Just Relax!

Why Telling Doesn’t Work

Autism in Education Symposium
May 5, 2015
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Thank you to those who provided input for the presentation!

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Anxiety develops out of worry and becomes a problem when people change their behaviour to avoid a feared person, place or event.
Stress is the body's reaction to a perceived, anticipated or imagined danger or threatening situation. The stressful situation can be happy or unhappy.
How do we cope?

**Buffers** - adaptive responses to stress

- Talking with friends
- Participating in sports, hobbies
- Exercise
- Restful, calming activities
- Sleep
- Medical intervention
Challenges

- Communication skills may be compromised
- Difficulty understanding and expressing emotions
- Limited number of friends or support system
- Lack of self awareness
- Group sports often difficult
Relaxation

• Why teach relaxation?
• Which strategy do we use?
• How do we teach effectively?
• How do we target generalization?
Why teach relaxation?

- Functional skill with lifelong impact
- Can be used across environments
- Non-stigmatizing
- Perceived as neutral or pleasant in general
- Can be guided by parents or teachers
- Demonstrated effectiveness
Which strategy do we use?

• Progressive Relaxation (PR)
• Behavioral Relaxation Training (BRT)
• Controlled Breathing
• Guided Imagery

Goal: The Relaxation Response (deep physical calm and mentally alert)
Progressive Relaxation (PR)

- Focuses on teaching to *recognize and label the difference between muscle tension and muscle relaxation*
- Apply tension to each body part in top-down or bottom-up sequence, then release and pay attention to the feeling
- Longer exercise, more conspicuous
- Flexible (use with as many or few body parts as appropriate)
Behavioral Relaxation Training

- PR techniques modified for developmentally disabled learners with limited verbal skills
- Rationale: engaging in the motor responses alone produces the relaxation response
- No verbal reporting from the learner needed
- Shortened sessions
- Observables responses defined and measureable (Poppen, 1998; Paclawskyj, 2006)
Behavioral Relaxation Training

- Modelled/trained 10 behaviours in specific order from large to small muscle groups (body, head, shoulders, feet, hands, throat, mouth, eyes, breathing, quiet)
- Able to acquire relaxation response more rapidly than other forms of relaxation training
- Average session, 7 minutes; average mastery, two hours

(Poppen,1998; Paclawskyj, 2006)
RELAXATION ROUTINE

1. SIT ON A CHAIR...

2. "SCRUNCH" UP YOUR FACE... THEN... RELAX IT...

3. TENSE YOUR ARMS...

4. TENSE UP YOUR SHOULDERS AND CHEST...

5. TENSE UP YOUR LEGS...

6. BREATHE IN RELAXATION...

...THEN RELAX!

...BREATHE OUT TENSION
Controlled Breathing

- Commonly taught in school settings
- Easy; focuses on breathing alone without any other activity
- Can be done unobtrusively, anytime, anywhere
- Slow, calm, “secret” breathing
- Practices are brief but frequent
Controlled Breathing

1. Sit comfortably
2. Breathe slowly and evenly
3. Breathe in through the nose, (slow count three)
4. Breathe out through the mouth, (slow count three)
5. Continue until calm
Controlled Breathing

SQUARE BREATHING

1 2 3 4
breathe in for 4 seconds

1 2 3 4
hold for 4 seconds

1 2 3 4
breathe out for 4 seconds

hold for 4 seconds

PictureSET
www.setbc.org/pictureset/
Controlled Breathing

When I take a deep breath,
I smell a flower,
Then blow out a candle.

breathe in through nose

blow out of mouth
1. **Identify situations** or events that are associated with the problem behavior

2. **Teach and practice** until fluent in calm situations

3. **Prime and prompt** in identified target situations. Reinforce!

4. **Prime and prompt** in identified target situations across settings. Reinforce!

5. **Reinforce** spontaneous use
How to teach relaxation effectively

- Use role play and practice together with the learner a minimum of three times a day *when NOT anxious*
- Use visual, text or concrete supports if helpful for understanding
- Provide checklists or reminders to ensure practice occurs
- Involve parents!

(Chalfant, 2011)
My student is in high school and thinks this is too babyish.

- Pair with a peer model; Use video modelling
- Emphasize as a powerful and private strategy - “top secret breathing”
- Use imagery; build in special interest
- Identify concrete reinforcers or positive outcomes
How can we operationalize relaxing and make it more accessible to learners with language and/or cognitive challenges?

- Combine BRT with visual supports or concrete reminders
- Teach fewer or simpler steps by combining them (Hug yourself tight and release)
- Teach through imitation or with physical prompts
- Add and/or simplify visual supports
- Use simple and consistent language when teaching (1-2 words)
The teacher/parent starts to teach this to the learner but gives up. “It isn’t working”.

- Practice 3 times a day for 6-8 weeks for a more clear indication of whether the skill can be learned.
- Check to see if the effective teaching steps have been followed.
- Provide a checklist to track practice sessions and more frequent feedback to the learner and the teacher.
- Consider if the steps and/or the supports need to be changed.
The teacher doesn’t recognize early enough when they should prompt the learner to use the technique.

• Directly observe or involve the learner to identify more clearly the antecedents and/or observable precursor behaviours.

• Provide many opportunities to practice evocative situations in a safe environment
My student has difficulties with the breathing...sounds very loud and inappropriate.

- Use gestural or number/symbol prompts to help slow and quiet the breathing.
- Use more physical prompts to help the learner identify what body parts are involved.
- Use physical props to illustrate the way the breathing should look/sound (e.g., windmill toys, candle, balloon, fat straw)
Summary

- Relaxation skills can be a useful strategy
- Can be taught one on one or in a group
- Usually used to supplement other intervention components
- Time involved can lead to significant positive benefits for the learner
Final thoughts.....

Breathe in.
Breathe out.
Let it be.
Lori Lite Books, Stress Free Kids, Publisher

• Angry Octopus. An Anger Management Story for Children Introducing Active Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Deep Breathing to help Control Anger

• The Goodnight Caterpillar: A Children's Relaxation Story to Improve Sleep, Manage Stress, Anxiety, Anger

• A Boy and a Bear: The Children's Relaxation Book

• Sea Otter Cove: A Stress Management Story for Children Introducing Diaphragmatic Breathing to Reduce Anxiety, Control Anger, and Promote Peaceful Sleep

E-learning, Geneva Centre for Autism
http://visuals.autism.net
Video illustrating steps for relaxation and visual supports

PictureSET
www.setbc.org/pictureset
Relaxation picture sequence in French and English
References


