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Intervention Strategies



Attitudes and perceptions of self are formed early in life and remain with us throughout our lives as memory traces and influences of our behavior. This suggests that adults must do everything possible to ensure that children have an opportunity to develop positive attitudes and perceptions of themselves. Children who are given positive messages at home would benefit from reinforcement of those messages at school, while children who receive negative messages at home need exposure to positive messages. Skill in stress management is also an important factor in a child's personal development. Several studies have found a significant change in attentiveness of children when relaxation training was used. Other studies have shown that various measures of anxiety can be lowered as a result of the use of relaxation procedures or active imagination.

However, very little work has been done in applying these techniques with large groups of children. Most research deals with the treatment of a single child or a few children. This is especially true when the techniques include a biofeedback component. Carter and Russel's research in 1982 was done with five or six children at a time. Although they reported significant treatment effects using biofeedback, they concluded that classroom teachers were unable to duplicate this effect. They agreed that the teachers never became comfortable with the biofeedback machinery. The teachers did quite well, however, in assisting the children in listening to relaxation tapes.

Perhaps one of the factors that has limited research with large groups of children has been the requirement of relatively large blocks of time for teacher training and program implementation. For the procedures to be successful they must be understood easily by children and able to be delivered to a large group. There should be minimal time loss from the teaching day and, if pos-

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sible, the entire school population should have the opportunity to be included in the training. For optimal impact, anti-stress practices should be included in everyday school routines. Contrary to these recommendations, the majority of studies reviewed dealt with relatively small groups.

The school setting is a natural delivery system for a preventative mental health program. The healthy development of children involves coping successfully with stressful experiences. When children are under stress, even high levels of stress, but have strong social supports, they exhibit fewer symptoms of anxiety than do children with less support. An important component of the child's social system is the school. A system-wide intervention program impacts on this social system, and thus provides a greater impact on each individual.

Cauce, Comer and Schwartz in a study determined that the long-term effects of a systems-oriented school prevention program were positive. This was an important finding, as prior to this study short-term effects of preventative efforts were reasonably well established, but it was unclear whether these efforts had detectable long-term effects.

The literature reviewed supported the idea of a relatively long program as opposed to the introduction of relaxation training in a short time frame. Better relaxation treatment effects were shown when the program was at least six weeks in length.

Program Delivery

Another important factor in determining success rate is how the program is delivered. Because of the techniques involved and/or standardization requirements for research, many of the researchers were directly involved. Herzog maintained that children appear more able to relax in an environment that does not include strangers. Therefore, a program delivered by someone familiar to the child should yield more optimal results.

Gerber and Danilson's study was one of the few with a large number of subjects. Sixteen school counselors received training and instruction on the theory and use of the quieting reflex (QR) and of success imagery (SI) which was developed in 1980 by Holland, Stroebe and Stroebe. This two-phase study demonstrated that a given visualization strategy (SI), when used in combination with a given relaxation technique (QR), can help students minimize the debilitating effects of anxiety and stress and increase their scores on a standardized test, specifically the Science Research Associations Achievement Test.

The application of relaxation techniques has been successful in school-based intervention programs. These programs have improved

student's achievement scores, decreased levels of anxiety, increased self-concept and demonstrated children's ability to regulate bodily functions (heart rate, respiration rate, and skin temperature). Programs of relatively long duration (greater than six weeks) and implemented by persons familiar to the children appear to be most beneficial.

Origins of the Ready, Set, R.E.L.A.X. Program

The call for a school-based program designed to help children reduce anxiety is clearly supported in the literature. School-based special services providers need to implement stress management education programs if optimal learning and development are to occur. Our interest in a school-based program developed over the last ten years. It began with a stress-reduction program we designed for high school varsity athletes. Progressive muscle relaxation, active imagination and music were presented during ten weekly sessions. Pre- and post-testing using self-report inventories showed statistically significant results in decreasing anxiety and depression and increasing self-concept. Following this program, the authors used the same methods in an attempt to increase the musical skills of high school student-band participants. Ten weekly sessions were held during which time the experimental group was led through a relaxation, active imagination exercise. Although musical performance, as measured by the Watkins-Farnum Music Performance Test, did not differ significantly from control-group students, self-report inventories of anxiety and depression generally decreased while self-reported self-concept increased. The participants in both these groups frequently stated that the techniques used would be beneficial to all students. This feedback, coupled with the knowledge of the damaging effects of stress and anxiety in children, led the authors to consider a school-wide intervention program. The concept of a primary prevention program was appealing from the standpoint of the potential to have a positive impact on a large number of children. There is a critical need for stress management programs at all levels of education. The goal of the program was to provide a tool for children to use in a variety of settings to combat the negative effects of stress and anxiety.

The elementary school level was chosen for several reasons. First, this age child tends to be more receptive to new experiences and would be more likely to be a cooperative subject. Second, the school schedule is more flexible than in a secondary school setting and lends itself to an available block of time for a school-wide intervention. Finally, the hope was to provide a pro-

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gram that students would incorporate into their daily lives throughout the year.

Currently, to our knowledge, there is no systematic program in existence that exposes children to stress-reduction techniques over a long period of time. The longest program noted in the literature was Disorbio's, which spanned a six-month period. A program over an extended period of time is more likely to be incorporated into a child's lifestyle. A school or teacher that makes such a commitment of time sends an important message to children that affective education is an essential component of the total education program.

Multi-Method Advantages

In the Ready, Set, R.E.L.A.X. (R.S.R.) program, the use of relaxing music was used as an adjunct to muscle relaxation and active imagination. Interestingly, no other reports of combining the three techniques of music, active imagination and muscle relaxation are reported in the literature. Not only is the use of such music supported by research, but the authors' experience using music with their own children and with students in school, at workshops and in groups gave evidence of its benefits. Children who do not actively take part in the progressive muscle relaxation or active imagination are at least exposed to a passive form of relaxation. An additional benefit is the opportunity to develop an appreciation for an enriching form of music.

One of the values of using a multi-method intervention is based on Folkman's 1985 research indicating that each person has his/her own individual style of seeing the world. For some people, change is accomplished through behavior, which in turn affects cognition and feeling. For others, the key to change is through cognition, which in turn affects feelings and behavior.

FUNKY WINKERBEAN



Theoretically, then, some students may benefit more directly from the use of progressive muscle relaxation while others may benefit more from a cognitive-based success active imagination technique. People usually use several types of coping behavior in virtually every type of stressful encounter. This includes coping that is directed at solving or managing the problem that is causing distress (problem-focused coping) and coping that is directed at regulating the distress itself (emotion-focused coping). Thus, it is important to try to teach children how to select the most appropriate mode of coping. For example, if a problem is not solvable (disliking someone's personality), continuing to engage in problem-focused behavior becomes counter productive. Likewise, the same is true for engaging in emotion-focused coping when direct action and problem solving will resolve the conflict. Therefore, an important component of any intervention program is teaching children how to realistically appraise what must be done in a specific situation. The Ready, Set, R.E.L.A.X. program provides this component by having the students imagine themselves resolving problem-oriented issues. Additionally, suggestions are given to the classroom teacher for a brief follow-up discussion of the topic for the day. Other follow-up activities and projects are available. Also included in the R. S. R. program is an opportunity for the students to repeat a positive self-statement. The purpose of these self-statements is to have the students develop a problem-solving response set. Self regulated, private speech can function as an instructional cue that guides one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. It has been demonstrated that self-instructions have an influence on one's appraisal, attentional processes and physiological reactions. Stress management procedures can be effective only when they stimulate new ways of appraising potentially stressful conditions and coping with them.

It is important to try to teach children the most appropriate mode of coping.

12 Tips to Relieve Stress for Children and Adults

When you get that "stressed out" feeling, why not try:

1. Deep breathing/Muscle Relaxation
2. Meditating/Praying
3. Listening to relaxing music, or your favorite music
4. Exercising (stretch, walk, run, swim, bike)
5. Playing with your pet
6. Closing your eyes and recalling a fond memory
7. Developing a sense of humor
8. Expressing feelings
9. Eating healthy food
10. Making a list to help yourself get organized
11. Taking a warm bath
12. Making time to have fun

Remember, some stress is a fact of life. How we respond to stressful situations in our lives is up to us. Will we control the stress or will stress control us?