

**Book Title: Treating Huckleberry Finn: A New Narrative Approach to Working with Kids Diagnosed ADD/ADHD**

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**Publisher: Jossey-Bass**  
**Year: 2000**  
**ISBN: # 0787961205**  
**TYPE: Nonfiction**

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If you have doubts concerning the conventional thinking on ADHD and are looking for some alternative ways of dealing with these special students, David Nyland's book, *Treating Huckleberry Finn: A New Narrative Approach to Working with Kids Diagnosed ADD/ADHD* (2000), outlines a radical drug-free approach that may have considerable merit. To set the stage for discussing this book, it may be worthwhile mentioning some of the generally accepted positive attributes and cautions to for the use of psycho-stimulant medication in children (specifically Ritalin). Although these drugs do increase appropriate behaviors in about 70% of students, 30% report either no response or a non-favorable one. The side effects of these stimulant drugs may include insomnia, reduced appetite, stomachaches, headaches, irritability, increase of tics, possible long-term brain damage and addiction. The use of stimulants to improve students academically on achievements tests has not been documented to be as successful as positive behavioral results. Other cautions are that parents and teachers may view these medications as a panacea to solve behavioral and academic problems when it may only make children more compliant. Children must be taught not to believe that these drugs are a substitute for self-responsibility and self-initiative.

With these understandings as a common starting point, David Nyland in, *Treating Huckleberry Finn*, takes a much more radical approach to the use of drugs in the treatment of schoolchildren. He has a deeper level of disagreement with the current medical model treatment with Ritalin and practices an alternative approach that he feels can be successful. He believes that ADHD has been marketed as a biological disorder when very little evidence supports a biological origin. The diagnosis can be very subjective and the wdepression ADHD syndrome may be a "social construct" that is merely a way of explaining certain behaviors that are derived from our current social environment. Nyland sites several studies that claim Ritalin is highly addictive and only effective in the short run and may do permanent brain damage if used long term. Other physical effects reported are: decreased blood flows to the brain, disruption of the growth hormones affecting brain and body development, psychosis, depression, mania, irritability, and possible brain shrinkage. The psychological damage and long term effects have not been well established but may include: drug dependence, a self-image of weakness, loss of personal responsibility, a learned helplessness through submission to medical authorities and the child may attribute any success to the use of the drug rather than to their own talents, motivation and abilities. Students may feel they are less capable and learn to expect less out of life.

In using Huck Finn as an example of a boy who surely would be labeled ADHD if he was in a modern school setting, Nyland challenges establishment thinking on the treatment of boys in American schools. In school we expect boys to sit still and be quiet all day when they probably need to run and play. Huck like many other boys prefers the excitement of life on the river to the "deadly dull" atmosphere of the school room. In the approach he calls SMART for the five steps involved, he uses a narrative therapy technique to first Separate the problem of ADHD from the child. The next step he calls Mapping the influence of ADHD on the child and the family. Step three is Attending to the exceptions to the ADHD story. Step four is Reclaiming the special abilities of the ADHD child. Step five is Telling and celebrating the new story that replaces the old. Nyland also makes suggestions different teaching methods to be used in the classroom for ADHD kids who are being included in the regular education program. In the current educational atmosphere where the tendency is toward more standardized testing, teaching is focused on math, reading and basic skills. Students have less recess and more homework making school particularly difficult for children with ADHD tendencies that may have talents that are not recognized or taught to in the conventional school room. He stresses an approach that looks at the positives in each child and seeks ways to make their problems solvable without the use of psycho stimulant drugs. Building on solution-focused therapy, multiple intelligence theory and changes in teaching methods, Nyland believes we can slowly build on small successes leading to ever greater changes that will take place when we do things differently.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book for me personally was the use of a practical therapy that empowers the child and asks the child what his/her feelings are concerning the diagnostic label ADHD. When the child/student is willing to "buy into" their therapy and take an active part without the use of drugs, the problem of ADHD may eventually be controlled.