



# UPDATE

## SLEEP DISORDERS IN CHILDREN CAN MASQUERADE AS ADD/ADHD

Poor concentration and attention, impaired short-term memory and decreased work productivity are accepted symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) in adults. These symptoms overlap those of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD). In fact, some adults with OSA are misdiagnosed with ADD/ADHD, with symptom elimination when their apnea is controlled. Recent studies in children suggest the same might be true for them. By current estimates, 20-30% of children with frequent snoring and/or OSA suffers from inattention and hyperactivity.<sup>1</sup> The repeated arousal's, hypoxemic events and sleep deprivation associated with apnea may undermine normal behavioral inhibitions, resulting in problems self-regulating behavior and affect that both mimic ADD/ADHD and undermine academic performance.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, school performance has been shown to improve in first graders with substantial academic impairments after their OSA is treated.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a recent study suggests that cognitive/intellectual impairments secondary to OSA in early childhood might not be completely reversible.<sup>4</sup>

Periodic limb movement disorder, and the related restless legs syndrome (PLMD/RLS), once considered disorders of middle age, are now known to have onset in children in more than ½ of cases. What is commonly attributed to “growing pains” in some children might be a form of restless legs. Sleep specialists believe that the sleep disruption associated with PLMD and RLS and the motor restlessness of RLS while awake could contribute to inattention and hyperactivity in ADD/ADHD diagnosed children. Studies revealing an increased incidence of PLMD and RLS in children diagnosed with ADD/ADHD and improvement in symptoms when the limb movement disorders are treated support this notion.<sup>5-7</sup>

Children undergoing evaluation for ADD/ADHD should be screened routinely for sleep disorders including OSA and PLMD/RLS.

If you would like a copy of this article, contact the Sleep Disorders Center at (714) 771- 8950.

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