



# When the World Doesn't Fit the Child: An Evolutionary Rethinking of ADHD in Paediatrics

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# The Patient

9M  
CAMHS Clinic

## School Reports:

- Exclusions
- Behavioural concerns
- Disruptive
- Inattentive

# The Problem



ADHD – neurodevelopmental disorder



Treatments:

Medication  
Behavioural Therapy



Disparate effects:

Low SES backgrounds  
Early adversity  
Housing instability  
Chronic stress

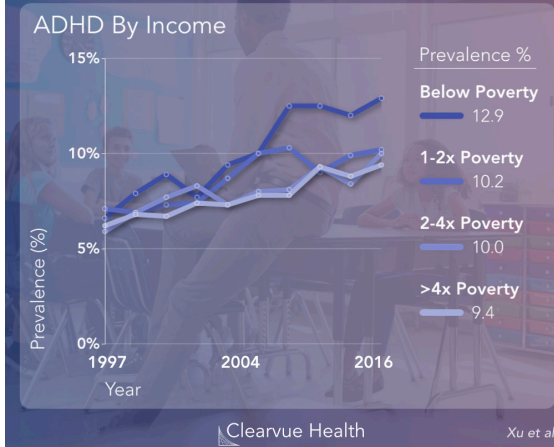


Exponential increase:

Referrals  
Prescriptions  
Wait times

## ADHD Trends by Income

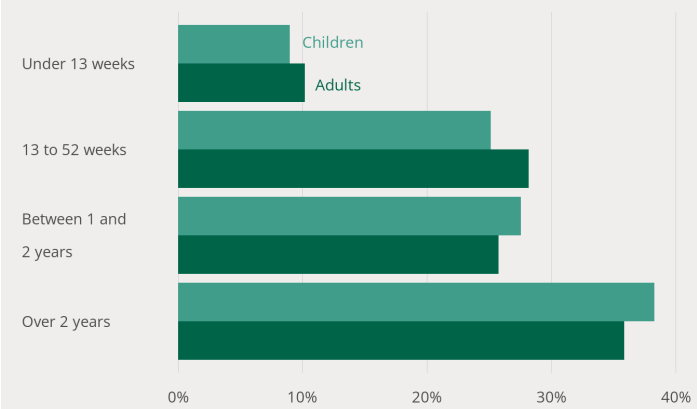
Kids living below the poverty line have the highest prevalence of ADHD.



(1)

## Waiting times for possible ADHD assessment

England, percentage of those waiting as at 31 December 2025



(2)

# NHS Taskforce

- 2025, NHS England launched independent taskforce
- “Historic neglect” of ADHD services
- Waiting lists 8 years in some regions

## ADHD TASKFORCE PART 1 REPORT PUBLISHED TODAY

“ADHD, when unsupported, is a potent route into educational failure, long-term unemployment, crime, substance misuse, suicide, mental and physical illness”

“Economic costs to individuals and the government of at least £17 billion are avoidable as, when appropriately supported, people with ADHD can thrive and fully engage in a working life”

Read the full report:  
[www.england.nhs.uk/publication/  
report-of-the-independent-adhd-taskforce/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/report-of-the-independent-adhd-taskforce/)

ADHD®

## Reframing ADHD Traits (4, 5)



- Exploration
- Novelty Seeking
- Rapid attention shifting

Assets, enhancing survival and fitness:

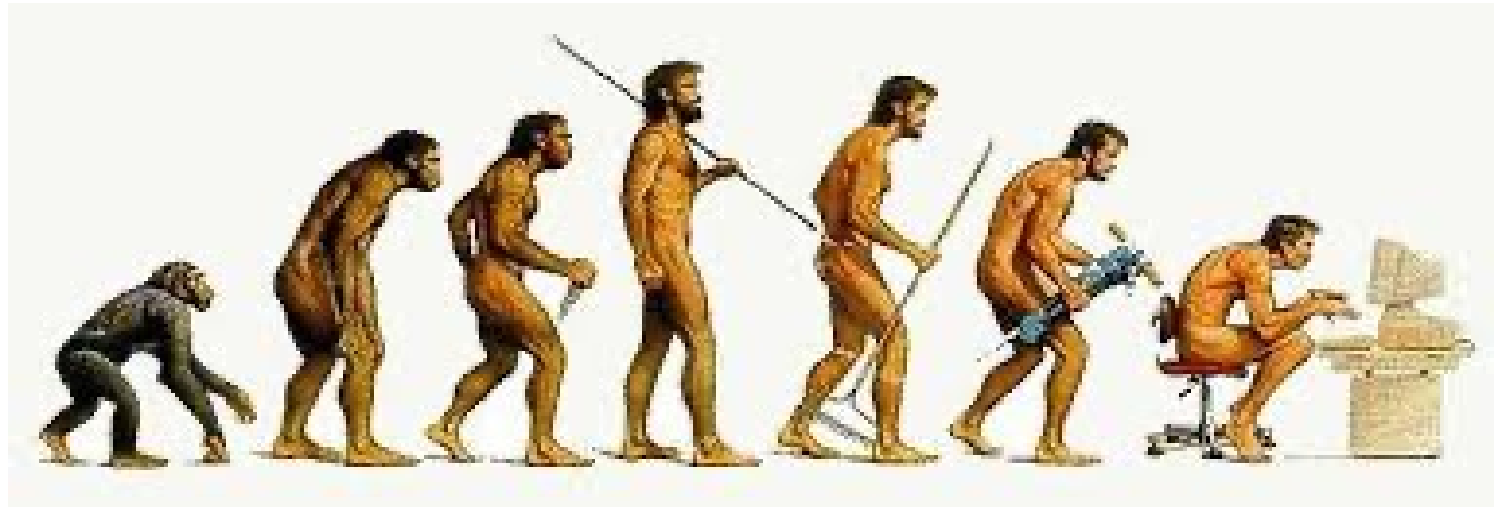
New food sources, threat response, unfamiliar territory



Same traits are now deficits in modern schooling environments

- Stillness
- Prolonged focus
- Uniformity
- Inattention
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity

# Evolutionary Mismatch



(6, 7)

# Life History Theory

- Poverty, adversity, instability → development trajectories recalibrated
- Epigenetic embedding of patterns, priming gene expression for similar conditions across the lifespan
- Environmental signals uncertainty/survival not taken for granted:
  - Don't wait
  - Prioritise the immediate
  - Reproduce early
  - Take risks
  - Seek rewards now
- Fast life history strategy
- Adaptive response, calibrated to an uncertain world.

## Why Are There Social Gradients in Preventative Health Behavior? A Perspective from Behavioral Ecology

Daniel Nettle

Published: October 13, 2010 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0013371>

### Observation:

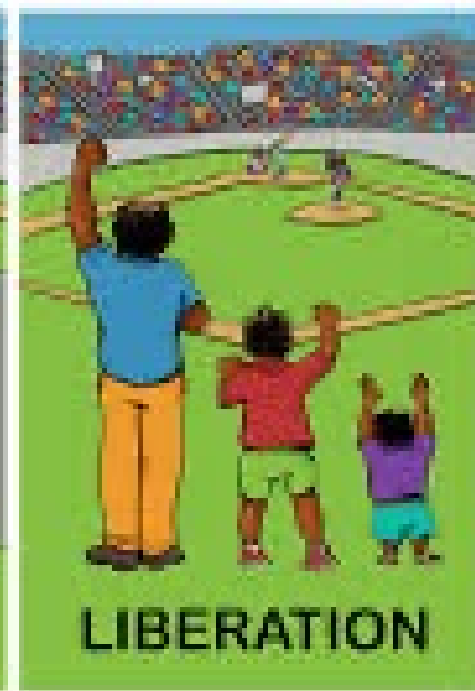
Poorer people smoke more, drink more, exercise less, eat unhealthily, ignore health advice, and cope less well with therapy than do wealthier people.



# Beyond Equity: An Evolutionary Case for Liberation



NHS Taskforce: adjust support to meet need



Does the fence need to be there at all?

# Clinical Implications (10)

## Structural Problems = Structural Solution

Stimulant medications in children:

Are we medicating children to fit environments that should themselves be changed?

Practical Examples:

- Montessori-style learning
- Outdoor education
- Flexible interest-driven classrooms



# Conclusion

Because when a child struggles to fit the world -

Instead of asking **“How do we change the child?”** We can begin to ask, **“How do we change the world around the child?”**

Evolutionary perspectives show us not only why this matters, but what we can do about it.

# References

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