

## **The Play of Children with ADHD**

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**Introduction:** Many children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have serious social and peer difficulties that can lead to adverse outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. Furthermore, studies have found differences in the nature and severity of social problems experienced by children between the different subtypes of ADHD. Play provides a natural context to explore those social problems.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to examine the play of children with ADHD-- compared with typically developing children and by ADHD subtype.

**Method:** Using the Test of Playfulness (ToP), we examined the play of children (aged 5 to 11 years) in two groups (N=350). Group 1: children diagnosed with ADHD (n=112) paired with playmates (n=112) who were typically developing; Group 2: a control group of age-, ethnic- and sex-matched typically-developing children paired with typically-developing playmates (n=126). Children with ADHD were subsequently grouped by three subtypes: inattentive (I), hyperactive-impulsive (HI) and combined subtype (C).

**Results:** Children with ADHD performed lower than typically developing peers on several ToP social play items but not on ToP items that relate most directly to the primary symptoms of ADHD; they performed better than typically developing children on items (especially mischief and clowning). When comparing the play of children by subtype, an item-by-item analysis revealed that the relative difficulty of ToP items was similar for children with the HI- and C- subtypes, but differed for children with the I-subtype.

**Conclusions:** The play of children with ADHD seems to be characterised by a developmentally inappropriate lack of empathetic responding, rather than simply by poor social skills. Further, there are enough differences in the play patterns of children in the varying subtypes to warrant consideration in intervention.

**Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy:** The research findings underscore the importance of play in the assessment and intervention of children with ADHD.