

Web-Based Radio Show

Self Esteem in Children with ADHD and ADD


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Thank you for joining us this morning. Today we have a very interesting presentation, I hope, for all of you tuning in. It is going to be on Self Esteem in Children with ADHD and ADD.

One of the biggest challenges, along with helping children with attentional difficulties learn to pay attention, is to help them also feel good about themselves and feel positive. Many children with attentional challenges, as well as other challenges, regardless of whether they have broader special needs conditions or just limited attentional challenges, suffer with low self esteem. They feel badly about themselves.

A good illustration is Mark, an eight year old little boy who, when he was talking with me said, "My brain doesn't work." I asked him what he meant by that and he said, "Well, when the teacher is talking, I'm staring out the window or my body just wants to move and I get up and I walk around the room or I talk to my friends." I said, "Well, what do you mean your body just sort of does it?" and he said, "It just sort of happens. It's like my brain just does it. It doesn't work." I asked him how he felt about that and he just used the broad term when he described it and he said, "Bad." I asked him, "What do you mean by "bad" and he said, "I have a bad brain and it's just bad." Then he gave a silly little grin like part of him enjoyed being mischievous but when I told him he was smiling a little bit too he couldn't comment on that. He just ignored it and said, "I get into trouble a lot." Then he said, "Some of the kids make fun of me because I get into trouble. Even my friends sometimes make fun of me." I asked him how that made him feel and he said, "That makes me feel bad." I kind of empathized that a lot of things made him feel bad. He gave another silly little grin and nodded in agreement. I asked him if there were any things that also made him feel less bad or good about himself and it took awhile because he was thinking, and he thought and he thought and he said, "Well, one of the things I like is magic and my Mom and Dad got me a magic box with some tricks in it for my last birthday, and I like doing that. If the trick works, I feel good. I can kind of trick people." I said, "How do they feel when you trick them?" He said, "They




feel dumb!” I said, “So it’s fun to make people feel dumb with your tricks” and he grinned from ear to ear.

As I looked at Mark in the context of his overall discussion with me and watched him interact with his parents, I could see that he could focus and attend when you were supportive like I was in our one-on-one situation and he could engage with me with warmth and his parents with warmth and he could interact and he could take us places and show us things and problem solve in a social way, he used lots of ideas in his talking and at times he could be creative and make up stories. In fact, he told me at another point during the interview that when he would get into trouble, he would sometimes just make up a story about why he did what he did, like one time when he was poking the kid next to him, the teacher asked him why and he said, “Because he was making fun of me and he made up a story that I had peed in my pants and that wasn’t true and I told the teacher all that.” Then he looked down and I asked him why he looked down and he said, “Well, I made all that up so the teacher wouldn’t be mad at me.” I said, “Boy, you have a good imagination! You can make things up pretty easily!” and he smiled indicating that he could both be creative and he could also use it as self serving purposes.

He could be logical and answer “why” questions, and he could even do a little bit of what we call “comparative thinking” where he said at one time during the interview I asked if there were any other children who do the same things you do in class. He said, “Well, there is one other boy who also always gets into trouble and has a bad brain.” I said, “Well, who has the better brain or worse brain?” and he said, “Well, I think mine is worse.” I asked him why and he said, “Because I do more bad things. I get into more trouble.” So he was kind of comparing himself to another child and even doing some comparative thinking. When I asked him how bad he felt, he could show me with his hands that he felt very, very bad. So he could do some gray area thinking.

When I asked about other feelings like what does he feel along with the bad feelings, and I gave him some examples like happy, sad, angry – he could talk a little about feeling sad, but he had a hard time talking about angry feelings or feeling embarrassed or humiliated. Whenever those feelings came close to being described or I even brought it up as to whether he ever felt that way, he just changed the subject and he talked about something he wanted for his next birthday; a toy. He said, “Oh, did I tell you about this new game?” He liked video games and said he wanted a new video game for his birthday. So he had a hard time talking about those kinds of feelings, which was obviously contributing to his low self esteem.




When we looked at his processing profile, in addition to his social interactions and thinking capacities, he was both reactive to certain sensations so noises and different kinds of touch would get him hyper stimulated, but he was also very sensory craving. He liked to move, he liked to touch things, he liked to get into environments that over stimulated him and then he craved the actual sensations that over stimulated him. He was pretty good verbally, actually, and was a pretty good talker but he had a hard time remembering five instructions in a row. Like one time I did a little exercise with him during the interview where I asked him if he could go get this toy and put it in that drawer and then get another toy that was in the drawer and bring it to me and then take it from me and take it to his dad and then show it to his mom, but he couldn't remember the sequence. He couldn't carry that out. He did some obstacle courses and he had a hard time with the sequencing although he was active and considered an average athlete by his peers. His fine motor was a little sluggish although he liked to draw. He liked to do magic tricks but he had a hard time making his letters and shapes.

His ability to balance, like balance on a balance beam was also a little bit below age expectations, although it was not really bad, but he had some relative strength there but not quite where we wanted it to be. When it came to big picture thinking, he tended to sometimes get over focused on one or two details and couldn't always see the big picture – what we call visual spatial thinking. So like for example when I asked him to search a whole room for something, he tended to look in one spot rather than taking into account the whole room and figure out strategically where it might be. So there were a number of processing areas where he was not quite as strong as he could be.

In talking with Mark's parents, it also became clear that there were some family issues that needed attention as well. Dad tended to be very punitive and thought Mark was just being bad and doing all this stuff deliberately and tended to take a hard approach to him and not have many interactions with him other than scolding him or punishing him with time outs. He wasn't hitting or being harsh in that sense, but his voice was gruff and he had a very negative attitude.

Mom tended to get overwhelmed. She was an anxious, caring person, but she was overwhelmed by Mark getting into trouble and very embarrassed that she would get called into school a lot to talk to teachers, and Mark was not doing well in his grades – he was getting C's and some D's and often wouldn't hand in his homework, so she was getting overwhelmed. Plus, they had three younger children – Mark was the oldest – and she felt, just as she put it, overloaded. She was also very mad at her husband because he was being unsupportive and she thought he was too harsh on Mark and that Mark was going to suffer depression and become a delinquent adolescent and use drugs and drink




and she was very worried about what would happen when Mark got older. So she was kind of overloaded and overwhelmed.

This pattern had characterized their relationship with Mark since he was little. It turns out that historically he was very active and had been sensory craving as well as getting overloaded easily since he was a little baby.

So our task was to help Mark feel better about himself as well as institute a whole program to help him learn to pay attention a little bit better. The first thing we approached, even before we started the program, was to work on some of the family dynamics so they could support the program we were going to recommend to help Mark feel better about himself. I worked with Mom and Dad, and with Dad we talked about why he was feeling so punitive and angry with Mark, and it turned out after many discussions that Dad had an older brother who was very active and intrusive and often hit him a great deal, and he was very worried that Mark would be out of control and a “monster” like his older brother and he felt his parents had never protected him. When he saw the connection in his mind between Mark and his older brother, it was my encouragement to have some of what we call hang out time and Floortime with Mark, and do that two or three times a day when he came home from work and a lot on the weekends with special projects together and get involved with Mark and his magic. I explained to him about hanging out time and just beating to Mark’s drummer and hanging out with him, but also setting limits when needed but trying to establish a nice relationship with him first. He was able to do that gradually with a lot of support and a lot of awareness that his worries about Mark and the connection with his older brother was fueling a lot of the anger he had towards Mark.

With Dad being more supportive, Mom was able to calm down and be a little less anxious and also I got Mom and Dad to start getting off by themselves once a week which they had stopped doing and they had lost that romantic spark in their relationship and they were able to rekindle that a little bit. I was able to help mom prioritize her work with all the kids since there were four children in the family and also get some help in the afternoons – we got a big brother mentor; a high school student to help carry out some of the recommendations that I made for Mark. Also, Mom was very worried about Mark’s future and just verbalizing that. Mom was able to calm down considerably and get more organized as we prioritized, and as she talked about her dad who had a period of alcoholism and had gotten into some trouble with the law during that with driving problems and she was obviously very worried about that and that Mark had inherited a “bad gene” and that helped her calm down and relax a little bit. But mainly giving her a lot of support, a little bit of insight on her own family, helping her structure her day, and




getting the help of a high school student; a mentor to help work with Mark's program in the afternoon that we recommended.

With Mark, we instituted an ambitious program that we phased in gradually. We wanted to see if we could help him overcome his attentional difficulties and do it without medication first and keep medication on the shelf if necessary to try at some later point. We focused on the areas where he was showing some need of some work. One of the areas that we identified, as I mentioned earlier, was in his ability to sequence ideas in a row and sequence actions in a row. Remember, he had trouble with obstacle courses and carrying out complex directions. So we played a lot of treasure hunt games with two-step directions and then three-step and then four-step verbal instructions. We also had pictorial instructions too with diagrams and maps to help him with his visual spatial thinking as well. So we challenged him visually and we also challenged him verbally, but always letting him succeed about 75%-80% of the time so we didn't overload him with six-step directions in the treasure hunt games, we did it with two or three steps where he would be successful and then add on a fourth and a fifth – always with a 75%-80% success rate. The prizes at the end of the rainbow were usually magic tricks. We got a lot of new, fairly inexpensive magic tricks from the variety shop that had a lot of inexpensive toys and things that we could load up with that didn't bankrupt the family. So he was very motivated to pay attention.

He also liked to draw and to help him be practical with things like getting his homework done and getting it in, each day we had him actually draw, not write out in words, a little map of what he was going to do that evening and what was due the next day. We had his teenage helper or mom do that with him after school so he would identify some play time and then some before dinner work and some after dinner work and what was due the next day and he would check them off himself. So he would have little drawings or sometimes he would choose to use words – we let him decide – and then at the end of the day when he got all his checks done, he could erase it and put up a new list for the next day. So we had this big board that he could use for that, and he could take a look. Whenever Mom or Dad were worried that he wasn't getting his work done or wasn't going to hand it in on time rather than nagging him, they would just say, "Let's go look at the board together" and "Oh boy! You have a lot of check marks today! Is there anything else you need to do?"


We also noticed that Mark was, as I mentioned, having trouble with balance, but he was pretty good at throwing, catching, skipping, hopping, and jumping, and we used a lot of balance exercises with him as part of his play. This was part of the afternoon program with his mentor/big brother who would come over and sometimes do this with



him and a friend. Mark was actually pretty popular and had lots of friends and peers. Even though they made fun of him at times, there were a lot of kids in the neighborhood and every so often it would be him and a friend and this high school junior who was a good athlete would come over and they would have a balance beam and Koosh balls and with Mark, he could do some of the things really easily like just stand on a Koosh ball or stand on a balance beam. So it was getting into the more complex balance exercises like standing on a balance beam or Koosh ball and then throwing and catching a Nerf ball or throwing and catching a tennis ball while doing that, and then talking while throwing and catching the ball, and then throwing and catching the ball with one hand while standing on a Koosh ball and talking and telling jokes. Then eventually we had him doing magic tricks while standing on a Koosh ball and balance beam. He enjoyed it thoroughly and he got better with his balance and coordination. We also did lots of running, jumping, hopping, skipping, throwing, and catching kinds of games too just to reinforce things he already did reasonably well. But he didn't have a lot of the fundamental problems in motor coordination and he had good muscle tone so we didn't have to work on some of the more basic exercises that we outlined in earlier discussions. He could get right up to the more advanced ones.

We mostly worked on sequencing and we mostly worked in terms of ideas at first and balance exercises at first, then we also added in obstacle courses with more and more complex obstacles that you had to get around and you had to plan because they involved climbing and going through tunnels, and we incorporated them in the treasure hunts. So he had to be an Indiana Jones kind of character to get the prize at the end of the rainbow, and he had to go through all kinds of tunnels and over things and some of them required a bit of planning like getting three chairs or getting a board to put over the chairs to get over a moat that was a pretend moat that he wasn't allowed to step in to get to the treasure. So it involved lots of planning, and when he had a friend in it, they took turns being the leader. When he was the leader, he gave the directions and then he and his friend would do it together. He became much better at sequencing as well as using his visual boards at home in the evenings for planning his homework schedules.

We also played a lot of regulation games with him – going fast, slow, super slow; playing the drums loud, soft, super soft. Also we exposed him to different environments – just a little bit of noise and a little bit of commotion and a little bit of touching, having friends banging into him and then more and more and more so he could learn to regulate and not over react in those situations, so he didn't become overloaded. But the modulation games – the fast, slow, super slow; playing the drums, running fast, slow, then super slow motion were geared to deal with his sensory craving where he got




impulsive and went from 0-60 in two seconds. In a sense, he learned to enjoy slow motion. But this occurred over a period of many, many months. As we were doing this, we were always asking him how it felt and how he felt and he became more and more a poet of his feelings.

We also, during hang out time, had both his mentor and his parents just talking about whatever was on his mind and we also did what we call the “Thinking about Tomorrow” game where he anticipated situations that would be hard and easy for tomorrow, and situations that he enjoyed and didn’t enjoy like in class with the subjects he felt were hard, and how he felt and what he routinely did when he had those feelings and how that made other people feel and what alternatives he might do. We used the Socratic Method where he had to brainstorm and come up with the solutions and where he learned to become a poet of his feelings. We tried to get into some of the feeling areas that were harder for him, like the angry feeling, the humiliating feeling – so we would ask, “Well, are there other feelings where you don’t feel just sad or happy?” to get him to describe a little more subtlety. We threw out some other feelings, like do you ever get a little mad – just a teeny, teeny bit? And he slowly began acknowledging angry feelings and even feeling embarrassed at times or even feeling scared, which was hard for him to admit. He didn’t like to talk about feeling scared. He expanded his range of feelings in his discussions with Mom and with Dad and also with his big brother mentor as we did that. So he was able to become a better thinker across a broader range of issues and feelings.

In a moment we will talk about how we helped him with his attitudes about his school and also feeling good about his inner core; his self; how he started changing his attitudes about his brain. To address specifically some of the areas that were leading Mark to feel “My brain doesn’t work,” we approached it in a number of ways. One, we wanted to find something that he was really good at that he would feel his brain did good. He loved to do magic and magic tricks, and as he learned to sequence a little better in terms of carrying out a series of steps, he could do more complicated magic tricks. Actually, we worked on his fine motor skills by showing him card tricks to do where he got more dexterous with his fingers, so he really enjoyed that. We enrolled him in a magic class where he met other kids who loved magic too, and he became quite a “Maven of Magic.” He became quite good and he became known as the “class magician” and even performed for the class.

Also, in talking with Mark over time, this occurred over many months, we had Mom, Dad, and his teenage mentor and I only saw them every few months for consultation, we helped Mark identify the feelings he got in his body just before he was




about to get fidgety and walk around the room or bug another child next to him or poke someone. So what he identified as “my brain made me do it” and “my brain is bad” became really a description of feelings. Also, we helped him understand by talking about it, what was easy and hard for him. Magic turned out to be easy. Also, moving around and having fun annoying people or making people feel dumb at times for making people feel like they didn’t know what to do he kind of enjoyed. That was his little smirk he showed me in the first session that he finally came to understand from discussions with me and I had alerted his parents to help him see that, that was fun for him sometimes. But that came later after about 8 months of the program where he was much better at describing his feelings, where he could see that it was fun getting other people to feel like their brains were bad and their brains don’t work right.

As he did that, he came to identify the feelings in his body as just normal, natural feelings. He became able to identify what he did well, like magic, and he was actually pretty good at math when he could concentrate and practice it. He had a little harder time with reading comprehension and a little harder time with reading, but he was competent at it with a little more diligence and practice as he identified things that he was good and not so good at, what his Dad was good at and not so good at, what his Mom was good at and not so good at, he began substituting things that “my brain is good at and not so good at” as part of what everyone’s brain is. We all have things that we do well.

It was very important for him, though, to have something to claim his self esteem around and have something that was his claim to fame, and that was being the class magician as he got better, better, and better at doing his magic tricks, even though the initial motivation was to get other people to “feel stupid” and fool people. But we gave him was a socially constructive way to fool people, not by trying to figure out why his brain was doing what it was doing. Gradually, he began feeling better about himself, particularly around things he began doing better and better because of his teenage mentor who worked with him on balance, throwing, catching, and kicking. He became a better soccer player on the kid’s soccer team that was in the neighborhood in a league. He became better at Little League Baseball, which he also enrolled in. He became a better student and he felt better about himself, so he had real accomplishments which made him feel better and he could rally around and feel better about himself.


The modulation games helped him with his sensory craving to help control him a little more. We also did a lot of rhythmic activity with music that also helped him control his behavior a little bit more. Dad’s more supportive approach and setting incentives for him and working with him on his little bulletin board maps was a big help for him. So we had a number of areas where he began feeling a little more competent. This was very,



very valuable for Mark. Gradually, he began to feel better about himself. One day he told me, this was about a year after he started the program, he said, “You know, my brain works better now. I can do more things.” This was when he was close to nine years old. He was able to describe his feelings a little bit better and the family was functioning better. Mom was less anxious because she was feeling more positive about Mark, Dad was feeling better about his son - they were doing some special projects on the weekends, and we had a new situation and Mark was no longer identified as an ADHD kid by his teachers or by himself or by his family because he could calm down, and focus and attend a little bit more. This was accomplished through this comprehensive program. But more importantly, he felt better about himself.

Now there were a number of general principles we can extract from this. The general principles are to help self esteem in a child with attentional problems is:

1. Understand the reasons for the attentional problems and begin addressing those so the child begins feeling like his body and his brain and his mind, even though he or she may not use those terms can start functioning better. So there's no substitute for real improvement. So getting the comprehensive program that we have just described in earlier sessions get cooking, and for some kids like Mark they already do things well, so the program only has to address a few of the elements like for him, the sequencing and the balance were the predominant ones, and expanding his range of feelings to get his thinking level not so much higher but applied to a broader range of feelings like the angry feelings and the humiliating feelings.
2. Equally important, and it should be right up there with #1, is helping with the family dynamics. Some family dynamics help support low self esteem and others support high self esteem. So work on family dynamics and have Mom and Dad helping a child focus and attend and feel good about themselves. That means setting limits and appropriate limits but in a supportive and constructive way. When Mark misbehaved, he still lost TV or video game privileges, and he still had time outs so there was no shortage of limits in his life on occasion, but they were much less frequent than before and not implemented harshly.
3. Make sure that the family dynamics are helped in a real way, not just with insight, but Mom needed some real help with 4 kids and we needed somebody to work with Mark because Dad was unavailable in the



afternoons to do all the exercises; a male role model since he was the oldest in the family, and a mentor or big brother who could really help him. That was a really important relationship for Mark and the teenager got a lot from it too, and enjoyed Mark. Fortunately, Mark already had good friendships, so that was already an area of some strength. Where friendships aren't there, then a lot of play dates become very, very important.

4. Next, and critically important, is that it is important to have a place where the child can really rally their self esteem around. For Mark, it turned out to be magic and magic tricks. For another child it might be art. For another child it might be telling jokes. For another child, it might be creative story telling. One child named Harold, he loved to make up games once we got into obstacle courses and stuff, and he wanted to create them. It turned out that he liked creating games that other people couldn't master. Like that comment Mark said about making them feel like they couldn't do things too, but he loved making up games. So every child has something they can excel at, even if it is not traditional schoolwork or not a traditional sports activity. So it is important to think outside the box and find something that the child really enjoys and let that become their claim to fame. That is something real that they can rally their self esteem over.

What is critically important is false self esteem or “you're a good boy” or “don't think that way” doesn't work at all. It needs to be something real that the child can rally around and that gives them positive self esteem.

It is also important gradually, as a general principle, to help the child understand their strengths and weaknesses, and that there are areas that they are good at so they begin substituting this more defined picture of themselves as a person for their picture of a brain that doesn't work. That's a more global, polarized assessment of themselves rather than a more subtle assessment of strengths and weaknesses.

So Mark was able to be successful at mastering his challenges and feeling good about himself, and with these principles, many children are able to feel good about themselves.

Thank you for joining us today and we will continue these discussions.