



## **AutPlay® Therapy and Trauma**

It is typically understood that children with autism spectrum disorder ASD are more susceptible to victimization, experience traumatic effects differently than other children, and may perceive daily common events as traumatic due to their varied perceptions and sensitivity to stimuli (Guest & Ohrt, 2018). Although we know that children with ASD experience trauma, it is not fully understood how traumatic stress impacts individuals with ASD, and there is limited research on treatment of trauma symptoms in this population. When working on trauma with a child or adolescent with ASD, it is important to stay flexible and to adapt to the child's individual needs and learning styles. Also, many children with ASD may present with a combination of adverse life events and psychiatric comorbidities. Neurologically, children with ASD process differently than neurotypical children. Processing speed, cognitive awareness, receptive language ability, and executive functioning ability may look very differently from working with a neurotypical child. These factors must be taken into consideration when attempting to address trauma issues, especially when using trauma models that have been normed on the neurotypical population such as TF-CBT and EMDR.

### **AutPlay Therapy Approach to Trauma Work with Children with ASD:**

AutPlay Therapy is an integrative approach of relational and behavioral methods. When working with children and adolescents with ASD affected by trauma, a three-step progression is employed. The three-step process is further outlined in the AutPlay Therapy book and in AutPlay trainings. A brief explanation is offered below:

- 1) Relationship and safety – Children with ASD who have experienced trauma must begin with building relationship with the therapist - feeling safe and familiar with the therapist and the clinical office and environment is essential for trauma issues to be addressed.
- 2) Regulation – Children and adolescents will need to learn to regulate their system. This can be done with a co-regulator or a regulation facilitator – with children with ASD, typically there will need to be a regulation facilitator that teaches and helps children move through a series of regulation interventions.
- 3) Emotion recognition and expression – Children with ASD may not understand or recognize emotions and most will have a challenging time expressing emotions in an appropriate manner. Trauma work will require helping children with ASD recognize, express, and manage emotions.

It is possible that any established trauma protocol could be effective for a child or adolescent with ASD, but steps should be taken to ensure the above processes have been established before implementing any trauma protocol with a child with ASD. Professionals should not attempt to use AutPlay Therapy to treat trauma issues in children with ASD without having a thorough understanding of trauma, a thorough knowledge of ASD, and have been adequately trained in AutPlay Therapy protocol.

## **ASD and Trauma Research and Resources:**

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