Chapter 16
Integrating Virtual Reality in Pediatric Neuropsychology:
Innovations in Rehabilitation and Intervention From Infancy to Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the integration of virtual reality (VR) as a transformative tool in pediatric neuropsychology, focusing on cognitive, emotional, and social development from infancy to adolescence. Examines the theoretical foundations underpinning VR interventions, including neuroplasticity, cognitive development theories, and immersive learning.Highlights VR applications in attention enhancement, executive functioning, memory rehabilitation, and social skills training, with particular emphasis on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). he chapter addresses the role of VR in pain management and anxiety reduction, providing evidence from clinical and research-based studies. Key challenges, such as accessibility, cost, and sustained engagement, are analyzed, alongside future directions that involve the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), biofeedback, and home-based VR therapies. By presenting current research and identifying areas for growth, the chapter underscores the potential of VR to reshape therapeutic practices in pediatric neuropsychology.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9689-6.ch016

INTRODUCTION

Definition and Scope of Pediatric Neuropsychology

Virtual reality (VR) has rapidly become a transformative tool in pediatric neuropsychology over the past decade. Advances in VR technology have made immersive experiences more accessible and affordable, opening new possibilities for both assessment and intervention in children and adolescents (Riva et al., 2019; Saredakis et al., 2020). VR provides computer-generated, interactive environments that simulate real-life scenarios in a controlled, safe manner. These virtual environments allow clinicians to offer safe, repeatable, and diversifiable interventions that enrich learning and assessment for both typically developing children and those with neurodevelopmental disorders (Parsons et al., 2019). Research confirms that VR can enhance emotionally relevant experiences and social interactions, while also reducing children's pain, fear, and anxiety in clinical settings (Iannicelli et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2020). This promise comes with challenges: several researchers have noted a lack of consensus on standardized protocols for VR trials and the need to establish reliable psychometric properties for VR-based assessments (Freeman et al., 2017). In the following sections, we review recent advances in VR applications for pediatric neuropsychology, compare VR interventions with traditional therapeutic approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and offer practical guidance for clinicians integrating VR into practice.

Introduction to Virtual Reality in Healthcare

Virtual reality has emerged as a transformative technology in healthcare by offering immersive, multisensory environments that simulate real-life experiences. Unlike conventional clinical interventions, VR engages users in interactive digital worlds that facilitate novel therapeutic approaches. For example, VR has been applied successfully in physical rehabilitation, pain management, psychiatric treatment, and neuropsychological interventions (Riva, Wiederhold, & Mantovani, 2019; Saredakis et al., 2020). Because VR systems can generate controlled, repeatable environments, clinicians are able to tailor therapeutic experiences to the specific needs of individual patients—a flexibility that is especially valuable when treating pediatric populations, for whom engagement and motivation are critical to therapeutic success (Parsons, 2019).

Comparative studies indicate that VR-based interventions may enhance patient cooperation, increase adherence to treatment protocols, and reduce anxiety during clinical procedures compared with traditional methods (Iannicelli et al., 2019). For instance, in the context of pain management, immersive VR distraction techniques have demonstrated reductions in pain perception that are comparable to, or in some cases exceed, the effects of standard pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions (Freeman et al., 2017). In mental health settings, VR is used to facilitate exposure therapy and cognitive restructuring, often providing a level of experiential realism that is difficult to achieve with conventional therapy (Yang et al., 2020). In these ways, VR does not merely replicate traditional treatments; rather, it offers an adjunct that can expand and enrich conventional clinical practice.

VR technologies can be categorized based on the degree of immersion they offer. Non-immersive VR, which is typically delivered through standard computer screens or tablets, involves interactive experiences that lack full sensory engagement. This form of VR is frequently utilized for cognitive training and is particularly appealing due to its accessibility and cost-