



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 18, 2010

Tom Sawyer Had ADHD?

No longer satisfied by with diagnosis of over 5 million children with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), believers in the reliability of the diagnosis have turned their attention to fictional adolescents.

In an article published recently at the online culture magazine, [Slate](#), Anne Applebaum presents textual proof from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to support her diagnosis of the title character with the disorder du jour.

He [Tom Sawyer] clearly has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — ADHD — as well, judging by his inability to concentrate in school. "The harder Tom tried to fasten his mind on his book, the more his mind wandered," Twain writes at one point. Unable to focus ("Tom's heart ached to be free"), he starts playing with a tick. This behavior is part of a regular pattern: A few days earlier in church (where he had to sit "as far away from the open window and the seductive outside summer scenes as possible"), Tom had been unable to pay attention to the sermon and played with a pinch bug instead.

Not content with identifying merely one psychological source of Tom's poor behavior, the author of the piece reckons Aunt Polly's ward suffers from oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), as well.

The [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) (DSM) defines ODD as an "ongoing pattern of disobedient, hostile and defiant behavior toward authority figures which goes beyond the bounds of normal childhood behavior." Ms. Applebaum's impressive skills at exegesis are on point in this interpretation of Tom's many bad habits, as well.

Everyone remembers the whitewashing scene in [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#), but how many recall the scene that precedes it? Having escaped from Aunt Polly, Tom Sawyer is "playing hooky" and teaching himself to whistle, when he suddenly spies a "newcomer" in his village — a newcomer with "a citified air." Their conversation unfolds like this:

"I can lick you!"

"I'd like to see you try it."

"Well, I can do it."





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"No you can't, either."

After that, the encounter deteriorates further ("Can!" "Can't!") until finally the two boys are wrestling in the dirt. Tom wins the battle — the citified newcomer is made to shout "Nuff!"— but returns home late and is thus commanded to whitewash the famous fence.

Following this incident, the reader's sympathies are meant to lie with Tom. But try, if you can, to strip away the haze of nostalgia and sentiment through which we generally regard Mark Twain's world, and imagine how a boy like Tom Sawyer would be regarded today. As far as I can tell, that fight is not just "inappropriate behavior," to use current playground terminology, it is also one of many symptoms of oppositional defiant disorder — [ODD](#)—a condition that Tom manifests throughout the book.

One would be excused from imagining that Ms. Applebaum was being ironic or satirical in her review of Tom Sawyer's behavioral disorders. She isn't. Applebaum insists that her purpose in analyzing Tom Sawyer (and Huck Finn, for good measure) is to reassure parents of children diagnosed with similar challenges that like Tom and Huck, their kids can overcome childhood obstacles and become successful.

Well, almost. Unlike Twain's dysfunctional duo, most American youngsters don't have access to rivers, rafts, and wilderness to satisfy their natural curiosity. Thus, their parents turn to psychologists and pharmaceuticals, if they're lucky. Many kids, laments Applebaum, aren't "lucky enough to have parents who can afford that sort of thing." What remedies are available for these unfortunate sufferers?

Nothing, the author moans. Applebaum categorically informs her readers that, "nothing like that [outlets for kids who are bored, bullied, or bullying at school] is available to children who don't fit in today. How does she figure?

Budget figures from the federal Department of Education tell a different story. According to a summary of the money appropriated by Congress in 2010 for after school programs, \$1.3 billion is being spent to keep kids from having nothing to do after the bell rings.

If Applebaum is correct and significant numbers of less fortunate children are inflicted with dysfunctional distractions that are keeping them from achieving their goals, perhaps all the 21st Century Toms and Huckleberrys in America need more cans of whitewash and fewer bottles of pills.



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