

More tots being medicated

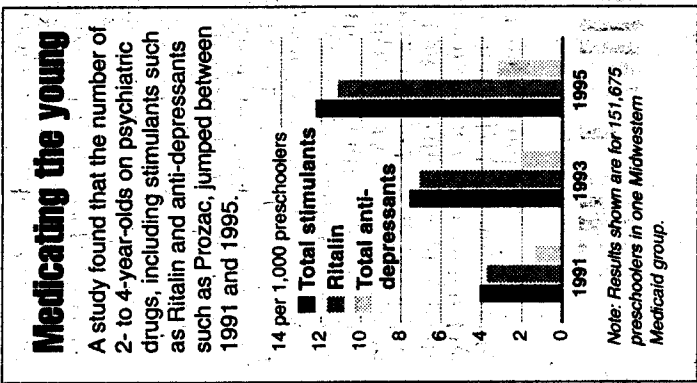
By LINDSEY TANNER
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — When he was a toddler, Heath Barker was nicknamed "the red tornado" for his auburn hair and his penchant for tearing things up and jumping off the furniture. When he was just 4, he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and prescribed Ritalin.

A study of more than 200,000 preschool-age children shows he was no isolated case. The number of 2- to 4-year-olds on psychiatric drugs including Ritalin and anti-depressants like Prozac soared 50 percent between 1991 and 1995, researchers report in today's Journal of the American Medical Association.

Experts said they are troubled by the findings, because the effects of such drugs in children so young are largely unknown. Some doctors worry that such powerful drugs could be dangerous for children's development.

Heath's mother has anecdotal evidence suggesting — as the researchers do — that the number of youngsters on psychiatric



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drugs is still rising. Through her involvement in Internet support groups for parents of children with behavior problems, Michele Barker said she is hearing of

more and more 3- and 4-year-olds being put on drugs like Prozac.

"It's become a quick fix," said Barker, 39, of Hot Springs, Ark.

Although the study did not examine reasons for the increases, Julie Magno Zito, the lead author and an assistant professor of pharmacy and medicine at the University of Maryland, suggested a few possibilities.

With an increasing number of children attending day care, parents may feel pressured "to have their children conform in their behavior," Zito said.

Use of stimulants, anti-depressants, anti-psychotics and clonidine — a drug used in adults to treat high blood pressure and increasingly for insomnia in hyperactive children — were examined. Substantial increases were seen in every category except anti-psychotics.

The number of children getting any of the drugs totaled about 100,000 in 1991, and jumped 50 percent to 150,000 in 1995.