

Treating Problems of Dysregulation Through the Targeted Use of Creative Interventions

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Dysregulation is a term which, widely defined, means imbalance. When it is applied to the realm of child mental health, the imbalances that are characterized as dysregulation can come in a variety of developmental arenas. Discerning the particular area of dysregulation with which a child is dealing is critical to providing skills training or other interventions to bring that area into balance.

For example, many children have an imbalance in their ability to focus. In some cases, children may have dysregulation in their executive functioning systems, impeding their ability to focus for the length of time necessary to complete tasks or to learn new information. In other cases children may exhibit a tendency to hyperfocus. This intensity of focus may manifest as a sub-symptom of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This can occur when a child hyper-focuses on high-motivation or high stimulation activities such as fast paced video games to the exclusion of other age appropriate activities. Hyperfocus may also take the form of obsessive-compulsive behavior and be tied to underlying anxiety issues. In both cases, play-based interventions can be carefully chosen to help with these areas of dysregulation.

Often, children with diagnosable psychopathology have more than one area of dysregulation simultaneously. For example, when children are struggling with diagnosed anxiety disorders, both their arousal systems and their patterns of cognition may be affected. In some cases their bodies' hyperarousal may be the result of trauma, abuse or maltreatment (Goodyear-Brown, 2009). In other cases a child may simply have a genetic predisposition to anxiety. In either case, the child will benefit from a host of activities that counter this physiological trigger and encourage a relaxation response. Anxious children also tend to have irrationally anxious thoughts that play as negative tapes inside their heads. Children can benefit from identifying these worried thoughts, learning to stop them and replacing them with coping self-talk. *The Worry Wars: An Anxiety Workbook for Kids and Their Helpful Adults* (Goodyear-Brown, 2010) lays out a step-by-step protocol that uses a foundation of therapeutic stories to guide anxious children through playful relaxation training, play-based cognitive-behavioral work and creative interventions to help families craft gradual exposure exercises. The manual has dozens of reproducible handouts that can be personalized to help children win back control over anxiety that has gotten out of balance.

The following list includes other areas of dysregulation that may be experienced by our child clients: physiological arousal patterns, affect regulation, impulse control and self-monitoring abilities, social skills, physical boundaries and cognition. Each of the skill building interventions delineated below addresses an area of imbalance.

Picture Perfect Postcards (Goodyear-Brown, 2010): Anxious children struggle with an imbalance in their thought life and in their physiology. They may perseverate on

worrisome content and may need directive help in shifting their focus to more pleasant stimuli. *The Worry Wars* contains a reproducible postcard and child friendly instructions that encourage children to imagine a place where they would like to vacation. On the front of the postcard they draw a picture of this place and on the back of the postcard they write two or three lines describing their vacation spot to a special person. This postcard template can be reproduced multiple times for the same child, so that an entire repertoire of safe, fun places could be generated for use in guided imagery or other relaxation exercises.

The Twizzler Test (Goodyear-Brown, 2002): Dysregulated children often have problems with physical boundaries. In this intervention, the therapist uses Twizzlers candy as a fun, appealing measuring stick. The child is introduced to a variety of scenarios. The question, "How many Twizzler lengths would you want between yourself and a...?" is asked about four different scenarios including 1) a family member, 2) a good friend, 3) someone in the grocery store line, and 4) someone in a dark parking lot at night. The child is asked to decide how many Twizzler lengths would represent an appropriate distance between people in each scenario. The best part of the intervention is that the answer is always "it depends" and invites the child to explore the nuances of boundaries between himself and others.

Take Your Temperature (Goodyear-Brown, 2005): One of the areas in which the dysregulated child manifests deficits is in the area of affect regulation. While many play-based interventions are available for use in building emotional literacy (Goodyear-Brown, 2002, 2005) this activity is non-verbal and therefore appeals to children who are resistant to talking about their feelings. The therapist presents the child with a toy doctor's kit. Inside the kit are tongue depressors. On each tongue depressor, the therapist has written a feeling word (when working with pre-verbal children a feeling face sticker can be substituted). The child is invited to pull out the tongue depressors that represent how he or she is feeling today, thereby taking her emotional temperature.

Anger Freeze Role Plays: Anger management techniques comprise another skill set in which dysregulated children need training. This intervention, best done in a group or family setting, focuses on the physical cues of anger. One person is asked to stand in the middle of the group and talk about a situation that made him or her angry. The first person to notice a physical sign of anger (i.e., clench fists, gritted teeth, etc.) says "freeze" and gets to describe the anger cue that was noticed. The game continues until everyone has had a turn to be in the center.

The Big One (Goodyear-Brown, Riviere & Shelby, 2004): This tried and true intervention uses bubbles and is invaluable in helping the dysregulated child decrease physiological arousal. This stress reduction exercise begins by having the therapist demonstrate a series of bubble blows. On the first try, the therapist takes a quick, shallow breath and is unable to generate many bubbles. On the second try, the therapist takes a deep breath in but blows out really quickly, generating lots and lots of little bubbles. On the third try, the therapist takes a deep breath in and blows out very slowly, creating one giant, steadily expanding bubble. Young children engage easily in this activity and are

eager to have a turn at blowing a big bubble. The bubbles serve as a simple yet powerful external focal point for deep, diaphragmatic breathing, which is clinically proven to decrease physiological arousal.

Put A Positive Spin On It (Goodyear-Brown, 2005): One problematic area in the life of the dysregulated child has to do with the child's faulty cognitions. Children who have behavior problems and are often in trouble develop a repeating script of negative self-talk. The therapist helps the child to identify some of these negative self-talk statements and then helps the child to craft replacement statements. The therapist introduces a variety of spinning tops. The child can experiment with spinning each top as he or she practices the replacement statements, repeating the positive self-talk until the cognitions are restructured.

These and other creative interventions can be found in the following resources authored by Paris Goodyear-Brown:

Goodyear-Brown, P. (2010). *The Worry Wars: An Anxiety Workbook for Kids and Their Helpful Adults*. Available at www.parisandme.com.

Goodyear-Brown, P. (2009). *Play Therapy with Traumatized Children: A Prescriptive Approach*. NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Available at www.parisandme.com.

Goodyear-Brown, P. (2005). *Digging for Buried Treasure 2: 52 More Prop-Based Play Therapy Interventions for Treating the Problems of Childhood*. Available at www.parisandme.com.

Goodyear-Brown, P. (2002). *Digging for Buried Treasure: 52 Prop-Based Play Therapy Interventions for Treating the Problems of Childhood*. Available at www.parisandme.com.

Goodyear-Brown, P., Riviere, S., & Shelby, J. (2004). *10 Peas in a Pod*. An educational DVD. Available at www.parisandme.com.

Biography

Paris Goodyear-Brown, MSW, LCSW, RPT-S, is a social worker and Registered Play Therapist Supervisor with 16 years of experience in treating anxiety disorders in children. She has an international reputation as a dynamic and innovative speaker. She maintains a private practice, teaches for several universities in middle Tennessee and is the editor of clinical mining reports for the Association for Play Therapy. She is the author of *Digging for Buried Treasure: 52 Prop-Based Play Therapy Interventions for Treating the Problems of Childhood* and *Digging for Buried Treasure 2: 52 More Prop-Based Play Therapy Interventions for Treating the Problems of Childhood*, *Gabby the Gecko*, and co-author of an original DVD of prescriptive play therapy interventions entitled *10 Peas in a Pod*. Her newest books are entitled *Play Therapy with Traumatized Children: A Prescriptive Approach* and *The Worry Wars: An Anxiety Workbook for Kids and Their Helpful Adults*.