PLAY THERAPY WITH THE ADHD CHILD: LESSONS LEARNED
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Over the last twenty years, I have had the opportunity, challenge and privilege of working with ADHD children and their parents. In my work with these children, I take on the role of "skill builder" and coach. I am able to help them to learn skills to overcome many of the difficulties encountered by individuals with ADHD. While my primary goal is to teach skills, I have learned that I cannot reach that goal without the use of play.

Some of the "skill deficits" that may be seen in ADHD children are:
* Difficulty in being able to calm down and relax our upset.
* Difficulty in ability to stop, think, and consider alternatives before choosing a course of action
* Difficulty in understanding social cues—using and responding to nonverbal language.
* Difficulty in planning ahead and being future oriented.
* Difficulty in identifying and appropriately expressing feelings.

I have developed a variety of play therapy techniques to help the child (and family) learn skills for overcoming some of these difficulties. Even more important than any techniques, however, is a basic orientation to being playful. Being playful and allowing the child to play is essential to creating a "safe place" that allows them to relax, be themselves, and do their work.

Many years ago when I first began my career at local mental health center, I remember how difficult it was to reach these children with traditional "talk therapy". However, whenever I did an activity or engaged the child in play, they responded well and the session went much better for them, as well as for me. Once I began speaking their language—the language of play—I was amazed at what could be accomplished.

I remember working with a child who was having difficulty with school. As we were talking about this, he commented, "It's boring." I asked, "Do you mean school is boring?" he replied, "No, this conversation right now is boring." I thanked him for telling me that and immediately got him involved in a playful activity. He was much more animated, engaged with me, and much easier to talk with.

On another occasion, I was having difficulty in getting an ADHD child involved in the therapy sessions. One day, he brought his beloved hackey-sack with him. I invited him to demonstrate for me. He was happy to do so, and playing in this way allowed him to relax, to be himself, and to begin to engage with me and with the therapeutic process. His skill with hackey-sack provided a "language" that could be used in talking about the other much-needed skills that his parents and teachers wanted him to learn.

In my work with families, I have found that parents are often so caught up in the difficulties and stresses of raising an ADHD child, that they may have trouble just being with their kids and enjoying them. I often recommend that the child and their parents do a "Be a Kid Activity". I tell them that this can't be to balance the checkbook or to rake the backyard. It has to be "play" and has to be fun ... tossing a ball, getting a "sno-cone" and seeing who can get the purpleset tongue, or playing a board game. Without fail, parents and children experience this as extremely rewarding. The parents see the "child" and not the "ADHD" and they enjoy the child and themselves. Our recent visitor to our office, laughing in the midst of a silly ball-throwing activity, commented, with all of his 7-year old wisdom, "Ah, it feels good to be young again."

I have learned to be open to lessons learned from ADHD children. They come to me for help and look to me to teach skills. Yet, many times they are the teachers, and we are the pupils and we need be aware and learn and be thankful. It has been very rewarding to work with these children and I am very thankful for the lessons learned.
Progress

Teach strategies and encourage practice. Get coaching and monitor progress. Assign specific ways to organize the skill. Link the skill to the child's everyday life.

Playful Formula for Teaching Skills

A playful formula for teaching skills is to make the child feel engaged and motivated. This can be achieved through playful interactions that demonstrate the skill in a fun and engaging way.

Pharmacological Approaches to Treatment

The MTA Study: Findings

ADHD Research: Implications for Therapists Who Work with Children

Skill Building: The Component of the Treatment Plan for ADHD

- Lea a playful, meaningful, and relatable approach to engage the child in a way that makes the skill fun and relevant.
- Help the child to practice the needed skills in a way that is engaging and enjoyable.
- Assess and build on the child's existing strengths and interests in order to help them develop new ones.
- Use a combination of 2 to 3 strategies that are effective for improving the child's attention, organization, and social skills.
- The components of the MTA intervention included a combination of medication and non-medications approaches to treatment.
- The MTA Study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of different treatment approaches for children with ADHD.
- Findings from the MTA Study showed that a combination of medication and non-medication interventions was more effective than medication alone.
- The MTA Study also demonstrated the importance of involving parents in the treatment process, as they played a crucial role in the success of the intervention.
- The findings from the MTA Study have important implications for therapists who work with children with ADHD, as they highlight the need for a comprehensive and individualized approach to treatment.