

Examining the language skills of children with ADHD following a play-based intervention

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Communication and play skills are important aspects of development yet are largely uncharted in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This exploratory study examined whether changes in pragmatic skills and problem-solving skills were observed in children with ADHD pre- and post-participation in a play-based intervention conducted by occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists. The study also investigated whether the presence of language difficulties affected the children's play outcomes. Fourteen children with ADHD (5;0–10;7 years) participated in a 7-week, pilot intervention to address play and social skill deficits. Pre- and post-intervention testing included: (a) the assessment of play and problem-solving skills via standardized testing, and (b) pragmatic skills via parent report. The children's language skills were also screened and compared with their play scores. Play skills significantly improved post-intervention. No significant differences were observed for pragmatic skills while prediction skills, an aspect of problem-solving, significantly improved pre- and post-play-based intervention. Fifty percent of children failed the language screener, yet separate paired t-tests identified significant play improvements irrespective of the presence or absence of language difficulty. Two independent t-tests revealed significant differences in play scores between these groups at pre- but not post-intervention.

While play and predicting skills significantly improved post-play-based intervention, other aspects of problem-solving and pragmatics did not. Reasons for the lack of change in these areas are discussed. The presence of language difficulties did not appear to affect the play outcomes of children with ADHD following a play-based intervention. A larger scale experimental trial investigating the play and language skills of children with ADHD is warranted, as is future collaborative research between occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists in the assessment and management of children with ADHD.