between what I recommend and what Montessori does. I think that the lecture will be more of an affirmation than an instruction, because this is the way to teach, it is the way to learn. It is, you know, like medical school. Once you get out of the first 2 years, which is really backwards—the second 2 years of medical school are just going to the hospital, finding a patient, and working, like every patient is your laboratory.

Peters: Now that you have connected with the greater Montessori community through the facilitation of a recent AMS Heads of Schools Retreat, speaking to the New York City Montessori Network (NYCMN), and pitching your Mining Magnificent Minds program on the AMS website, how do you see the Montessori environment supporting children with learning differences? How do you see that same environment not supporting these children?

Hallowell: Montessori is perfect. I think Montessori is the ideal educational system for everyone.

Peters: That’s a big statement.

Hallowell: Well, I think it is. If you read my book The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness, [what I describe] is basically Montessori without my knowing that it was Montessori. I think the Montessori system is the ideal educational system because it is all about learning through discovery. It is the opposite of rote learning—it is all about learning by doing—and that is the best way to learn. It turns you into a lifelong learner. So I believe that it is the best system for everyone. For kids with ADHD, the one thing they need more of that most Montessori teachers tend not to provide is a lot of structure and direction. So if the teacher is willing to be a little bit “not-Montessori” in this regard, I think other Montessori folks would say that is fine. If the kid is lost, confused, you don’t just let him sit there being lost and confused, and if you can provide a little structure and direction, then he will take off.

Peters: Dr. Joyce Pickering, a Montessori colleague of ours who is very familiar with children with attention challenges, wanted me to ask you this question: With your renowned expertise in ADHD, what do you see as the benefits of the Montessori classroom for children with attention challenges?

Hallowell: Just the ability to follow your curiosity, which is what the ADD brain wants to do, and Montessori encourages that. Most traditional classrooms discourage that. They say, “Pay attention to what we want you to pay attention to,” while the Montessori classroom says, “Let your curiosity lead you,” which is what ADD people are trying to do. That is why it is the perfect environment.

Peters: In one of her last lectures, Dr. Montessori “summed up the ideas she had developed over a half century—the importance of the early years, the absorbent nature of the child’s mind, the need to allow the child to develop his capabilities spontaneously rather than by means of the force of adult pressure. The child’s plea, she said, is ‘Help me to do it myself’” (Kramer, p. 361). Can you comment on how this plays out today in children with learning difficulties?

Hallowell: Again, that’s perfect. It is just that some kids with ADD or with dyslexia do need help, in other words, they need special instruction. If you have dyslexia, you need help learning how to read; so leaving them to do it themselves won’t work. And with ADD, the help kids need is in the structure, in learning how to do executive functioning—learning how to plan. But other than that, the Montessori environment is perfect.

Peters: One of the eight principles addressed in Angeline Lillard’s book, Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius is “the order of the environment is beneficial to children.” In your experience, how important is it for children with learning issues to have an orderly environment in which to work?

Hallowell: Orderliness is very helpful, but regimentation is not. You don’t want the environment to be confusing, because they are already twisting and turning in their brain. You want the external environment to be orderly and predictable, but at the same time, full of surprises. But let the child discover the surprises. It is like Shakespeare, who wrote within a very tight structure—iambic pentameter. So, the order was there, and then within that structure he created enormous variety, and so the order of the
Montessori classroom allows the child to create variety—to create surprises.

**Peters:** And then on the other side, does providing choice and encouraging independence help or hinder children with attention deficits?

**Hallowell:** It helps, except when it doesn’t. Let me explain. Sometimes, too many choices overwhelm them, and that’s when the teacher needs to intervene. I call it the Chinese Menu Syndrome: It is just too much, they want it all, and they get confused and frustrated. That is when the teacher says, “Order from this column.” They need that structure, and that is not going against Montessori because you are doing some organizing that children cannot do.

**Peters:** In the 1890s, when Dr. Montessori made the decision to give up her medical career to pursue a career in education, she began her work with children by studying Séguin, Froebel, and Pestalozzi. These noted educational practitioners and philosophers helped her to understand the need to help children who were confined to asylums. What was your impetus to devote your career to children and adults who have learning issues?

**Hallowell:** I didn’t even know ADD existed until I finished all my medical training and my fellowship. I was 31 years old when I learned about it—I always knew I had dyslexia. I was a slow reader. But, when I learned about ADD and I realized I had it, I also realized that it was hugely misunderstood and more common than most people thought. When I learned about this hyperactive voice and as I started studying with my professor, the head of the hospital, I told him I was writing a book about ADD. He said, “Why do you want to write a book about pains in the ass?” That was the way most people thought of it—these are just “bad boys.” That was when I was determined to became the champion of ADD and support these children.

**ON PARENTING AND SOCIETY TODAY**

**Peters:** What is your take on the suggestion that children today have a sense of entitlement when it comes to school, work, and personal time?

**Hallowell:** I’m very wary of generalizations like this. I think parents are great and kids are great, so in my philosophy about how to raise kids, as I wrote in my book *The...*
Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness, I think the key to it all is what I call connections. Creative connective childhood, and by that, I don’t mean access to the Internet. I mean friends, family, neighborhood, dog, nature, God—as many positive points of connection as you can create. And then have fun with your kids and that’s it. I’ve raised three kids that way and they are fantastic. Just connect with kids, have fun with them, and teach them to do their homework and brush their teeth—that’s it. All this stuff, every week there’s a new book about parents who are messed up in this way and kids messed up in that way, and I just don’t see it. I really don’t, but then the kids I know and the parents I know are doing their best, and if they put in the time, they usually get good results. With some exceptions, of course, but things can go wrong. I think the problems lie in the educational system that is really marginal in the public schools in this country. It’s all about rote learning, race to the top, and all this kind of stuff that Obama has gotten as wrong as Bush. So the politicians don’t get it, the policy makers don’t get it, and the poor teachers are beleaguered by high-stakes testing and reaching benchmarks that are unrealistic.

Peters: Can you talk about the role standardized testing plays in education today? What advice would you pass on to schools to help them in working with parental anxiety?

Hallowell: Raising test scores—that is considered to be the gold standard of an education, and it absolutely shouldn’t be. The gold standard of education should be discovering new knowledge, learning new things, and enjoying doing it. Are you becoming a lifelong learner? When I was consulting with the Harvard Chemistry department, which I did for some 8 years because they had suicides there, one of the things I learned is that Harvard on paper gets the best applicants from around the world because they’ve got five Nobel Prize winners in their department.

Their applicants for graduate and post-doc positions are the best in the world on paper and have the top scores in the world. Every year a new crop came to this huge department, like 600 students. The mandate is to go to the lab and discover new knowledge. Some rush into the lab like, “Hallelujah! I can go into this incredible lab with all these incredible resources and all these amazing mentors and discover new knowledge.” The other group freeze up and says, “No, you’ve got to tell me what to do; I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll run your protocols. I’ll stay up all night, but you’ve got to tell me what to do. I can’t come up with something on my own.” And that’s the outcome of this do-what-you’re-told curriculum, and these kids do it really well. They do it the best of anyone in the world. They get the top scores, but they don’t know how to think creatively. They don’t know how to take initiative. It is the Montessori kids who would run into the lab. They’ve been doing it since they were very young, but these others—and it’s just a shame because they’ve lost it—can get it back, but it’s hard. They’ve lost the brain muscles that they need the most.

Peters: There seems to be a movement to downplay the emphasis on rigor and emphasize a more Montessori approach to learning, for example, to accentuate effort over achievement (Dr. Carol Dweck); foster a child’s creativity (Sir Ken Robinson); and respect differences in individual child development (your own work). Would you agree, and how do we help parents and educators understand the importance of children having choices in their work and emphasizing effort over achievement?

Hallowell: Just get them to go back to their own lives. What worked for you? Or what led you to be the best you could be? And then you’ll discover that it was moments where you could follow your curiosity, follow your passion, that you were at your best. Let me just say one more thing about rigor, because it’s such an important concept. Where I went to high school (Phillips Exeter Academy) was a place that most people think of as an extremely traditional, orthodox, rigorous, and competitive institution. It is, but in fact, it’s very, very Montessori. All classes at Exeter are taught at round tables.

Peters: The Harkness Table, right?

Hallowell: The Harkness Table, exactly. It’s these round tables, and what you do is you sit there and talk with each other. So far from being this dictatorial teacher, the Exeter teacher is a facilitator, an instigator, a catalyst, and the kids basically teach each other. It’s very infectious. The School changed my life forever. But not in the ways most people think. Most people think, “Oh, you went to Exeter. What a hard school, very rigorous and all that.” They don’t know what the rigor really was. It was wonderful rigor. It was exciting. It was the most important 4 years of my intellectual life. It was Montessori.

After our interview, Dr. Hallowell reminded me that it is the Montessori classroom that fosters happiness in adults. His last words were, “Dane, it’s all there in my book The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness. Dr. Montessori got it right, and she did it over 100 years ago. Pretty amazing.”
References

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For more information on Dr. Hallowell, visit his website: www.drhallowell.com.

Conference Alert: Mark your calendar for Dr. Edward Hallowell’s keynote address, “Igniting Every Child’s Full Potential,” at the AMS 2013 Annual Conference, Saturday, March 16, in Orlando, FL. For details visit www.amshq.org/2013conference.

The personality of the child has remained buried under the prejudices of order and justice. Though the adult has agitated very strongly in defense of his own rights, he has overlooked those of the child.