



Teaching Relaxation Skills in Physical Education



by Anita Courtney

"Stressed out" has become a way of life for many Americans. For children, stress comes from a variety of situations such as bullying, divorce, high stakes testing, and peer pressure. Because many children are not exposed to stress management techniques, stressful situations often result in unhealthy coping mechanisms such as overeating, "acting out," and substance abuse behaviors. Relaxation activities can be taught to provide students with methods of coping with these situations in a healthy manner. These strategies can then be used during school, outside of school, and throughout life. In fact, children who participate in relaxation activities during school experience reduced blood pressure and heart rate and self-report improvements in feelings of calmness and physical well-being (Lohaus & Klein-Hebling, 2000). As physical educators continue to emphasize healthy lifestyles, relaxation activities can be added to the list of healthy lifestyle skills taught during physical education.

Relaxation activities require a minimal amount of time in physical education. When taught periodically throughout the curriculum, these activities can provide students with techniques for coping with stress. The remainder of this article focuses on practical tips and activities to help maximize the effectiveness of teaching relaxation to elementary and middle school students.

Tips for Teaching Relaxation Activities

- Prior to using these activities with children, practice speaking in a calm, comforting, and steady manner. The voice should be smooth and somewhat monotonous, but not a whisper.
- Practicing these techniques five minutes before falling asleep at night and five minutes before getting out of bed in the morning will increase proficiency and enhance effectiveness at teaching these skills.
- Remember, relaxation skills are just that, skills. Like other skills, such as throwing and catching, these too must be practiced. Use these activities on a regular basis so both the teacher and students become proficient in them.
- Allow students to move vigorously before the relaxation exercises begin. This allows them to release built up tension and enhances the techniques. Fun activities such as tag would be appropriate.
- Relaxation activities are most effective when taught at the end of a physical education lesson. They can then be used as a means of teaching about relaxation and as a strategy for calming students before they return to the classroom.
- When possible, dim the lights. The body associates dim light with sleep and bright light with wakefulness. Lowering the lights will begin to relax the body. If the room lights can't be controlled beyond "on" and "off," a lamp or a night light will work.
- A warm environment supports relaxation. If possible, provide students with carpet squares or other mats to keep them off cold floors.
- Music can have a calming effect on the body (Miluk-Kolas, Obminski, Stupnicki, & Golec, 1994). Bamboo flute music, New Age music with synthesizers, and nature sounds like ocean waves have been proven effective for this purpose. Music should be cued up and ready to go at the right volume before you start the exercise. Extra time and noise, often created when working with audio-tape, can be distracting and interrupt the relaxing atmosphere.
- If there are competing noises—heating or cooling system, traffic, or loud conversations—turn up the music, raise your voice, or incorporate the sounds into the guided meditation. For example, you might say, "Notice how the humming sounds of the heater relax you more and more." Or, "If your mind begins to drift, gently bring it back to the sound of my voice."
- Make sure there is adequate space between students. Establish the expectation that distracting other students is unacceptable.

- When leading the meditation, stay alert. It's tempting to drift off with the students. (Teachers will find that they relax as they lead the exercises, but not as deeply as the students.)
- After the session, short stretching and deep breathing activities prevent feelings of tiredness induced by the relaxation experience. It is not unusual for groups of children to become very quiet, slow-moving, and insightful after these activities.
- Consider teaching these activities to classroom teachers as well. Faculty meetings and in-services offer opportune times to provide teachers with a relaxation break. Also, teach them some activities they can use in their classroom.

Relaxation Activities

- **Body Squeeze.** This technique involves slowly tensing and then releasing each muscle group individually. Start with the muscles in the feet and finish with the face. Sample language: "Begin by tensing your feet. Squeeze them into little balls. Imagine that you are curling your toes around a pencil. Squeeze as hard as you can. Tight, tight, tight. And now s-l-o-w-l-y, let the muscles in the feet and toes relax. Notice the feelings of warmth and tingling that follow. Now, tense your calf and ankle muscles by flexing your toes toward your knees. Hold the squeeze. Hold it a little longer. Get to know what that tension feels like. Now, very s-l-o-w-l-y, let the muscle of the ankles and calves go. Let them melt into the floor. Get to know what relaxation feels like."
- **Smelling a Flower.** Breathing deeply is one of the most effective ways to elicit the relaxation response. However, when instructed to deepen their breath many people draw in a forced breath that is anything but relaxing. Using the mind-body connection can help people deepen the breath in a more natural, less forced way. Sample language: "Bring a picture of a flower into your mind's eye. It can be any kind of flower. Imagine the petals, the color, and the shape of the flower. Now imagine breathing in the flower's perfume. Draw that scent into your lungs. Continue to breath the sweet smell into you. Let your self be filled with the breath." If the technique is working, the rise and fall of the participant's chest and abdomen become visible as the lungs fill and release.
- **Imagination.** This technique uses both visual imagery and body awareness to move a person into a state of deep relaxation. Sample language: "Lie down on the floor. Rock a bit from side to side to get comfortable. Let the back of your body become heavy. Let the legs be heavy. Let the arms

be heavy. Give your weight into the support of the floor. Let your body melt into the floor. Now, imagine that you are lying on a very comfortable raft floating down a gentle river. The movement of the water is very slow and easy as it slowly moves your raft along. You look up at the blue sky and see wisps of white clouds slowly moving by. As you continue down the river, you pass a beautiful green tree with yellow blossoms. You draw in a deep breath and smell the sweet, clean scent of the blossoms. Draw in another breath and smell the clean fresh air. Once again, draw the clean, clear air into your lungs. Hear the sweet sounds of birds singing in the trees. You see an eagle gliding effortlessly across the sky. You follow the journey of the eagle with your eyes. Feel the gentle warm breeze as it touches your skin. You feel peaceful, calm, and happy." To bring the students out of this experience, invite them to wiggle their fingers and toes, make circles with their ankles and wrists, and then stretch their arms over head and lengthen from toes to finger tips. Ask them to slowly sit up and be still for a few moments, letting the pleasant feelings sink into them.

In summary, children need strategies, skills, and ideas for coping with stress. With just a few minutes at the end of select classes, physical education teachers can teach relaxation skills that may help students achieve a healthier lifestyle now and in the future.

Resources

Books

- Hudson, J. (1996). *Instant meditation for stress relief: Breathing techniques and mental exercises for an immediate sense of calm and well-being* (New Life Library Series). New York: Lorenz Books.
- Lazarus, J. (2000). *Stress relief and relaxation techniques*. Lincolnwood, IL: Keats Publishing.
- Lite, L. (2001). *The goodnight caterpillar: The ultimate bedtime story*. Litebooks.net. Available at www.litebooks.net/caterpillar.htm
- Lite, L. (2001). *A boy and a turtle: The children's visualization book*. Litebooks.net. Available at www.litebooks.net/caterpillar.htm
- Lusk, J. (Ed.). (1992). *30 scripts for relaxation imagery and inner healing*. Duluth, MN: Whole Person Associates. Available from www.wholeperson.com/wpa/tr/30s/30s.htm
- Wilson, P. (1995). *Instant calm: Over 100 easy techniques to use for relaxing mind and body*. New York: Penguin.

CDs

- Christine, E. (n.d.). *Stress break: Relaxation and meditation techniques*. Available from www.elainechristine.com.
- Faust, J.S. (n.d.). *A touch of grace*. (bamboo flute music) Available from Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health www.kripalu.org.

References

- Lohaus, A., & Klein-Hebling, J. (2000). Coping in childhood: A comparative evaluation of different relaxation techniques. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping*, 13, 187-211.
- Miluk-Kolas, B., Obminski, Z., Stupnicki, R., & Golec, L. (1994). Effects of Music treatment on salivary cortisol in patients exposed to pre-surgical stress. *Experimental Clinical Endocrinology*, 102(2), 118-20. ©