

Interventions at the Point of Performance

The Power of Play

by Mark Katz, PhD

CHILDREN WITH ADHD who struggle to regulate their emotions and control their behavior may actually regulate their emotions and control their behavior very well in their therapist's office, but not very well at home, at school, or on the playground. Marcie Yeager, LCSW, RPT-S, and her husband Daniel Yeager, LCSW, RPT-S, are therapists based in Lafayette, Louisiana. They have developed an executive function-based treatment model intended to bridge the gap between the therapy office and real life.

Their model provides children with tools they can use in actual situations where these skills are needed the most, or at what psychologist Russell Barkley refers to as the *point of performance*. The treatment approach has other innovative features as well, many of which are described within the model's six components.

■ A dynamic assessment process

The model employs a dynamic assessment process designed to identify real-world situations where the child executes quite well. "We listen to descriptions of behaviors that may indicate a particular EF weakness," says Marcie Yeager, "but then we also elicit information about contexts in which the child can easily demonstrate that EF. Maybe it's at grandma's house, maybe it's on the ball field,

maybe it's while playing games." The Yeagers then identify specific supports, accommodations, or environmental influences that contribute to successful execution in those contexts. The information obtained through this process is key to developing and introducing tools, supports, accommodations, and environmental changes to problematic situations. The Yeagers use the assessment results to help parents, teachers, and the child gain a new understanding of how executive function delays impact the child's functioning at home, at school, and with friends. For interventions to succeed, parents, teachers, and children first need to see challenges through this new lens; otherwise, challenging behaviors can look entirely willful.

■ Identifying persons who can serve as facilitators

Parents who may have relied only on rewards and punishments to change their child's behavior learn how they can also teach and strengthen their child's attentional and behavioral skills. "We help parents become facilitators for their child," says Daniel Yeager. "The role of facilitator implies collaboration with the child, helping the child to become an active partner in setting goals and finding solutions. The facilitator's job is to provide

enough 'scaffolding' to allow the child to perform while at the same time showing the child that they can develop their own strategies for coping with EF-related difficulties." The Yeagers compare the process of teaching these skills to the process of teaching a child to ride a bicycle. In both instances, developmental readiness enters into the equation. Some children will need more external support or "scaffolding" than others.

■ Planning developmentally appropriate interventions

Games can be an excellent way to engage children and at the same time teach them about executive skills. "Children who struggle with ADHD are first of all children," says Daniel Yeager. "Like all children, they are naturally drawn to play. Therapists can utilize the language of play to engage the child's interest and, more importantly, to demonstrate to the child what executive functions are and why they are important." Childhood games such as Simon Says and Red Light, Green Light involve working memory, behavioral inhibition, and other executive functions. Children can learn how the same executive skills they use to succeed at these games can also be used to succeed at school, at home, or on the playground.

■ Providing external support at the point of performance

Here the Yeagers work with parents, teachers, and others in the child's circle of support to put in place external supports necessary for the child to succeed during a typical day. Different supports might be needed at school than at home, and different supports might be needed at home than with friends. Once scaffolding is in place, the Yeagers feel they can focus more intensively on tools and strategies that the children themselves can use at the point of performance. Children are taught that doing better is within their power. Using tools and strategies at the point of performance is the key. A variety of tools and strategies are then introduced, many of which provide children with visual or other external reminders or cues.



■ Adjusting support according to performance

Initial point-of-performance interventions are designed for less demanding situations that provide the greatest likelihood of success. Once children have some success under their belt, more demanding situations are introduced. The Yeagers help parents and other facilitators understand how to weigh appropriate scaffolding with time spent helping children learn new skills. Striking the right balance allows interventions to occur within the context of a child's unique developmental needs. Children have the opportunity to learn new attentional and executive skills while still enjoying successful experiences that come with developmentally tailored scaffolding.

■ Introducing a long-term vision

Some children not only need more scaffolding than others, they also need it for much longer periods of time. Still, with the right combination of self-initiated tools and strategies on the one hand, and scaffolding on the other, the quality of their lives can improve

significantly. Parents, teachers, and others in the child's circle of support are provided this long-term vision.

The role of play

The Yeagers' model draws extensively on three sources of information:

- studies of executive functioning, and in particular, the work of Russell Barkley
- theories of child development, focusing particular attention on the work of Lev Vygotsky and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development
- the role of play in helping children improve working memory, emotional self-regulation and other executive skills.

Their views on the role of play were shaped in part by Tools of the Mind, a program developed by psychologists Deborah Leong and Elena Boedrova of Denver, Colorado. Tools of the Mind teaches preschoolers how to use different "mental tools" to gain greater control of their social, emotional, and cognitive behaviors (see *Attention*, April 2009). A 2007 study conducted by neuroscientist Adele Diamond at the University of British Columbia

showed that children enrolled in preschool classrooms using Tools of the Mind improved in their ability to resist distractions and temptations (inhibitory control), mentally hold information in mind (working memory) and flexibly adjust to change (cognitive flexibility).

The Yeagers describe their model, along with tools and strategies for improving attentional and executive skills, in their recently published book, *Executive Function and Child Development* (Norton, 2013). Those wishing to communicate directly can email the Yeagers at playtherapy@att.net. 

A clinical and consulting psychologist, Mark Katz is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center located in San Diego. He is a contributing editor to Attention magazine and a member of its editorial advisory board, a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board, and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.



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