



Play Therapy with ADHD

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Introduction

- Lynn Louise Wonders, LPC, RPT-S, CPCS
- Have worked with children, teens and families since 2002 providing clinical services
- Have been providing play therapy training, supervision and consultation for other therapists since 2010
- My personal and professional experience with ADHD



Learning Objectives

- 1. Participants will be able to clearly define the clinical definition of ADHD and identify the symptoms in child clients.
- 2. Participants will be able to understand the potential for differentiating diagnoses and identify what other issues ADHD symptoms may point toward.
- 3. Participants will learn how to utilize play therapy to assist clients with ADHD or ADHD symptoms using at least 10 facilitative play-based techniques.

Concept of ADHD

- Controversy
- Traditional clinical view
- Research
- Non-traditional, holistic view
- Launching point
- Set of symptoms



American Medical Association says:

- ADHD "is a commonly seen neuropsychiatric syndrome that has been extensively studied over the past four decades . . . It should be noted that debate over ADHD within the research and medical communities has been mild and mostly concerned with nuances in the diagnosis and treatment paradigms. By contrast, highly inflammatory public relations campaigns and pitched legal battles have been waged (particularly by groups such as the Church of Scientology) that seek to label the whole idea of ADHD as an illness a "myth" . . . It is thus most important to separate legitimate concerns raised by scientific papers from abstract, distorted, or mendacious information from other sources." - See more at: <http://www.chadd.org/understanding-adhd/about-adhd/the-science-of-adhd.aspx#sthash.QIE2gWGH.dpuf>

All about ADHD (NIMH - nihm.nih.gov)

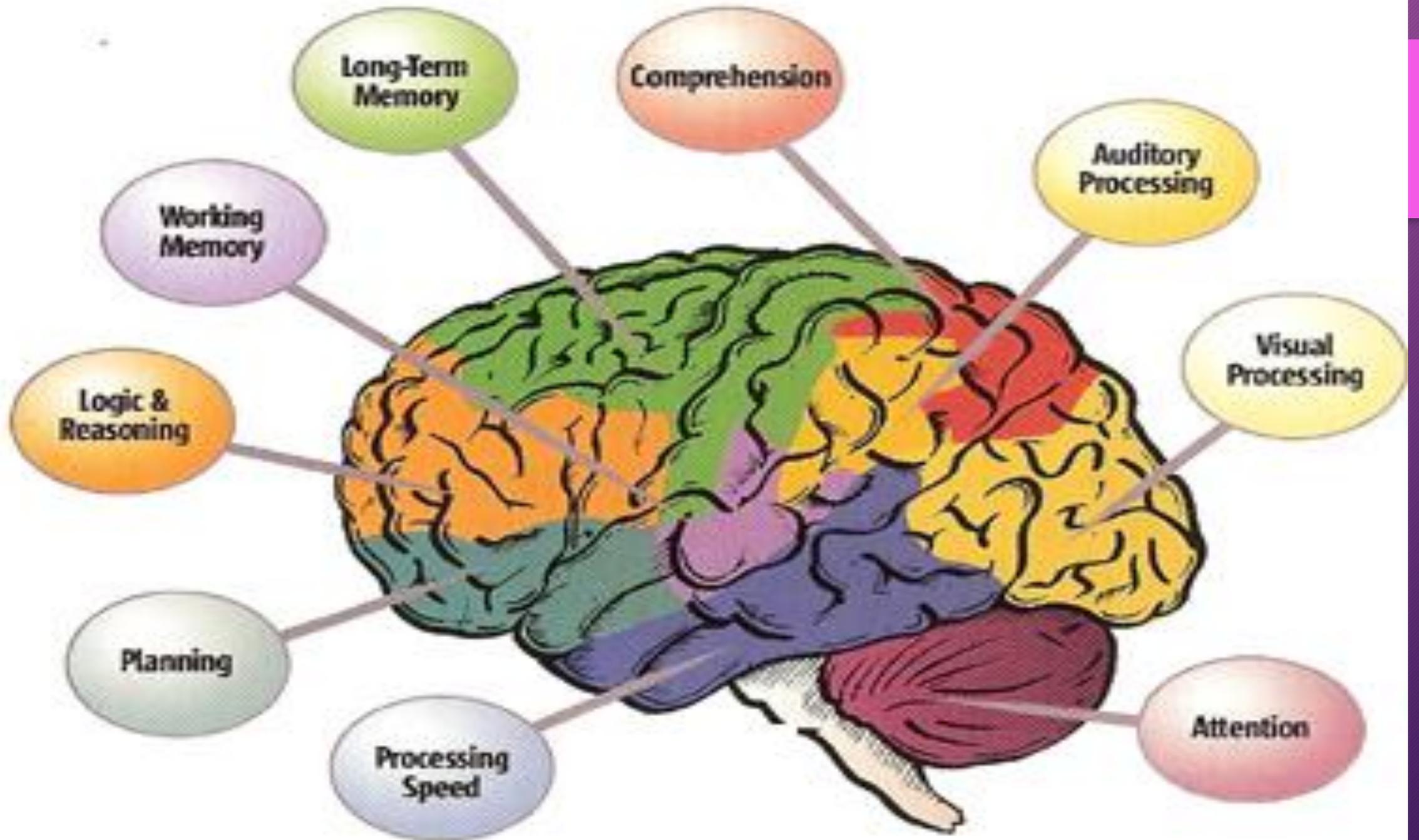
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is defined as a brain disorder marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

Neuroscience

- Structural and functional imaging research on the neurochemistry of ADHD implicates the catecholamine-rich frontal-subcortical systems in the pathophysiology of ADHD. Catecholamine disruption as at least one source of ADHD brain dysfunction. - See more at: <http://www.chadd.org/understanding-adhd/about-adhd/the-science-of-adhd.aspx#sthash.QIE2gWGH.dpuf>

Catecholamines?

- Catecholamines, including dopamine and norepinephrine, are the principal neurotransmitters that mediate a variety of the central nervous system functions, such as motor control, cognition, emotion, memory processing, and endocrine modulation. Dysfunctions in catecholamine neurotransmission are implicated in some neurologic and neuropsychiatric disorders.
- When catecholamines are at normal levels the body and brain work in balance to have healthy levels of energy.
- When catecholamine levels are abnormally high a person will experience high levels of anxiety and other symptoms.



3 typical components of ADHD

- **1. Inattention** means a person wanders off task, lacks persistence, has difficulty sustaining focus, and is disorganized; and these problems are not due to defiance or lack of comprehension.

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3 typical components of ADHD

- **2. Hyperactivity** means a person seems to move about constantly, including in situations in which it is not appropriate; or excessively fidgets, taps, or talks. In adults, it may be extreme restlessness or wearing others out with constant activity.

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3 typical components of ADHD

- **3. Impulsivity** means a person makes hasty actions that occur in the moment without first thinking about them and that may have high potential for harm; or a desire for immediate rewards or inability to delay gratification. An impulsive person may be socially intrusive and excessively interrupt others or make important decisions without considering the long-term consequences.

About ADHD

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a condition affecting 15 percent of school-age children but only 5% actually have ADHD
- Children with ADHD are more prone to gross and fine motor developmental problems.

Signs and Symptoms (nimh.nih.gov)

- Inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity are the key behaviors of ADHD. Some people with ADHD only have problems with one of the behaviors, while others have both inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity. Most children have the combined type of ADHD.
- In preschool, the most common ADHD symptom is hyperactivity.
- It is normal to have some inattention, unfocused motor activity and impulsivity, but for people with ADHD, these behaviors:
 - are more severe
 - occur more often
 - interfere with or reduce the quality of how they function socially, at school, or in a job

Symptoms and Signs

- People with symptoms of inattention may often:
 - Overlook or miss details, make careless mistakes in schoolwork, at work, or during other activities
 - Have problems sustaining attention in tasks or play, including conversations, lectures, or lengthy reading
 - Not seem to listen when spoken to directly

Symptoms and Signs

- Not follow through on instructions and fail to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace or start tasks but quickly lose focus and get easily sidetracked
- Have problems organizing tasks and activities, such as what to do in sequence, keeping materials and belongings in order, having messy work and poor time management, and failing to meet deadlines
- Avoid or dislike tasks that require sustained mental effort, such as schoolwork or homework, or for teens and older adults, preparing reports, completing forms or reviewing lengthy papers

Symptoms and Signs

- Lose things necessary for tasks or activities, such as school supplies, pencils, books, tools, wallets, keys, paperwork, eyeglasses, and cell phones
- Be easily distracted by unrelated thoughts or stimuli
- Be forgetful in daily activities, such as chores, errands, returning calls, and keeping appointments

Symptoms & Signs

- People with symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity may often:
 - Fidget and squirm in their seats
 - Leave their seats in situations when staying seated is expected, such as in the classroom or in the office
 - Run or dash around or climb in situations where it is inappropriate or, in teens and adults, often feel restless
 - Be unable to play or engage in hobbies quietly
 - Be constantly in motion or “on the go,” or act as if “driven by a motor”
 - Talk nonstop
 - Blurt out an answer before a question has been completed, finish other people’s sentences, or speak without waiting for a turn in conversation
 - Have trouble waiting his or her turn
 - Interrupt or intrude on others, for example in conversations, games, or activities

Symptoms and Signs (nimh.nih.gov)

- ADHD symptoms can change over time as a person ages. In young children with ADHD, hyperactivity-impulsivity is the most predominant symptom. As a child reaches elementary school, the symptom of inattention may become more prominent and cause the child to struggle academically. In adolescence, hyperactivity seems to lessen and may show more often as feelings of restlessness or fidgeting, but inattention and impulsivity may remain. Many adolescents with ADHD also struggle with relationships and antisocial behaviors. Inattention, restlessness, and impulsivity tend to persist into adulthood.

But before we start diagnosing all of this as ADHD. . . .

- Let's take a look at how often an ADHD diagnosis might be a misdiagnosis

Risk of Misdiagnosis

- Symptoms of ADHD overlap and could instead be:
 - OCD
 - PTSD
 - Anxiety Disorder
 - Learning Disability
 - Bipolar Disorder



Could be Trauma...

- Hyper-vigilance and dissociation, for example, could be mistaken for inattention. Impulsivity might be brought on by a stress response in overdrive.
- “Despite our best efforts in referring [these children] to behavioral therapy and starting them on stimulants, it was hard to get the symptoms under control,” Dr. Brown said of treating her patients according to guidelines for ADHD. “I began hypothesizing that perhaps a lot of what we were seeing was more externalizing behavior as a result of family dysfunction or other traumatic experience.” - Dr. Nicole Brown, Johns Hopkins University Hospital

Trend in over or mis-diagnosing ADHD

- In recent years, parents and experts have questioned whether the growing prevalence of ADHD has to do with hasty medical evaluations, a flood of advertising for ADHD drugs, and increased pressure on teachers to cultivate high-performing students. Now Brown and other researchers are drawing attention to a compelling possibility: Inattentive, hyperactive, and impulsive behavior may in fact mirror the effects of adversity, and many pediatricians, psychiatrists, and psychologists don't know how—or don't have the time—to tell the difference. (article *How Childhood Trauma Could be Mistaken for ADHD* by Rebecca Ruiz, *The Atlantic*)

Epidemic?

- “ADHD itself is not an epidemic—ADHD *misdiagnosis* is an epidemic. “ - Gareth Cook, Mind Matters

What can we do?

- “What we must do is simply be more judicious in making the diagnosis. Parents and doctors must be taught that just because a child has a difficult time paying attention or sitting still in school does not, ipso facto, have a potentially lifetime brain disorder. It's complicated. It takes time to figure out what might be best for this individual child.” - Gareth Cook

A Therapeutic Paradigm Shift

- Symptoms that look like ADHD are a POINTER:
 - Is there trauma?
 - OCD? Look further....
 - Anxiety? Look further
- We CAN address the symptoms with play therapy and along the way continue to assess.
- Encourage parents to consider and investigate the possibility of not jumping immediately to medication without first trying therapy and behavioral methods as well as nutrition adjustments and lifestyle changes
- Feeding young children amphetamines without investigating and ruling out could do more harm than good to their developing brains.
- Ask the right questions, consult with the medical doctor

Symptoms of ADHD and Executive Functioning

- Intrinsicly tied!

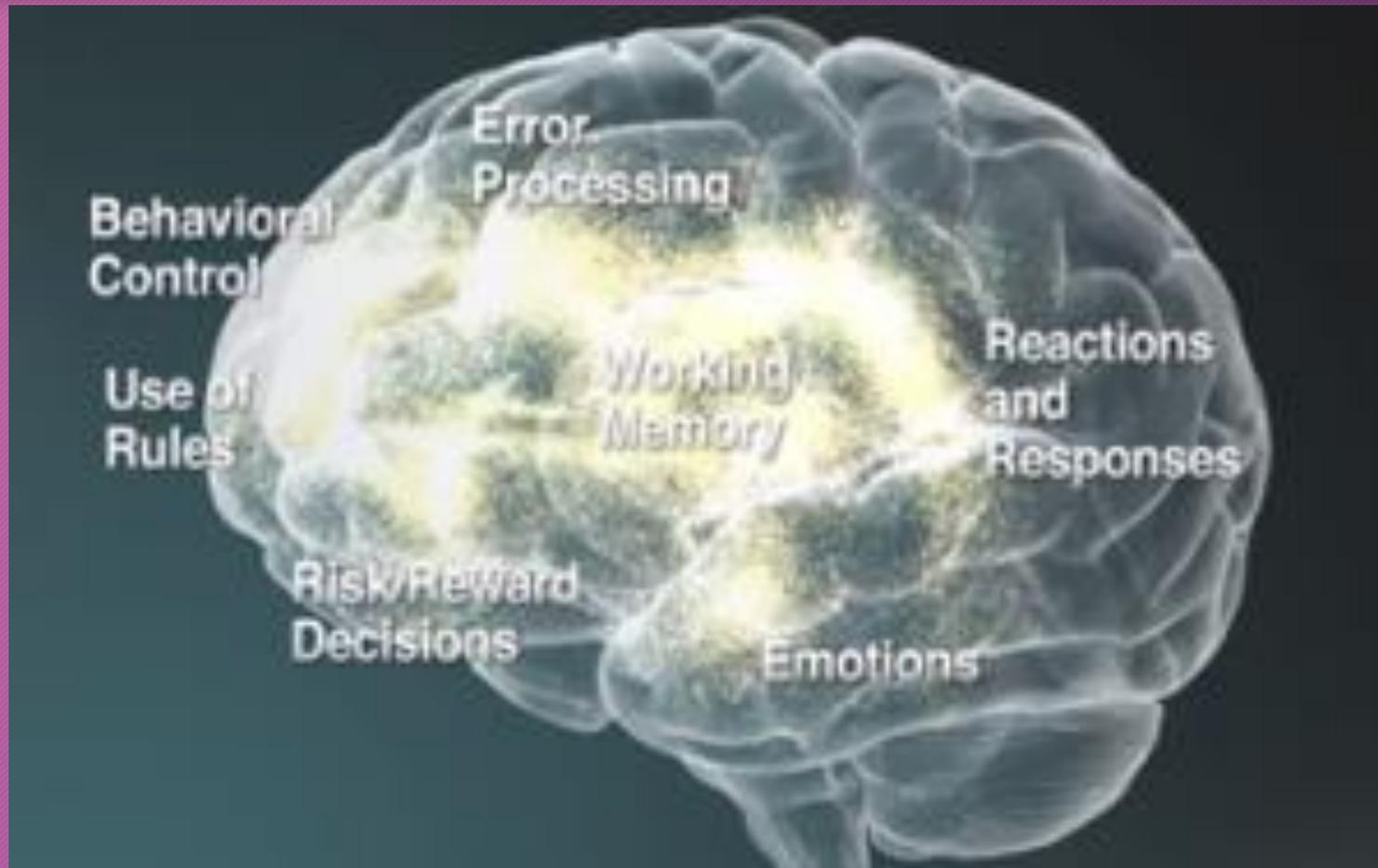
Executive Functioning

- **Executive function and self-regulation** skills are the mental processes that enable us to
 - Plan
 - focus attention
 - remember instructions
 - juggle multiple tasks successfully
 - Prioritize tasks
 - Set and achieve goals
 - Control impulses

Executive Functioning

- **Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function:**
 - working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control.
 - These functions are highly interrelated, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other.
- Each type of executive function skill draws on elements of the others.
- **Working memory** governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time.
- **Mental flexibility** helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings.
- **Self-control** enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

Executive Functioning



What does an ADHD kid look like?



ADHD Kids in the Play Room

- Often room-wreckers
- Jumping from one activity to another
- Inability to regulate energy
- Clumsy, accidentally breaking items, falling,
- Unaware of their place in space and time
- Difficulty transitioning out of play room
- Sometimes hyper-absorbed - hard to get their attention once absorbed

Why Play Therapy?



- “Kids with ADHD hear lots of ‘Nos’ and ‘Be carefuls,’ and ‘Don’t do thats,’” says Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., author of *Playful Parenting*.
- “Constantly being told ‘no,’ or having to hold themselves back, puts a strain on kids. This causes their symptoms to get worse.”

So... why play therapy?



- Play is a child's natural way of managing after frequent emotional upheavals. Play is an opportunity for relationship building.
- “No child, with or without ADHD, readily comes up to me and tells me what's on his mind,” he says. “If we don't allow children to make this connection through play, they connect in a way that is aggravating and intrusive, and then we get into punishment mode.”
- Play therapy provides an emotionally safe space for children to explore and express.

Play Therapy with ADHD

- A time for child-centered play therapy
- A time for directive/facilitative play therapy



Careful balance: Structure & Freedom

- In the play room ADHD kids need some sense of structure while also being permitted freedom of expression and exploration without judgment they do not get elsewhere.

Fantasy Play



- For children with ADHD, fantasy play is especially important because they may feel isolated and confused due to their inability to effectively communicate their experiences, fears, and concerns.
- Through fantasy play, these children are able to explore and express their inner most feelings, fears and curiosities.
- Providing props and prompts (if needed) and then following the child, allowing him/her to direct the play the therapist fully participates.
- Dressing up - costumes
- Action figures
- Sand tray
- Puppet shows
- Following the lead of the child mostly
- Therapist often active participant in the child's fantasy play
- Aggressive play
- "Let's pretend. . . ."

Art and Expressive Therapy Techniques



Art & Expressive Techniques

- Free expression -
 - allowing a child to paint, draw, color in whatever way they wish can provide insight for you as the therapist and also can provide an opportunity for the child to have freedom they don't normally have in structured school setting which can provide relief.
- Facilitated art projects
 - Coloring in the lines - helps with fine motor, eye-hand coordination, strengthening ability to focus
 - Collages - fine motor and focus
 - Cumulative art project added to each week builds on ability to have continuity
 - Mandalas
 - House Tree Person
 - Making puppets (socks, paper bags)

Games-based play therapy

- Benefit of particular games:
 - Facilitates building tolerance for waiting
 - quells impulsivity
 - Assists with development of executive functioning skills
 - Can assist with fine motor focus
 - Increase focus
 - Delayed gratification
 - Social skills training



Games

- GAME SUGGESTION:
 - Let's go fishing
 - Jenga
 - Sorry
 - Chutes & Ladders
 - Connect 4
 - Memory Games
 - Checkers
 - Chess
 - Candyland
 - Hi Ho Cherry O

Building Blocks



Building Block Activity Benefits

- Facilitates patience and perseverance; follow through
- Helps to improve focus
- Cooperation and team work if therapist participates actively
- Executive functioning skills - sorting, sequencing, logic

Big Body Games - Gross Motor

- Benefits: Certain types of movement and activity can help calm over-active symptoms and improve mood, anxiety, depression, focus, and memory.

Big Body - Gross Motor Interventions

- Examples:
 - Ring toss
 - Beach ball toss
 - Hula hoops
 - Bowling
 - Velcro "darts"
 - Bean bag toss
 - Hokey Pokey

Mindfulness Training with Children



Brain research MRI studies with Mindfulness

- Recent studies indicate in adults who practice mindfulness meditation for 8 weeks had an increase in pre-frontal cortex grey matter and a shrinking of the amygdala.
- If adult brains can change this dramatically, imagine how this practice can help children!

Mindfulness Training



Mindfulness defined

- Mindfulness is the dedicated practice of paying very close attention to what we see, feel, hear, taste in the present moment without a lot of thinking or judging it as good or bad.
- Developing mindfulness is to slow down the brain and the body and grow awareness Slow and grow....
- Good for therapists to have a mindfulness and/or meditation practice of their own.

Mindfulness Interventions with Children

- Be a tree
- Feather blowing
- Eat a raisin
- Silent listening game
- Flower sitting
- Rising sinking belly breathing
- 4 square breathing
- Birthday cake breath
- Freshly baked cookies breathing
- Slow motion
- Sequencing games/activities
 - Lacing beads or cards, basic recipes,

Patience and Understanding

- It's critical for play therapists to be closely in touch with their own limitations, impatience or internal reactions such as irritation with kids who have ADHD/symptoms.
- It can be easy to get swept up in the chaotic energy of an ADHD kid or feel overwhelmed.
- Practice meditation before and after your sessions with ADHD kids yourself.
- Pad your appointment times for self care and extra time for play room clean up

Q & A

- Anyone on the live call have questions or comments?
- Did we cover our learning objectives? Anything else you would like me to cover?

Thank you!

- Please visit wonderscounseling.com for my catalog of recorded play therapy trainings and stay tuned to my Facebook group Growing A Play Therapy Practice for further training and mentoring opportunities to grow you practice.