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Cover: The fate of this Guam kingfisher, like that of its 47 surviving relatives, now rests in the hands of U.S. conservation biologists. The species was on the brink of extinction before scientists enrolled it in a captive breeding program. Using modern DNA "fingerprinting" tests, researchers will decide which birds should be mated to create offspring with ideal measures of genetic diversity. (Photo: Susan Haig)

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Letters

Pathology or prophecy?

The childhood psychiatric disorders described in "Troubling tally of kids' mental disorders" (SN: 12/24&31/88, p.405) are common, run-of-the-mill behavior patterns seen by all pediatricians, usually age related and readily amenable to treatment by parental reassurance and simple behavior modification techniques.

It does a great disservice to parents and children to label these as psychiatric disorders, severe or otherwise. Labeling young children is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Perhaps an even greater harm done by such inclusive diagnosing is that it tends to devalue more legitimate psychiatric diagnoses. It is not reasonable that any behavior pattern present in more than 20 percent of the population can be considered a psychiatric disorder.

Jed Jacobson
Pediatrician
Hollywood, Fla.

Our culture is obsessed with redefining all natural developmental processes, making them look like a laundry list of pathologies. Normal childhood fears have become phobias, temper outbursts are now oppositional disorders, worry is overanxious disorder and wanting one's mama around is separation anxiety.

Next come the statistical horror stories, followed by political sanction of more "health" care and treatment facilities.

I know, I know: I suffer from a recurring hypergiggle disorder.

Eugene J. Webb
Psychotherapist
Houston, Tex.

After reading "Troubling tally of kids' mental disorders," I felt compelled to share some troubling facts that probably lie behind the numbers quoted in that story.

As a psychotherapist specializing in incest and addictive illness, I have become acutely

aware of the epidemic of abuse suffered by children in this country—and elsewhere, too. The childhood diagnoses cited (phobias, oppositional disorder, overanxious disorder and separation anxiety) are useful markers for assessing whether an individual has been sexually abused as a child.

To state that "rates this high would clearly imply a major public health problem" is to miss the point. While it is critical that children who are suffering from severe psychiatric disorders get the treatment they need to grow up whole, it is even more important that more be done to protect them from the occurrence and reoccurrence of that which precipitates these disorders: sexual abuse.

There are millions of children being sexually abused in this country every year and millions of adults who are survivors. It's time we acknowledge the extent and severity of this problem.

Deborah Feller
Psychotherapist
New York, N.Y.



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