

The Best Toys and Games Are the Ones You Play Together

You don't need to buy expensive gaming consoles or vast Lego sets to help kids with ADHD build social skills and express themselves through the magic of play. These tried-and-true toys and games will keep your child entertained — and learning — for hours on end.

by Ellen Kingsley

Long before my son was diagnosed with ADHD, his preschool teachers noted his "inappropriate" manner of play. It was "not goal directed," they said; when given two dinosaurs, rather than engage them in battle with each other he would simply throw them at his classmates. Matchbox cars, Ninja Turtles, Duplo blocks, Playdough, and yes, finger paint all followed a similar trajectory.

My son was still too young at the time to have been diagnosed accurately with what turned out to be textbook ADHD, but his chaotic and aggressive manner of play was a powerful early clue. Likewise, early and continual interventions through play had a powerful impact on his ability to concentrate, focus, and follow through. It also helped him develop social skills such as cooperating, communicating, negotiating, sharing, and taking turns.

Child psychiatrists and psychologists have long used play as a therapeutic tool for children with problems such as ADHD, clinical depression, and anxiety disorders. Many children can express themselves through play when meaningful discourse is not possible. Conversely, play is an indirect way for therapists to recast children's perceptions, cognitions and behaviors. As Carol Brady, Ph.D., a Houston child psychologist, puts it: "Children communicate metaphorically through play. As a therapeutic tool, it's like giving a sugary pill instead of a bitter pill."

Wow Your Kid with These Perfect Holiday Gifts!

In a home setting, Brady believes, parents also can use play to help their children achieve impressive gains in attentional and social skills. And while the market abounds with expensive and therapeutic "toys and games specially designed to help children with ADHD," Brady says many conventional, inexpensive toys such as Go Fishing, Clue and Chinese Checkers can be just as beneficial. "It's not so much the game as how you play it," Brady says.

Here are several of the toys, games, and methods Brady recommends for parents and their ADHD children.

Ages 4-6: the power of fantasy

Four to six-year-olds enjoy fantasy toys because they allow for exploration of new experiences and feelings in a safe context. Doctor kits, stuffed animals, family and animal figures, and action or monster figures enable the children to act out roles, situations, and emotions. For children with ADHD, fantasy play is even more important.

Younger children with ADHD may feel isolated and confused because their disorder prevents them from communicating effectively their experiences, fears and concerns. They may have a problem or a story to relate, but they are too distractible to stay with the task from beginning to middle to end. Similarly, they tend to be impulsive, rather than anticipatory thinkers; that is, they act on their impulses before considering whether or not it's a good idea. That's one reason ADHD kids so often find themselves "in trouble" or without friends.

When skillfully directed by parents, fantasy play helps ADHD children learn to stay with a string of tasks long enough to bring them to a conclusion, and teaches them to consider consequences before acting. Constant practice through play enables children to transfer these skills to real life.

Parents should plan ten minute play sessions once a day — longer periods run the risk of the child falling out of attention, and the parent becoming frustrated. Using the toys as props, initiate the fantasy game by suggesting to the child, "Let's make up a story about the horses" — or about whatever fantasy figures are involved.

Fostering follow-through and completion

Continue by prompting: "Once upon a time..." and let the child start to make up and act out the story. You can even play act one of the roles in the fantasy, taking the part of one or more play figures and interacting with the child's.

While the child always directs the fantasy, the parent's role is to redirect when necessary to maintain focus. Every time the child veers of track, you can gently direct the child back to the game — for example, "I was really interested in that horsey story. Tell me what happens next."

If the child is not finished with the fantasy as the ten-minute period concludes, the parent can prompt the ending. "Oh, it's getting dark. Time for horsey to get ready to go to bed," or "The boy's mommy is calling him to come home for dinner now." Take another minute to finish the story and put away the toys.

Start with simple themes: the horse is running around the pasture, and then it's time to have a snack and go home. After a few months, you'll probably notice an improvement in your child's ability to stick with the task. At that point, you can step up the challenge gradually by making the themes increasingly more elaborate (After the snack the horses go out to find a secret treasure). You can even expand the venue of the game from the playroom floor to the whole house.

Rehearsing social behaviors and consequences

Non-ADHD kids who naturally play fantasy game from beginning to end have ample opportunity to rehearse, abandon, and try out new behaviors in this safe and sheltered context. But ADHD kids are different; without parental involvement they may not be up to this task.

Therefore, throughout the story the parent should interact in ways that encourage the child to rehearse social behaviors, experience logical consequences and eventually anticipate outcomes.

Some examples:

- "If the baby horse goes out without his mommy, do you think he might get lost?"
- "If the girl breaks all her toys, what will she have to play with?"
- "If the boy hits his friend, maybe the friend will get hurt and not want to play with him anymore."

Parents also can respond within the fantasy — for example, taking the part of the injured party. If the child's figure hits yours, you might say: "Ow, that hurts! I don't want to play with people who hurt me. Can you try being more gentle?" ADHD children, so used to being chastised, can be more responsive to correction when it's not directed personally at them.

.....

Run! Jump! Play!

.....

The parent-child relationship benefits from this kind of play too. Says Dr. Brady, "What parents can gain along with the satisfaction that they're helping the child is time to enjoy each other, unlike most times where you're telling your kids what to do or making them do something. And it's doubly rewarding because kids in this age group are so much fun and they say the cutest things."

Ages 6-10: rehearsing lifetime skills

Elementary school is a time during which children develop increasingly sophisticated social and cognitive skills that will carry them to high school and beyond. It's an especially critical period for children with ADHD; if they fall behind their peers in this domain, it sets the stage for failure in the future.

"From six to ten, most children learn how to take turns, play by the rules, pay attention to detail, strategize, handle frustration, deal with failure, and recover from disappointments," says Dr. Brady. But ADHD kids often find themselves excluded from the very peer activities such as team sports and cooperative board games that help them build these skills. Their lower frustration tolerance, shorter fuse, and difficulty staying on task can be off-putting to potential team and play mates. When ADHD children are shunned, they miss opportunities to develop socially and cognitively with their peers. This snowball affect can take years to counteract.

.....

Great Sports and Activities for Kids with ADHD

Guidelines for finding a sport or extracurricular activity that fits your child's interests. Download now!

Get This Free Download

The Best Toys And Games for Kids, Part 2

Parents can help at this stage by taking the place of peers and engaging their children in games that will help them develop more socially acceptable behaviors. Dr. Brady counsels parents to look for games that help build the capacity to focus, handle frustration, and play by the rules.

Choosing games that grow with the child

Children with ADHD often have a diminished capacity to follow multi-step directions and stay on task, and become frustrated by their inability to do so. Games that are perfectly appropriate for most six to ten-year-olds may prove far too challenging even for highly intelligent ADHD kids.

But many popular games can be adapted for kids with ADHD, with rules multiplying and challenges increasing gradually over time. This approach enables ADHD kids to master challenges in increments, building gradually their capacity to stay with the game, follow complicated rules, and handle frustration and disappointment.

One example is Milton Bradley's Fishing Game. "I like it for six-year-olds because as kids can master longer periods of time you can change the nature of the game," says Dr. Brady. "At the same time it maintains its familiarity so they don't get distracted by something new and they don't get overwhelmed."

She encourages parents to improvise. "In the beginning, you can start by just letting the child learn how to catch fish. Once this step is mastered, you can go to the second step, which is a race to see who throws out their fishing poles first. The third step would be to add a cognitive challenge, such as who can get four red eights first. After that step is mastered you can change the game to something more interactive by allowing players to ask each other for cards they might need to complete a set. The point is that the game grows with and also fosters the child's ability to maintain more detail."

Keeping it simple

The less complicated and more low-tech the game is, the better it works for ADHD kids. High tech games can be overstimulating; complicated games too frustrating. The following are several simple games that can help enhance ADHD kids' social and cognitive skills.

MEMORY AND ATTENTION

The Memory Game (Milton Bradley): This simple game helps increase attention span and memory. It requires players to match their cards with others that are turned face down. If you turn a card face up and it doesn't match your card, you have to put it back face down. The challenge is to remember the cards that have been put back down, so that you can pair them with your cards when matches come up. Whoever gets the most matches wins.

"Because this game can be frustrating, you can quickly get an informal measure of how far you can go in terms of length of time and staying focused," says Dr. Brady. "Then you can begin to change the rules to match your child's frustration level." With younger or less focused children, you can set up the game so that matching cards are closer together; when they try to find a match they'll usually win. Over time you can increase the challenge by scattering the cards, forcing the child to go farther in the visual field to find a match.

ANTICIPATING CONSEQUENCES

Chinese Checkers: Chinese Checkers works for ADHD kids because it's simple, yet it requires a bit of strategy. Like its more complex sisters, Checkers and Chess, it helps kids develop their capacity to plan and think ahead.

The challenge is simple; just get your men from this end to that end using very simple strategies. Over time they start to learn that if they think ahead about where they're going, they can get there a lot faster. "When they make this connection it's really good," says Dr. Brady. "That's also when they start beating me!"

ANTICIPATING SUCCESS AND DEALING WITH FAILURE

Chutes and Ladders (Milton Bradley): Children with ADHD experience increased frustration over anticipating success and dealing with failure. Chutes and Ladders is an excellent way to help kids increase frustration tolerance and get over failures quickly.

The objective is simple: to roll the dice, and move the players along a trail toward the top of the board. Along the way are ladders; if you land on one, it can bring you quickly to the top. The chutes are a hazard; land on them and you can plummet from leader to loser.

"I like this game because it gives the parent and child an opportunity to talk about how it feels to climb ladders and have good things happen," says Dr. Brady. "But then you also get to talk about what it feels like to slide down the chute. You can help them practice how to manage failure, particularly when you're so close to winning. And you can stress the importance of recovering quickly from disappointments, because if you continue on you still can get to the top."

SOLVING PROBLEMS AND STAYING ORGANIZED

Clue (Milton Bradley): Clue is a crime solving game in which children have to evaluate clues to determine who committed a crime, and which weapon was used. It works by process of elimination, so it forces kids to think about information that they have and that they don't have. That's a real challenge for kids with ADHD, and it enhances some critical skills.

One is learning to use information to solve problems, rather than acting on impulse; kids with ADHD tend to act on their feelings before thinking about the consequences. Within the safe confines of a game like Clue, children learn quickly that impulsive actions usually are counterproductive.

Another objective is to organize and prioritize. "Since the game provides players with cards that help them eliminate items from a list, it fosters this kind of thinking in everyday life," says Dr. Brady. I tell kids that in daily life we also have to make lists and cross out items so that we know what our priorities are and what we have to do.

Copyright © 1998 - 2016 New Hope Media LLC. All rights reserved. Your use of this site is governed by our **Terms of Service** (<http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/terms.html>) and **Privacy Policy** (<http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/privacy.html>). ADDitude does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. The material on this web site is provided for educational purposes only. See **additional information** at <http://www.additudemag.com/adhd/disclaimer.html>. New Hope Media, 108 West 39th Street, Suite 805, New York, NY 10018 .

[Adult ADHD](#) | [Parenting ADHD Children](#) | [ADHD Treatment](#) | [School & Learning Disabilities](#) | [About ADHD](#) | [ADHD Resources](#) | [ADHD Community](#)

Source: The Best Toys and Games Are the Ones You Play Together