Emotion Regulation and Working Memory in ADHD

Nicole B. Groves, Michael J. Kofler, Erica L. Wells, & Taylor N. Day
Florida State University, Department of Psychology

Background
- Approximately 48-54% children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) exhibit difficulties with emotion regulation (Graziano & Garcia, 2016).
- Emotion dysregulation is resistant to the current gold-standard treatments for ADHD and portends risk for adverse outcomes, even into adulthood.
- Evidence from the cognitive literature suggests that working memory (WM) is a key mechanism underlying the ability to regulate and suppress the outward expression of strong emotions.
- Recent estimates indicate that approximately 62-85% of children with ADHD have WM deficits, and that these WM deficits may exert a causal influence on ADHD symptoms.
- Overall, research indicates that:
  - Many children with ADHD have difficulties with emotion regulation.
  - WM may underlie the ability to regulate emotion.
  - Many children with ADHD have WM deficits.

Current Study
- To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the relation between WM, emotion regulation, and ADHD symptoms in a carefully-phenotyped clinical child sample.
- We used bias-corrected bootstrapped conditional effects modeling (Hayes, 2013) to test the hypothesis that:
  - Better-developed working memory would predict better-developed emotion regulation abilities, and
  - That this association would occur over and above working memory’s relation with ADHD inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive symptoms.

Participants
- 145 children aged 8 to 13 years (M = 10.33, SD = 1.47) recruited through community resources
- Sample characteristics:
  - 55 females (37.9%)
  - 100 White/Non-Hispanic (69%), 18 Hispanic (12.4%), 13 African American (9%), 10 Biracial (6.9%), 4 Asian (2.8%) children.
- Group Assignment
  - ADHD group (N = 102) included children with comorbid diagnoses, including anxiety (21.5%), oppositional defiant (13.86%), depressive (9.8%), and suspected learning (28.43%) disorders.
  - Control group (N = 43) included typically developing (N = 22, 51.16%) children and children with psychiatric diagnoses other than ADHD (N = 21, 48.84%), including anxiety (41.86%), oppositional defiant (4.65%), depressive (6.98%), and suspected learning (2.33%) disorders.

Models
- **Model 1**
  - Working Memory
  - Teacher-reported Inattention
  - Parent-reported Emotion Regulation

- **Model 2**
  - Working Memory
  - Parent-reported Inattention
  - Teacher-reported Emotion Regulation

Measures
- Rapport et al. (2009) computerized phonological and visuospatial reordering WM tasks. Used dimension reduction function of SPSS to create a single factor score (z-score) indicator of WM.
- Parent and teacher ratings from the Emotional Control subscale of the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF; Gioia, Isquith, Guy, & Kenworthy, 2000).
- Parent and teacher ratings form the Attention Problems and Hyperactivity subscales of the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004, 2015).

Results
- **Group Differences**
  - The ADHD group (M = -0.33, SD = 0.94) had significantly worse WM than the control group (M = 0.79, SD = 0.64), t(113.17) = 8.32, p < .001, d = 1.39.
  - The ADHD group had significantly worse emotion regulation based on parent report (M = 61.23, SD = 12) than the control group (M = 52.43, SD = 10.52), t(140) = -4.13, p < .001, d = 0.78. The ADHD (M = 59.5, SD = 15.33) and control (M = 56.05, SD = 14.87) groups did not differ significantly on the measure of teacher-reported emotion regulation, t(141) = -1.25, p = .22, d = 0.23.
- **Conditional Effects Models**
  - There were significant indirect effects of WM on emotion regulation through hyperactive/impulsive symptoms for both Model 1 (M_b = -0.64, S.E. = 0.36, 95% CI = -1.47 to -0.85) and Model 2 (M_b = -1.05, S.E. = 0.59, 95% CI = -2.35 to -0.06).

Discussion
- In line with previous literature, the children with ADHD had poorer WM performance and more emotion dysregulation, per parent report. Surprisingly, the ADHD and control groups did not differ on teacher-reported emotion regulation.
- While these results suggest that WM does not directly predict emotion regulation, WM does indirectly affect emotion dysregulation through ADHD-related hyperactive/impulsive symptoms.
- Future research should continue to investigate potential mechanisms underlying emotion dysregulation in ADHD.