“She’s hyperactive, you know.” Mrs. Bryant said it with deep concern. Then, as if to mitigate the cause of her concern, she added with an embarrassed giggle, “I guess Erica got it from me.”

With considerable astonishment I realized that Mrs. Bryant was genuinely upset. But why was she under the impression that there was something wrong with her daughter, and that it carried the label “hyperactive?” Eight-year-old Erica had just spent almost two hours in my office with no sign of any disturbance. What I had seen during the psychological examination was a lively, charming, and a quite average eight-year old. Two hours was enough time to see that Erica had no problems paying attention, or staying with a task. Where could her mother have gotten the idea that this was a hyperactive child?
It came from the new classroom teacher. Erica had been noisy in class. Being a lively and charming youngster, her friends had joined her in the noise. That was more than the new teacher could take. She sent Erica for evaluation. The evaluation turned unfortunate. The child, nervous in front of strange adults, whom she interpreted as unfriendly, had tried to be extra lively to win them over. That did it! Erica was labeled “hyperactive” instead of “nervous in front of not-so-friendly adults.”

Why had she been relaxed with me when I tested her? Probably because we were old friends. I was the doctor who periodically examined her sick little brother. And her brother looked forward to those visits with its wonderful toys. Psychological examinations in experienced hands can be great fun, not at all threatening. Their purpose is to find out what a person can accomplish under normal conditions, not what stress and duress will produce.

Fortunately the story of Erica had a happy ending. Rather than placing her on Ritalin, as the school had demanded, her parents switched schools (this was before home schooling was a relatively easy alternative in New York State). Her new homeroom teacher was a lively elderly woman who enjoyed a noisy classroom. In the new school Erica escaped further evaluations. As she grew older she channeled her wonderful energy into helping her parents with their blossoming catering business. On graduating from high school she became a full-fledged partner in their business which her husband-to-be eventually joined.

What appalls me is the label “hyperactive.” For those of us who have worked with genuine psychopathology, “hyperactive” implies a neurological abnormality usually involving the reticular activating system deep in the brain. In many cases the abnormality is so pronounced that it is picked up by as undiscriminating an instrument as the EEG (electroencephalogram). People who have this genuine kind of brain damage are very different from the school child who doesn’t sit still in the classroom and has trouble paying attention to boring seat work. Once you have seen genuine hyperactivity, you will never mistake the liveliness of Erica for this kind of pathology.

Rather than reflecting the pathology of hyperactivity, our squirming and wriggling youngsters resemble other young mammals of every size and shape. What baby elephants, puppies,
kittens, rat pups, and colts all have in common is that their activity levels keep their mothers and sometimes their fathers on constant alert.

The elaborate nurseries of elephant, dolphin, monkey, and wild dog mothers are necessary because the energy levels of the youngsters surpass those of even the most energetic adults. As a result, the adults pool their energy resources and create nurseries. The same holds for us humans.

A healthy youngster keeps going long after the exasperated adult collapses in exhaustion. That is why we have Dad periodically take over from Mom, or older sibs, or grandparents, or yes, even our schools. Except that sometimes our schools are resentful of this task which they feel is beyond them.

Why all this energy? Why all this wild running and bouncing about? To build a healthy body. Those couch potatoes that so many schools seem to prefer have obesity problems with elevated cholesterol levels already in childhood! Then there are the social interactions we learn from such simple games as playing ball. The understanding of concepts such as fair play, taking turns, giving someone else a chance: these are the essentials of social living that are learned during childhood’s play. No classroom dialectic can take their place.

The frenetic activity of youngsters in the backyard or on the playground is serious work. To dampen this work through the administration of drugs implies a lack of knowledge of our biology and its purposes. But, you say, Erica surpassed many other youngsters in her energy level. Perhaps we should see her as especially gifted on this dimension. And she may well have inherited her high energy level from her mother who was the driving force behind the family business. That business held the family together as well as giving entry-level jobs to numerous youngsters in the neighborhood.

Human diversity has enriched all our lives. Musical, mathematical, verbal, athletic abilities, and yes energy levels are not evenly distributed among us. Instead, each of us has a special mix of aptitudes with which we can delight and enchant each other. To call a particular mix excessive, especially when there are people all around us showing how successful the mix can be, seems bizarre. And yet, in the last 30 years, I have seen a rising population of children labeled as “hyperactive” simply because they resemble their successful parents. The high energy level of these parents frequently was essential to their achievements.
I am so glad that Erica’s parents understood—that they did not heed the advice of her school, and perhaps destroy, or at least inhibit, the wonderfully energetic and creative woman she came to be!