

EMDR

Child and Youth

EMDR for children with ADHD

Ariane Tjeenk-Kalff
Tirtsa Ehrlich
Anneke Eenhoorn

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Case study Tom (12)

Professional
football player

Attentional problems, very busy, acts without thinking

↓
Learning problems

↓
Fear of failure
Sleeps badly
Sad at home

↓
Has a short fuse, gets angry,
gets into conflicts with others

Treatment plan?



Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Prevalence: 5% on average*

Subtypes

Inattentive

“ADD”

**Hyperactive
& Impulsive**

Combined

* Faraone et al., 2021

Concepts and consequences of ADHD

Attention

- Concentration
- Easily distracted
- Completing tasks

→ Affects school and social interaction
→ Fear of failure

Hyperactivity

- Restlessness
- Difficulty sitting still
- Excessive activity

→ Disruptive in class & at home

Impulsivity

- Act without thinking
- Interrupting others
- Taking risks

→ Conflicts & problem with rules
→ Accidents



Individual variation per age, environment and personal factors;
a multifactorial disorder

Underlying explanations of ADHD

Executive functions

(Self-control / self-regulation*)

- Problems with planning and organisation
- Poor time management abilities
- Greater risk of encountering problematic situations



• Motivation

Difficulty to motivate themselves (intrinsic motivation) and prefer immediate over delayed rewards.



"You can do it, if you just try harder"

* Barkley, 2012

'Stop that!'

'Try harder!'

'Shut up
already!'

'hahahaha!'

"Everyone
hates me"

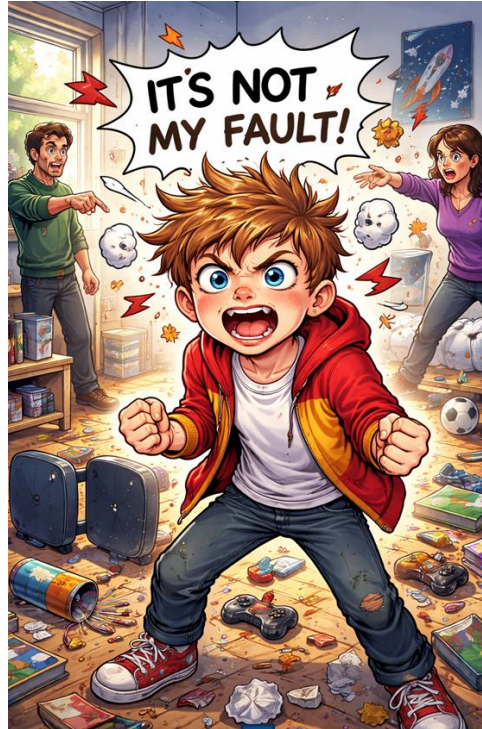
"I am a
loser"

'Pay
attention!'

"I'm not good
enough"

"I'm
stupid"

"I wish I was
normal"



Negative
self-esteem

EMDR
Child and Youth

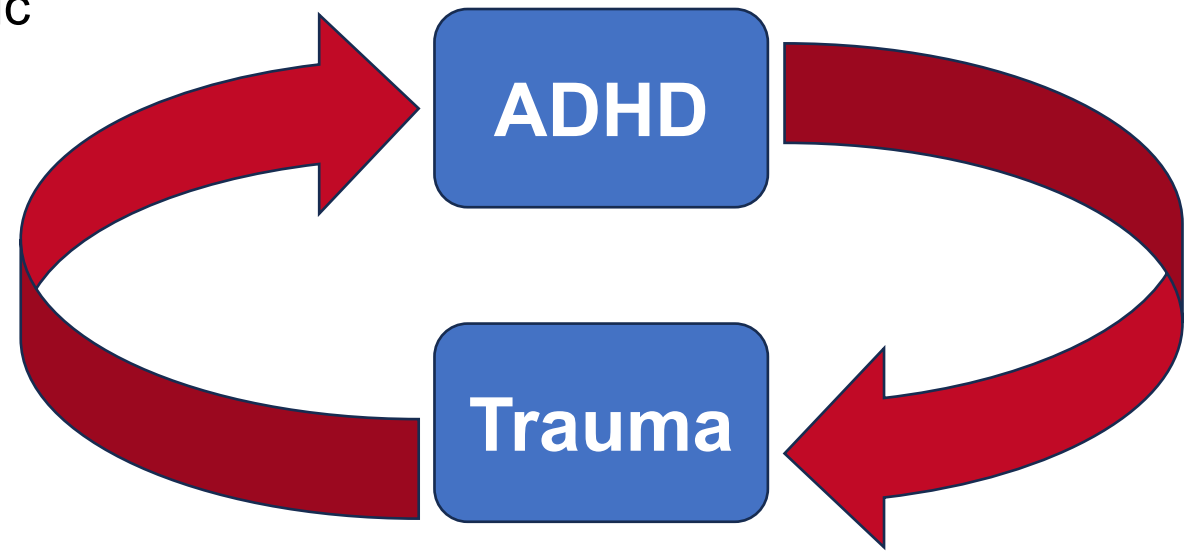
Rationale for EMDR in ADHD

Children with ADHD often experience traumatic events.

They are more likely to develop PTSD*.

This may lead to exacerbation of ADHD symptoms.

Which may increase the risk of more traumatic experiences.



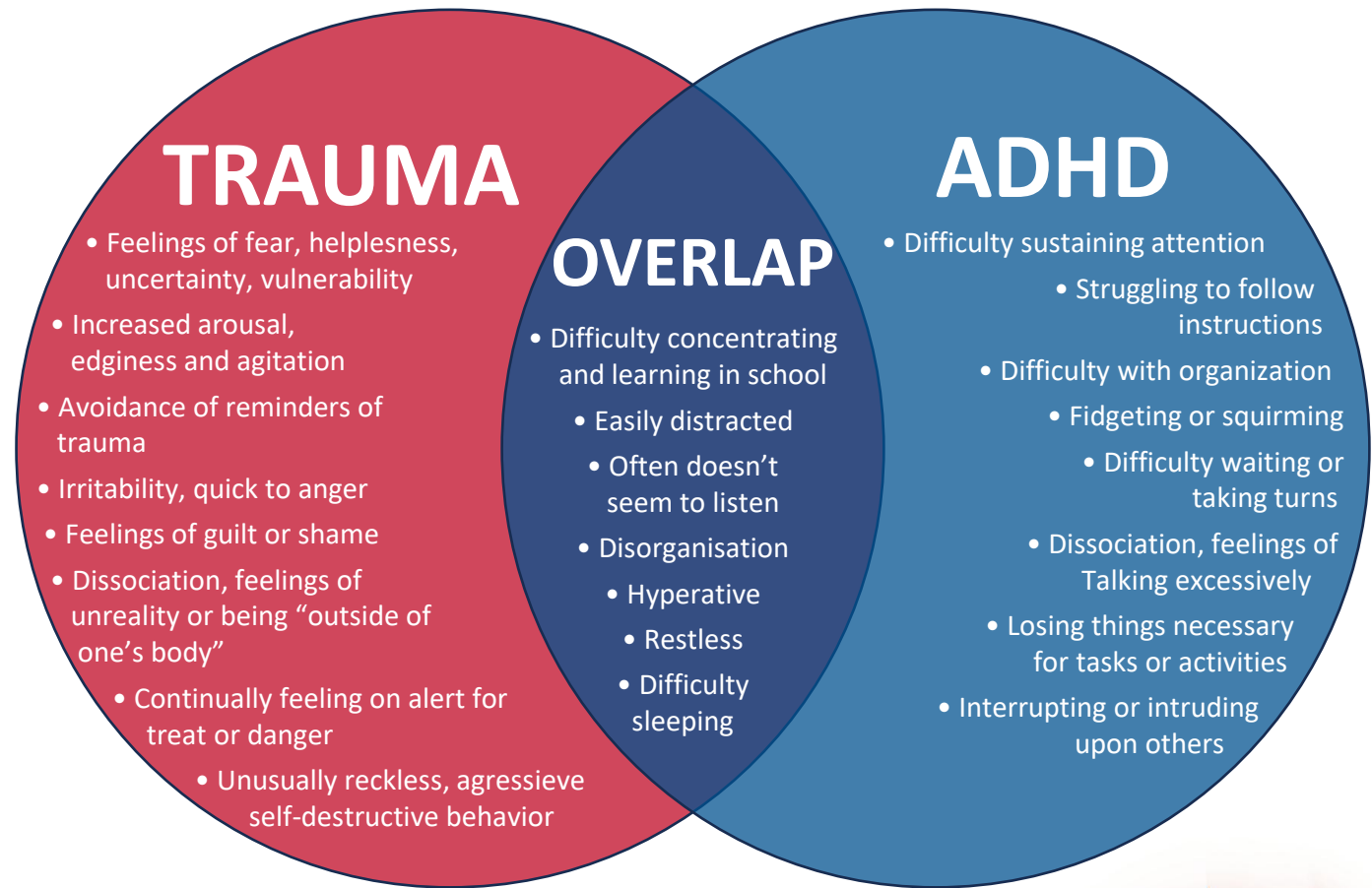
* Faraone et al., 2021

ADHD and Trauma

Prevalence ADHD and PTSD unknown.

Only one study showed 22% children with PTSD also had ADHD*.

PTSD should be treated first to evaluate ADHD behaviours afterwards



The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016



* Ünver & Karakaya, 2019

Emperical evidence

Hardly any scientific studies published on EMDR in children with ADHD.

Case report 12-yr old boy with ADHD and multiple traumatic experiences received EMDR*:

- Reduction of emotional regulation problems and
- Improvement executive functions

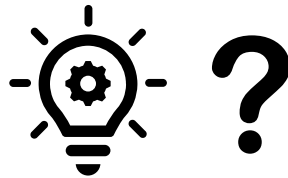
*Guidetti et al., 2023



Potential effects of EMDR in ADHD?

Children with ADHD have lower working memory capacity AND problems with attention.

Quicker results
because of their
limited WM
capacity?



Longer total
treatment because
of their attention
problems?

Based on our clinical experience ...



General recommendations

To improve continuity and planning

- Low-stimulation treatment room.
- Fixed time and send reminders.
- More and shorter sessions (30-40 min).
- Encouragement / re-explanation at start of each session.

Medication

- Appropriately adjusted medication before starting EMDR.
- Medication before session.
- Rebound effect at end of day (with short-acting medication).
- No session at end of day.

Preparation phase

Reinforce motivation

- Reward card
- Motivational interviewing techniques
- Clear goals

Encourage to be honest

Reassurance about associations

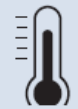
This reward card belongs to: _____

Session 1	😊	
Session 2	😊	
Session 3	😊	After three sessions, [name] may choose from the following rewards: - going to bed half an hour later - choosing what to eat - going to a movie together
Session 4		
Session 5		
Session 6		

Reward card for young children

Preparation phase

Visualisation of the phases

Phase	Icon
Explain EMDR	
Describe the traumatizing event	
Identify the image	
Examine why this image is still so disturbing/unpleasant	
Use EM* (eye movements, light bar, buzzers, etc.) Start EM*	
Check if there is still disturbance	
If there is still disturbance remaining, continue and repeat	X...X...X...X...X
When there is no more disturbance, link positive thoughts or words to the memory	
Body scan and positive closure	

Preparation phase

- Set rules
- Use SUD and VOC cards
- Explaining EMDR

Ages 12 years and younger	Ages 13–18 years
Go to the toilet beforehand	Turn off mobile phone during session
Drink afterwards	Catch-up before the start of EMDR
No chatting during eye movement	No stories or discussion during eye movements

Example with Tom

- After explaining the chest of drawer's analogy:

“You know how your screen can get blurry while you are playing a game if you don't have a good internet connection? That is what will happen to this memory.”.

“You need to concentrate very hard because the drawer needs to be completely tidied up for EMDR to work as well as it can. It may bother you if a bit of clutter is left behind”.

It can be helpful to point out that the target memory of image can become blurry of change throughout therapy

Assessment phase

- More directive
- Irrelevant information aside
- Drawing a picture of target can help to stay focused

“Did you see
that bird?”



Desensitization phase

- Pace adjusted (lowered or raised) to speed of information processing.
- Support concentration.
- At back to target, check in.
- Keep them motivated (collaborative, rewards card, external prompts, etc.).
- Move if needed (e.g. V-steps, throwing a ball, walking around) and use additional WMT.



Installation, Body Scan & Closing the Session

- Directive
- Maintain the pace

Closing the session

- Calming down after session
- Ask parents to monitor responses in a diary

Concluding Remarks

- Be mindful of:
 1. General traumatic experiences
 2. ADHD-related negative experiences
 3. Secondary problems of ADHD
- EMDR is indicated with (partial and comorbid) PTSD as result from negative ADHD-related experiences
- EMDR with ADHD requires: creativity, patience, structuring and more motivation
- Clinical impression: EMDR works equally well in children with or without ADHD
- More research of the working mechanism of EMDR