Treatment options for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, outside of medication, are being developed to produce a more holistic approach to treating children.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says ADHD is best treated with a combination of behavior therapy and medication.

Akili Interactive Labs in Boston has been developing a video game designed to improve a child’s ability to process information and potentially help problem-solving, attention and memory skills. In the game, the player has to steer a character down a river while making decisions about objects that appear on screen, according to a Reuters report.

“The issue is that there’s been many attempts to build apps for various disorders, and up to this point most of the research shows that they just get good at the app,” Western Kentucky University psychology professor William Pfohl said. “They don’t transfer into other environments.”

Jonathan Lee, marriage and family therapist and one of the owners of More to Life Counseling, said depending on the severity of symptoms, he encourages natural means first for children with ADHD. Only if that fails should medication be an option.

“I use video games in working with children with ADHD and other issues,” Lee said. “Video games can be used for treatment, and they can also be abused as well. Certain natural supplements have been proven to help along with environmental and diet changes.”

Lee said he had a client who did short bursts of aerobic exercises before a test. That would stimulate the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that ADHD is associated with, by keeping serotonin in that area of the brain and allowing him to focus throughout the test.

“We tailor to the type of ADHD and diet can help or hurt their symptoms,” Lee said.

Pfohl said people are trying to find technology to help cognitive disorders, but they really don’t transfer into the real world. Each child needs a program that adapts to their particular issues, he said.

“A computer program or app has to be able to adapt to the various needs of kids to enhance those skills. ADHD has 18 characteristics and you only need 12 to be diagnosed with ADHD. So, not all kids look the same,” Pfohl said.

Dwight Trabue, founder of FamilyWorks Therapy and Counseling Services, said he helps his clients by taking something they love and using it as a training process in focusing.

“You go from something you can do and take one step at a time to normalize things they may not know,” Trabue said.

As an example Trabue said that if a client likes basketball, he would use shooting free throws as a way to help them keep focus and gradually have them step farther from the line to increase the difficulty.

“They’ll have an example that this is a system that you can do with any problem you have in life,” Trabue said. “Everything is sequential.”
Pfohl said he is somewhat confident that technology may reach the point of helping with cognitive disorders like ADHD and dementia, but it’s still in its primary stage at this point.

“Technology may be a treatment, not ‘the’ treatment, for helping kids with ADHD,” Pfohl said.