

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #176: Time Warp: Understanding Time Perception in ADHD

Lori: A lot of times, the way we have privileges in the home or establish a routine where, like, these harder things have to be done first before we get those, like, really rewarding things, we're really helping to support our child's ADHD brain and also teach them how to do that in the future to delay that gratification a little bit.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: I'm here today with Mallory and Katie, and today we're going to be talking about a specific executive functioning skill that really is at the heart of many challenges for kids with ADHD, and that is time perception.

Katie: Oh, yes. So, if you've ever struggled with your child not getting ready on time for school or having that meltdown because they think they only got two minutes of screen time when really they were on for an hour, you are not alone. Children with ADHD really struggle to estimate how much time has passed and to estimate the time that is needed to get things done. And this isn't just a skill that kids struggle with. Honestly, most ADHD adults also struggle with perceiving time.

Mallory: Yeah. And you might be wondering what we mean by challenges with time perception. So, Dr. Russell Barkley, an ADHD expert that we all respect, has found that through research, people with ADHD can see consistently struggle with time perception or using their, it's the internal sense of time to guide future behavior.

Lori: In other words, children with ADHD, tend to be overly attentive to what's happening in the moment, and they're under attentive to the future. And for parents and kids, this can lead to a lot of frustration and challenges, both at home and at school.

Katie: And of course, we always give you this reminder, but this is just how your child's brain is wired. It is a legitimate challenge. Your child with ADHD is not intentionally trying to frustrate you by running late or taking a really long time to do something. And they're not being disrespectful of your time. It's just something that is truly really hard for them.

Mallory: Yeah. So today on the podcast, we're going to talk about how challenges with time perception can show up in our kids' daily life, and then we're going to share three tips you can use to support your child so they can thrive at home and at school.

Lori: Yeah. So, we talked a little bit about this, one thing that we hear from parents over and over again is they are so slow in getting ready in the morning. That they get distracted really easily, no matter if you wake them up early, they'll still take forever to get through that morning routine. So again, it can feel like, you know, things are really dragging and you might be like, oh my gosh, it's been 30 minutes and they haven't done anything. Whereas your child is like, why is mom yelling at me? Like she just told me that I needed to get ready. She's hardly given me any time even though 30 minutes has passed, right. I think a lot of parents can understand that. We see this a lot with video games too, where like something that's very motivating or screen time that they love. And so, if they're doing something that they're really excited about, that they're going to feel like no time has passed at all. So you might you know, be turning off screen time after an hour and they're saying, what are you doing? Like, you've only given me five minutes. Like, tell me that your kids haven't said that to you before. So those are, those are some common situations that you can kind of see. A lot of times too, like you maybe you ask your child to clean their room and they immediately go into this massive meltdown. And many times, that's because in their estimation in their mind, that's going to take them the rest of the night. You know, we just went through this at my house where we were cleaning our room and cleaning out clothes and my kids are like, it's

going to take the whole day. That they don't understand that like, you know, it might take an hour or it might take a half hour, it's not going to take the whole day, especially if we focus on it. So, when it comes to things like cleaning the room, doing chores, getting homework done, a lot of times there can be meltdowns because they feel like it's going to take the whole night, right?

Katie: Yeah. Those are great examples of kind of how it shows up at home and then thinking about in school. This is also going to cause some issues for our kids because they're going to have difficulty with various aspects of their day. Whether that's, hey, I need to turn in this assignment and it's due at the end of this class period and maybe they're working really slowly. They're not really self-monitoring or recognizing. I know that a big thing that I would work on in therapy with kids is not stopping at a hard problem and just stalling out and sitting there. But it's like, skip that one, go to the next one, you can always come back, right? But that is a time management thing because recognizing, okay, I have 45 minutes to finish this math test and then really quick math, of course it takes a little extra math to figure out there's 15 problems so I have three minutes on average per problem. This is really complicated stuff and so it can result in our kids working really slowly. When they get home, maybe like Lori said, the homework takes a really long time. Maybe they might not realize like, oh, I needed to stop at my locker in the morning and grab those items so they might show up to class without everything that they need. This is caused by this issue of time perception. And other kind of times I'm thinking of younger kids and I help a lot in my son's second grade classroom, and it's really hard for them to stand in the line, right. They line up to go to lunch and you can just see their little bodies are like trying to hold still, but I think there's a huge piece where it's like we're going to be standing here forever. Or maybe it even feels like we've already been standing here forever. So, waiting for your turn, waiting in a line, that can be a big thing. And then obviously we all know the dreaded long-term project. You know those school assignments where it's like the whole thing is due in a month. We just finished one with my kids, they do two, they each have one per semester at our school. And I love that they do it because it is a life skill to be able to break things up into smaller chunks, we're going to get into that, but really this idea of sending something home and then expecting our kids to work a little bit each day, this is really hard for ADHD brains. Because at the beginning it's like it's September and this isn't even due until October. That's a whole separate month, right. It feels so far away and so they can end up procrastinating all the way up to the

deadline and then there's a lot of stress around that situation and for not only your kid, but the whole family.

Mallory: As you can imagine with the way these challenges with time perception show up at home, show up at school, these challenges can result in a lot of big feelings, right. It can lead to your child feeling really frustrated. It can even lead to anxiety. Like we hear from a lot of families that their child doesn't like to use timers and feel like the time is ticking away because that makes them feel anxious. Struggling with kind of the passage of time, feeling time, understanding this can really lead to a lot of emotional challenges in your home and at school.

Lori: Yeah. So, I have an example of a teen that I was working with, but I feel like this is, I want to use this because I feel like this is a common theme that I see for tweens and teens. Just because at that age in particular, that's when at school there's a feeling of, we've kind of taught you, we break down projects for you in elementary school, right. We break them down, they have their own due dates, we help along with that. Come middle school, we have different teachers. Every teacher has different expectations. There's a lot to manage and they're not breaking down those tasks for you necessarily. And so, a lot of tweens and teens at this age really start to struggle. One in particular, I remember interviewing him and he really wanted to have good grades. And I really, I want to emphasize the fact that it's many of the kids that I work with that are failing classes feel so bad about it. They do not want to be in that position. They really want to do well. They go into the next grade level, like, I'm not going to let this happen again. I'm going to do awesome this year. They have the best intentions, right. But it's holding that long term goal in mind and making the steps to meet that. So, you know, he would get home from school and he'd talk about, I just felt really tired. I wanted to wind down. I just wanted to like get on screens or hang out with my friends. And he was in the moment. He wanted to have fun. He had had a long school day, right. But then he'd forget about projects that were due. He'd forget once he got home and he was doing other things, he totally forgot about the homework that was due, like out of sight, out of mind. And then he'd have missing assignments, he'd get poor grades. And then he started getting really anxious and really stressed because now I've got like 10 missing assignments and now it just feels overwhelming. Like now I have no ability to keep up. There's no way I can get that done. He's feeling bad about himself. He has low self-esteem. He doesn't feel like he can get out of this hole. And again, it's like that difficulty with holding that long term

reward of getting good grades in his mind and taking steps towards that, that's really hard for kids with ADHD because they're so in the moment, right.

Mallory: Yeah, I think another, another simple example of like struggles with time perception and how it can lead to big emotions. I know so many of you can relate to this is when it comes to hygiene tasks and especially getting your child to bathe or shower, every parent knows that struggle of getting your child in the shower. You hear things from your kid like, I just showered yesterday. And in your head, you're thinking, no, I've actually given you, like, three days. And they're like, it's going to take forever. It takes forever to wash my hair. I don't want to do that. So, they're overestimating how long the shower is going to take them, and it feels like a huge task. So, then you finally get them in the shower, right? And then they don't come out for an hour because they've lost track of time. And but again, you say, it's time to get out. And they're saying, I just got in. And you're like, no, actually, you've been in there for an hour. So, this is one example, like, one simple example of how this time perception challenge can show up in your home and can lead to some of those big feelings, too.

Katie: Yeah, it's really tricky. So, we know that these challenges with time perception are very real. Hopefully, we've convinced you if you can't draw on your own child's experience. Although most of us probably have a list, we're like, yep, yep, check that one off. So, we're going focus now on some tips to really support kids with ADHD. So, our first tip is going be to help you create some visual routines. And we talk about routines, it's a little bit different than calling it like a schedule, right. Because a lot of times schedules are more rigid and focused on the time and we're going to do it for this many minutes, and we'll talk about that in a minute. But a routine is more like, these are the things I do in this general order. And routines are so important for all of us, but especially for people with ADHD. But at the same time, it can be really challenging to build and stay consistent on a routine. And the main thing we hear from parents is, I'm a broken record. I have to tell my child 852 times to do the same things. I'm constantly prompting. And this is really exhausting. It's hard for your relationship with your child. It can feel like you're so focused on getting them ready, and all of a sudden you realize, like, I haven't gotten myself ready. Everything, it feels chaotic. So, we really want to encourage you to set up kind of a general routine. And we want you to have your child help with this. This is not something that we as grownups will do independently. We want our kids involved and say, okay, what are the main areas that we need to focus on? So, we can generally break it up into morning, after school, maybe bedtime, and evenings, that's

always a little chaotic in my house, maybe a homework routine. But really it's like, what are those parts of the day that are the most challenging for my child? And then let's figure out what are the main components, the things we really have to do. Whether that's like emptying out lunch boxes so you have ice packs ready for the next day, or, in the morning, obviously, we talked about brushing teeth or maybe taking a shower. I don't know how people have their kid take a shower in the morning, but maybe you do. But thinking about, like, what are those things that we need to do? We need to take medicine, we need to eat breakfast, we need to get dressed. So, then what you can do is you can have your child help you build out the routine, and then that really becomes their guide. So, you're not constantly saying, oh, yeah, you know, this is your next step. But you can say, what does it say? Like, let's check your routine, let's check your paper. And then they can follow that. And it can be really, really helpful. And we do have really customizable, printable routines that you can get through our website. And they're very, very helpful because there's a bunch of options, and you just choose the ones that affect you and that you need. And as it changes over time, you can always make changes, and it's really easy. Another thing that can be really helpful is breaking tasks up into manageable chunks. So, like, for example, we think about these school projects instead of, like, Lori mentioned, like, they come home and it's not due for a really long time, what we can do instead is start to break it down. Okay, it looks like you have to, you know, write three paragraphs. Okay, let's write down each of those different things as a separate item on the to do list. And they make fun of me. You guys make fun of me. Because I love to do lists, but it's really helpful when you break it out into those manageable pieces. And if I, I do this for myself, if I just say I have to clean my entire house, that's too overwhelming. But if I'm, like, going to clean up the laundry room or I'm going to get the dishes put away. This is a lot more, a lot easier for my brain to get focused in on one task and so we can help our kids with this skill. But again, a lot of this is going to be parent led at the beginning. And then over time we're shifting more and more of the responsibility onto our kids. But we have to model that for them. They're not automatically going to know how to break their work up into manageable chunks. And a lot of times you might assume that they can do that, but what we really have to do is evaluate, like where are they at? And then how can I help them to build in this skill?

Mallory: Absolutely. So, another tip that kind of goes along with all of this is to teach your child time management tools, how to use time management tools. And one tool that we love is a visual timer. You've probably heard us talk about the Time Timer before. We love their

product, but essentially, it's a timer where you can visually see time elapsing. So, there's a red face, and as the red slips away, time is passing. It's kind of like one of those sand timers where when you flip it over, the sand falls to the bottom and you can visually see kind of the passage of time. You're making it more visual for your child. And this can be really helpful for situations where you're asking your child to work for a set amount of time. So, let's say that you need your child to read for 15 minutes, you set the timer for 15 minutes, and then they are easily able to kind of visually track how much time has elapsed. This is also helpful when maybe you're giving your child a privilege and they get to do an hour of it. Say they get an hour of video games or whatever it is. They can look at the visual timer and visually see kind of the time elapsing. So, this makes time more concrete rather than just completely abstract for our kids. So, I kind of mentioned how, you know, kids tend to overestimate how long, less desirable tasks are going to take, like how long showering is actually going to take. So, we encourage parents to help their kids do what we call, like time estimates or little timing experiments. Like if your child feels like this specific chore is going to take forever, like I have to walk around the house with a sanitizing wipe and sanitize each door handle because someone's been sick. Ugh, but that's going to take me forever. That's going to take like an hour. Well, let's time you. Let's see how long that actually takes. Because I bet it's going to take a lot less time than you think it's going to take. And they do it and it ends up taking five minutes. So, you kind of do little timing experiments to see how long these they're predicting it's going to take a long time, let's find out how long it actually takes. This information can also be helpful with another strategy that we, that we kind of recommend to families, it's visual time blocking. And this is really helpful for kids who again feel like certain things, less desirable things are going to take a really long time and they feel like they don't have enough time to do those things they really want to do, like play with friends or get outside. Visually take a piece of paper and draw chunks of time that are kind of, that equate to actual, actually how much time they have to do that. So, when you get home from school, you have 10 minutes for snacks. So that takes up like two boxes or something like that. Then you're going to do homework for 30 minutes. So that takes up even more boxes. And you're kind of based on how much time that task takes is in direct correlation to kind of how big that box is on the piece of paper. So, they can visually see like, oh, homework is just such a small part of my afternoon compared to free time or soccer practice, to really make this abstract concept of time more concrete for them.

Lori: Yes, I love that. And our third tip is to focus on providing immediate positive feedback or build immediate rewards when your kids are completing those kind of non-preferred, more challenging, difficult tasks. Okay, so we know that delaying gratification is really hard for kids with ADHD. And Dr. Russell Barkley, again in his research talked about a concept called temporal discounting. And again, in this situation, this is where individuals with ADHD tend to prioritize immediate rewards over future ones, okay. So, I talked about this before and the situation with that student getting a good grade, it's a reward in the future. And it's really hard for somebody with ADHD to hold that in their brain. They're focused on what is the immediate reward right now.

Katie: Yeah, there's someone, I forget who it was that we were talking with, who was talking about this exact issue and college and how when you have a child who's in like 6th, 7th, 8th grade, it is really hard for them to think about that bigger picture, that future picture of I need to get this grade on this test today, so I can, eight years from now, go study the thing I want to study. And so, one recommendation on that same topic was that parents should set up college visits a lot younger. A lot of people start thinking about college, and not every child is going to go to college, but if that is your plan, or a vocational school or whatever, don't wait until junior, senior year to start looking at those options, but get your kids excited, even in middle school. And I loved that tip because I think that's a really tangible thing that we can start to implement. And I know my daughter will be in sixth grade next year. And it's like really thinking about that, what is the future? Because when they can start to see it and visualize it, that really does help because it is so abstract. I mean, I can't even imagine at 11 thinking like, oh, my future job or my future vocation. But that's a tip that someone gave us, I thought that was really great.

Lori: Yeah, I love that. And I think when parents understand again, how an ADHD brain works, that they're really focused on immediate rewards. If your child has the option every day to choose video games or do homework first, they're always, always, always going to choose the thing that is immediately really reinforcing. Even if it's I, you know, play a video game versus like have a friend over, you know, the thing that is even more reinforcing, that takes less time, it's extremely reinforcing, is going to be the thing that they're going to choose. So, a lot of times the way we have privileges in the home or establish a routine where like these harder things have to be done first before we get those like, really rewarding things, we're really helping to support our child's ADHD brain and also teach them how to do that in

the future to delay that gratification a little bit. But also, sometimes we have to kind of impose immediate feedback and immediate positive rewards or consequences in our child's day to motivate them towards something. So, one thing we hear all the time from families is like, I have a routine, my child never uses it. And so, think about when you're building out that routine with your child, can you build in the last step of the routine is the activity that your child is super motivated for. Whether that's like playing a game outside or, riding their bike, riding on, my kids love their go kart, is it, you know, screen time, you know, so think about how do we build that into the routine so your child can see what is that thing that they're working towards to get these other little steps done is really important.

Mallory: And I think that there's a lot of adults with ADHD who would tell you that there's so many things that they still, so obviously the goal is to like, build in this ability to delay gratification for our kids over time, right? We don't want them to always need immediate positive feedback. We want them to be able to delay the gratification, think towards the future. But there's plenty of ADHD adults who would tell you that still in adulthood they do a lot of things in a certain way that gives them that immediate positive feedback. And so, it's not necessarily a bad thing. I don't want to say, I don't want to say we have to train our kids out of needing this positive, immediate feedback because there's plenty of adults who do things and they've set their life up so that they can get that immediate positive feedback. And that is fine. We want both here, right? It's not one or the other situation, it's a both. We want to set up situations where they can get that immediate positive feedback while also keeping an eye towards we want them to develop the skill of being able to delay gratification. And that does take a lot of work on our part as parents to kind of, talk about the future picture, help them see the future picture, engage in goal-oriented behavior, talk about how doing this now is going to benefit you in the long run. But it's a lot of work.

Katie: Yeah, I think that that's true to life, right? Like if I go take, I do this, I gamify my life, right? I remember last year telling you guys about Christmas cards and how I was writing 10 addresses and then I would get to take a break and then 10 more addresses and then take a break. And that is much more of an immediate, right? I get to get up, turn on a song, do something interesting to my brain. But, a lot of things are delayed gratification. I mean, I think about a goal of like building muscle. And if I want to build muscle, I can't just work out one time and then be like, oh my gosh, look at that, I got all this muscle, right? I mean, it would be lovely if you have a strategy for that, please DM us, we would love to hear! But

really it's like the small consistent habits over time that build up and that is really hard for ADHD brains. And so exactly like you said, Mal, it is both because the world is both. Like, real life is both. You don't always get, you know, a paycheck, every single day that you go to work, you have to wait a lot of times, two weeks or four weeks or depending on what your setup is. And so, a lot of life does require some delayed gratification, and that's a skill that we want our kids to have. But, yeah, I think long term, teaching them what they need and how to build that in is like, the main key. So, we know that kids with ADHD can really struggle with time perception or kind of using that internal sense of time to guide their future behavior. And they love to live in the moment, which makes them really fun and carefree, but that also can result in them, not considering how their current behavior impacts the future. So our key takeaway is that the best way to support our kids is to really try to be understanding and patient in the moment and understand that your child isn't trying to be difficult. These skills are really hard, but we can set up supports and build skills to help them to develop this sense of time and this perception of time. And we are here to support.

Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

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Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!