

Greetings, friends. My name is Peter Gorski and I recently joined the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. In my role as director of Program Impact and Innovation, I hope to help bring our community's residents, organizations and services into ever closer partnership with the staff and programs of the Children's Board. I thought I'd use this first column to introduce myself and my ideas for what I will be writing to you about in this space over the coming months.

Before joining the Children's Board in May, I directed the Lawton & Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies at the University of South Florida College of Public Health. I continue to teach on the faculty at USF in my role as Professor of Public Health, Pediatrics and Psychiatry. I am a pediatrician, specializing in the emotional, behavioral and mental development of young children. I did my pediatric and developmental medicine training at Harvard Medical School and its teaching hospitals in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then, I have practiced pediatrics and child development, conducted research and taught students at the University of California in San Francisco, Northwestern University in Chicago and Harvard University in Boston. Twelve years ago, I went back to school to study community development, social and health policy while earning a Master in Public Administration at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Over the course of my career and my personal life experience (my wife and I lost our first child before her first birthday and have since reared three children with remarkably different personalities and abilities), I have learned to honor the unique nature, interests and needs of every child and family. At the same time, I have witnessed the powerful influence of relationships on the mind, body and spirit of the developing child. Nature and nurture are equal influences on how children grow, on how they develop a sense of their own identity and on how they decide to dedicate their energy for life. From the parent-child relationship to the way we connect as neighbors and members of a community, children benefit when they feel the security, creativity and inspiration of caring adults who take responsibility for building a healthy environment.

I plan to spend a lot of time meeting children, families and others who live, study and work in Hillsborough County. In this column, I will share the wisdom I glean from community residents about conditions, issues and possibilities that affect our children's health and well-being. The Children's Board dedicates its work to helping Hillsborough become the best place in America to raise children. To achieve this realistic goal, we need to all put our hearts and minds to the task and work together - families, businesses, schools, churches, government agencies, individuals and institutions. We can start by asking each other how every decision we make, whether personal or public, will affect children in our community. If I can represent and communicate the thoughts, feelings and dreams of these children as I write these pages to you, then I will feel like I am contributing positively to our common cause. I look forward to learning, working and celebrating with you.

For my first contribution, I've written about a subject of pressing importance to children, families and schools – attention deficit and hyperactivity. I hope you find it of interest:

We Hold Their Whole World In Our Hands

Sometimes, it's hard to know how much children's health and well-being is shaped by forces of nature and how much is forced upon them by the conditions and experiences they get exposed to. One of the most widespread examples is the nearly epidemic rise of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among American children. ADHD challenges the intellectual, behavioral, social and emotional development of several million children. Desperate to help, parents, teachers and doctors are turning more often and earlier to medical treatments. We Americans use 85% of the world's supply of stimulant medication. Children as young as two years of age are taking powerful drugs in hopes of controlling their behavior, improving their learning abilities, social skills and self-image. In truth, ADHD is easier to label than to understand and, even though we have not yet discovered the cause or the full effect of our treatments on the developing nervous system of children, the condition is very tempting to treat.

Are all the right kids being diagnosed and treated for this condition today? Are some being under-treated while others are over-treated? The medical profession is becoming unified in how to help children older than six years of age adapt to the challenges of living with ADHD. This is far from true in the case of younger children. Still less is known about how to prevent children from ever developing symptoms of this disorder in the first place.

Someday, I expect that medical science will discover the exact combination of genetics, disease-causing agents, toxic environments, stressful experience and brain development that leads to ADHD. At that time, we'll be able to know how and when to treat each child who may be vulnerable. I am certain, however, that we will never succeed in protecting children from this serious disability until we discover the answers to some big social questions as well. Here are a few I would like to ask:

- Has our society pushed people beyond our natural tolerance for individual differences of style and thought that don't conform to the majority's norms?
- Are we excluding people who would succeed if they could proceed at a different pace?
- Are we losing sight of the value of cultivating the diversity in human nature, diversity that is so essential to supporting a society's growth and health?
- Do children's behaviors, moods and energies mirror the stress present in the lives of adults?

My bet is that ADHD is a problem created when a particular child's brain and nervous system can't adapt to the demands of cultural norms and expectations. The rapidly growing number of children affected by this disorder might serve to warn us all of the dangers we face in worshipping the false idol of immediacy. By demanding instant information, understanding and results, we may strain the capacity and the nature of many individuals. Worse still, in mistaking efficiency for competence, we may ultimately deplete the human soul and limit the number of people and the number of ways for contributing to the value of life in our communities.

I don't believe that we have to choose between becoming a species of human doings or human beings. We can decide, instead, to value height and depth, straight lines and curves, simple truths and complex connections, all in the service of knowledge and achievement. ADHD deserves the focused attention of science and culture. If we think with our heads and our hearts, we will preserve the wondrous vitality of youth and promote the social, emotional and biological sources of children's health. To succeed, we must be willing to probe further into our physical and social world. After all, our children are waiting, understandably impatiently, for guidance and hope.

I've included some web links that might be of assistance:

ADHD.com

[CHADD - Children and Adults with Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder](#)

[The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)