

## Relaxation and Imagery

### Relaxation

Relaxation and Imagery are helpful tools to offset some of the negative aspects of anxiety and stress in children and adolescents. These two techniques are combined in relaxation and imagery training (RIT), a program that promises to help at-risk children realize more of their potential (J.J. McWhirter, 1988; J.J. McWhirter & M.C. McWhirter, 1983). Similar programs improved students' test anxiety, study skills, and academic self-esteem (Wachelka & Katx, 1997).

Relaxation training promotes anxiety reduction by teaching the individual to reduce muscle tension. Relaxation training has two objectives, first, it is a means to counter-condition the anxiety associated with a stressful environment. Second, it is a self management tool. This tool has a spin-off effect. As children gain confidence in the ability to become calm in learning and social situation, they gain approval from adults and peers, improve their attention span, and less distractable, and learn more.

Several techniques are useful in relaxation training, including biofeedback, autogenic training, meditation, the quieting reflex, and progressive relaxation. In the relaxation technique use in RIT, the youth tenses and then relaxes various muscle groups. This procedure continues until the person is aware of the contrast between a tense and a relaxed state. In time the student can relax on their own without adult instruction.

### Imagery

Visual imagery is an important adjunct to relaxation training. It use to lessen tension and enhance comfort, to engage various muscle groups, and to cue a relaxation response. The counselor or teacher may ask a child to imagine a peaceful scene, such as waves lapping on a shore at night, rocking on a porch swing, or sitting in front of a warm fireplace. Many excellent scripts and audiotapes are available to set imagery scenes for students (Davis, Robbins-Eshelman & McKay, 2000). Commercial tapes have music, narratives, and distinctive environment sounds (birds songs, flowing water, rustling leaves).

In an educational context, imagery:

- a) creates a readiness to learn
- b) aids comprehension
- c) enhances memory and recall
- d) facilitates problem solving and creative thinking.

Helping students prepare their minds, emotions and bodies for learning may be as important as the instruction itself. Anticipation of mental event and openness of mind create a state of readiness for whatever is to be learned.