Young children, ages 2 to 5, with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should receive behavior therapy as a first-line treatment over medication, which can improve ADHD symptoms without the side effects, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) urged health care providers following the release of its “Vital Signs” report.


The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2011 had recommended that health care providers refer parents to training in behavior therapy before prescribing medicine to a young child. However, according to the CDC’s “Vital Signs” report, about 75 percent of young children being treated for ADHD received medicine, and only about half received any form of psychological services, which might have included behavior therapy.

“The bottom line is that we know parents want to do what’s best for their children and we want to support health care providers and parents of young children with ADHD,” Anne Schuchat, M.D., principal deputy director at the CDC, said during the briefing. “Behavior therapy has been shown to help improve symptoms in young children with ADHD and can be as effective as medicine but without the side effects.”

Schuchat noted that while medication may be appropriate for some children with ADHD, health care providers, including pediatricians and therapists, should work with families to make sure children with ADHD are receiving the most appropriate treatment, and this should include a discussion about behavior therapy as the first step.

ADHD is first diagnosed by a primary care physician among 53 percent of diagnosed cases in children aged 4–17 years; psychiatrists, psychologists and other physicians, such as neurologists, diagnose an additional 18 percent, 14 percent and 15 percent of cases, respectively, according to the report.

The report noted that both behavior therapy in the form of “parent training in behavior therapy” (also called parent behavior training) and psychostimulant medication for children are effective ADHD treatments among those aged less than 6 years, but the strength of evidence for behavior therapy exceeds that for psychostimulant medication.