Understanding ADHD Medication

What It Can Do, What It Can't, and The Bigger Picture

Dear Parent,

I trust this message finds you well. Following your child's assessment, I wanted to share some important information about ADHD medication – what it does, what it doesn't do, and why understanding this matters for your child's journey ahead.

Many parents arrive at my clinic with questions and, quite understandably, concerns about medication. Some have read frightening things online. Others have been told by well-meaning friends that medication will "change their child." Let me offer you a clearer picture.

■ The Brain Glasses Analogy

Think of ADHD medication as "brain glasses"

Just as glasses help someone with poor eyesight see clearly, ADHD medication helps your child's brain focus more effectively. It doesn't change who they are – it helps them be more fully themselves, without the fog of distraction getting in the way.

Glasses don't teach you to read. They just make the words clear enough for learning to happen. ADHD medication works the same way – it creates the conditions for your child to learn, grow, and succeed.

What ADHD Medication Can Do

ADHD medication works by increasing specific chemicals in the brain – particularly dopamine and norepinephrine – that help with focus, impulse control, and self-regulation. When these chemicals are at the right levels, your child's brain can finally do what it's been trying to do all along.

At Home

- ✓ Help your child sit still long enough to eat meals and complete tasks
- ✓ Improve their ability to listen to instructions and follow routines
- ✓ Reduce impulsive reactions – the shouting, climbing, constant movement
- ✓ Lower frustration over small things, making daily transitions smoother
- ✓ Make mornings less chaotic and bedtimes less exhausting

At School

- ✓ Improve attention during lessons, making learning possible

✓ Reduce classroom disruptions from impulsive talking or leaving their seat
✓ Help your child sustain effort long enough to finish tasks they start
✓ Support working memory – holding instructions in mind while acting on them
✓ Enable them to demonstrate what they actually know in tests

In Social Settings

✓ Reduce impulsivity that leads to grabbing, interrupting, or rough play
✓ Improve waiting their turn in games and conversations
✓ Help manage emotional outbursts during playdates or sports
✓ Allow their true personality to shine through without ADHD interference

What ADHD Medication Cannot Do

Here's where realistic expectations become important. ADHD medication is remarkably effective at what it's designed to do – but it's not designed to do everything. Understanding these limits prevents disappointment and helps you plan for comprehensive support.

■■ Important to Understand

If your child has poor eyesight *and* a broken arm, glasses will help them see clearly – but they won't heal the broken arm. Both problems are real. Both need treatment. One solution can't fix both.

The same applies to ADHD medication. It treats ADHD symptoms effectively. It doesn't treat anxiety, learning disabilities, depression, or years of accumulated low self-esteem. Those need separate attention.

✗ **Teach skills automatically:** Your child still needs to learn organisation, study habits, and social skills – medication just makes learning possible

✗ **Fix learning difficulties:** Dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia need educational intervention, not higher medication doses

✗ **Treat anxiety or depression:** These conditions have different neurochemistry and often need separate treatment

✗ **Replace good parenting:** Consistent routines, clear boundaries, and positive strategies remain essential

✗ **Make them "perfect":** Your child will still be a child, with all the normal challenges that entails

✗ **Guarantee good grades:** It provides a platform for learning – but good teaching and support are still needed

The Bigger Picture: Our CALM Approach

At our clinic, we believe medication is one important piece of a larger puzzle. We use what I call the **CALM framework** – because managing ADHD effectively requires attention to multiple areas of your child's life:

C	**Communication** How we talk to ADHD children matters. They need clear, visual, and consistent instructions. We'll help you adapt your communication style.
A	**Associated Conditions** About 80% of children with ADHD have at least one other condition affecting them. We assess for anxiety, learning difficulties, and other challenges.

L	**Lifestyle** Sleep, nutrition, exercise, and routine all affect how well your child functions. These aren't alternatives to medication – they enhance it.
M	**Medication** When indicated, medication provides the neurochemical foundation that makes everything else work better. It's not the whole answer, but it's often essential.

Supporting Medication with Lifestyle

Medication works best when combined with good habits. Think of these as boosters that enhance what medication does:

Sleep: ADHD brains need adequate rest. Poor sleep makes symptoms worse and can look like medication failure.

Nutrition: A protein-rich breakfast before medication kicks in, regular meals, and limited sugar help stabilise focus and mood.

Exercise: Physical activity increases the same brain chemicals that medication targets. It's like a natural supplement.

Routine: Predictability reduces the mental load on your child's brain. Structure is love, not punishment.

What to Expect in the First Weeks

If your child is starting medication, here's what you might notice:

■ The First Few Weeks

Week 1-2: You may see immediate changes – improved focus, calmer behaviour, better ability to stop and think. Some parents describe it as "meeting their child for the first time." Or changes may be subtle at first. Both are normal.

Common initial effects: Appetite reduction (especially at lunch), some sleep changes, occasionally mild mood shifts. These usually settle within 2-4 weeks.

Week 3-4: By now, patterns become clearer. We can assess whether the dose is right or needs adjusting.

Important: Medication doesn't produce a different child – it helps your child function as themselves, without ADHD constantly interfering.

Please contact us if you notice:

- Your child seems "flat" or emotionally dulled (not just calmer)
- Severe appetite loss that doesn't improve after 4 weeks
- Significant sleep problems that persist
- Mood changes that concern you
- Any symptom that doesn't feel right

Your observations matter. You know your child best.

A Resource I'm Creating for Families Like Yours

After twenty-five years of helping families navigate life after an ADHD diagnosis, I've realised something important: parents need comprehensive, honest guidance – not just for the first few weeks, but for the months and years ahead.

I'm currently completing a book called **"Understanding ADHD Medication: Brain Glasses for Your Child"** that covers everything families need to know about medication – from how it works to managing side effects, from navigating South African medical aids to planning for the long term.

■ Coming Soon

Would you like an advance copy when it's ready?

If you'd be interested in receiving an early version of this book – and perhaps sharing your feedback to help shape a resource that could support thousands of families – simply reply to this email or let us know at your next appointment.

Your insights from this journey will help make the book more useful for families walking the same path.

Remember This

Medication opens the door. Support, structure, and understanding help your child walk through it confidently.

You're not failing by considering medication. You're not taking the "easy way out." You're providing your child's brain with what it needs to function – just as you would provide glasses for poor eyesight or insulin for diabetes.

This is about helping your child thrive, not just survive. And that's exactly what we're here to support.

Warmly,

Dr John Flett

Neurodevelopmental Paediatrician

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If you have questions before your next appointment, please use our online feedback form or contact the practice. We're here to help.