

CASE
STUDY

THE CASE OF MATT

It was not until Matt was nearing the end of first grade that his inattention and poor concentration became apparent. He was a bright child, according to the results of school-readiness testing, who began the year with predictions of great accomplishments. At first, he seemed to live up to his promise, but as the months passed, he seemed to have persisting difficulty absorbing new information and finishing his daily lessons. His teacher felt from the outset that Matt had been considerably more active than his classmates but attributed this to a high level of curiosity that constantly led him into new undertakings.

At home, Matt had never been considered to be a problem child. The second of five children, he had grown up in a family that encouraged

independence and imposed minimal constraints on the children's behavior. He was not watched especially closely by his parents but was instead encouraged to develop his own interests and keep himself occupied. With four other children around the house, the level of ongoing activity was rather high, and Matt's behavior did not seem markedly atypical by his parents' standards.

The problem that emerged at school involved the fact that Matt found it extremely difficult to focus his attention effectively on his work. Moreover, he seemed to be restless and physically agitated much of the time. Accustomed as he was to working on things that interested him and at a pace that suited his somewhat high-strung temperament, Matt found it difficult to work under

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the constraints imposed by his teacher at school. He constantly fidgeted in his seat, was easily distracted by things going on around him, and seldom completed his assignments on time. Because his behavior was not especially disruptive to others, it initially received little attention. But after the first few months of school, his teacher had become aware that the quality of his work consistently failed to measure up to the standards she felt were reasonable based on his aptitude test scores.

By the end of the first grading period, Matt was passing all his academic subjects, but he received several "Unsatisfactory" ratings in such areas as Paying Attention, Completing Work on Time, General Work Habits, and Ability to Work Independently, which surprised his parents. A meeting with Matt's teacher achieved no particular resolution, mostly because it was difficult to specify precisely just what Matt needed to do in order to work more effectively. His teacher did suggest that he have a physical examination, however, as she felt that his restlessness might have a physical basis.

Matt's physical health had been generally good throughout his early development. His mother's pregnancy was free of major complications, and although the labor had been difficult, he was born without incident. He was sometimes colicky as an infant and seemed more demanding than her other children had been. She viewed him as more active than the other children right from the start and recalled that his attention was constantly being diverted from one thing to another. But this did not create any particular problems at home, and prior routine physical examinations had uncovered no major health problems. Thus, the first real suggestion that anything might be amiss did not occur until after Matt had started school.

The physical exam done at his teacher's suggestion once again found Matt to be basically in good health, although on the basis of the teacher's report and his own observations, Matt's pediatrician felt that the boy's behavior might warrant a consideration of "hyperactivity." Until Matt's behavior was evaluated more precisely, however,

the pediatrician was reluctant to prescribe any medication. He recommended that Matt be evaluated by a clinical psychologist in private practice and that a decision regarding medication be postponed until the assessment was completed.

Matt's parents were perplexed and somewhat upset by the lack of clear definition of Matt's problems. They were also distressed by the apparent insinuation that Matt's problems might have a psychological, rather than physical, basis. Despite these reservations, they proceeded with the recommendation and had the evaluation performed. A clinical psychologist saw the entire family together as a unit after an initial interview with the parents. She also carried out basic psychological testing on Matt, using tests designed to assess general mental abilities, school achievement levels, work habits, and basic personality dimensions. Finally, she visited Matt's school to observe his reported problems firsthand. The results of the assessment indeed suggested that Matt had greater difficulty than most children with respect to sustained concentration and attention. In addition, his typical activity level at school appeared markedly higher than that of the other children.

Evidence came from several sources. First, Matt's performance on the most recent revision of a Wechsler intelligence test designed specifically for children was marked by (1) an overall above-average level of performance but (2) relatively poor performance on a group of component measures that collectively forms a "Freedom from Distractibility" factor. Each of these tests demanded sustained, careful attention to a fairly complex task—an undertaking that was beyond Matt's powers of concentration. On portions of the Wechsler IQ scale, Matt's performance was at a level indicative of above-average general abilities. Further testing revealed that, although he possessed sufficient basic academic skills to master the demands of his schoolwork, Matt seemed at a loss in controlling the process of analyzing the various parts of any complex task and working systematically toward a solution.