Subjects

The experimental subjects in the pilot year of the R.E.L.A.X. Program were 123 first through sixth grade students enrolled in a parochial school in a small midwestern rural community of 20,000, primarily of middle to lower-middle income status. The subjects were predominately white, all had female teachers and represented the portion of the enrollment of the school that remained stable over two years.

The control group subjects were 120 students enrolled in another parochial grade school in the same community. These subjects were predominately white, had female teachers and represented the entire enrollment of the school that remained stable over two years. Children in both schools were similar in chronological age, intelligence, as measured by the cognitive index of the Metropolitan Achievement Test, and socioeconomic level, as assessed by the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position. The subjects during the second year of the study remained the same with the exception of an additional set of first grade students and graduation of sixth grade students.

Materials

There were six main types of materials used:

1. Pre- and post-testing was completed using various self-report inventories. Children in Grades 1–3 were administered the Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale and the Depression Inventory for Children, while children in Grades 4–6 were administered the Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale and the Piers-Harris Children’s Self Concept Scale.
2. A series of original active imagination and progressive muscle-relaxation scripts (See Part II).
3. An introductory letter to introduce the program to parents (See Appendix A).
4. Inservice programs for staff, students and parents (See Appendices B, C, D).
5. Music selections, including Baroque classics as well as other relaxing music (See page 28).
6. A questionnaire to obtain feedback from students in the R.E.L.A.X. program (See Appendix E).
Procedure

To obtain permission to implement the program, an overview of the program was presented to the school board of each of the targeted schools for their formal endorsement. After school-board approval, a letter explaining the program was sent to each parent (Appendix A). An inservice program was then held with the faculty of the experimental school to explain data-gathering procedures and to provide an introduction to the R.E.L.A.X. program and materials (Appendix B). Then a parent inservice was held to discuss stress and answer any questions about the program (Appendix D). This was followed by pretesting during the second week of school using the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS), the Depression Inventory for Children and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Students in grades one through three were given the RCMAS and the Depression Inventory. Teachers at these levels were asked to read the items to their students and define unfamiliar words. Students in grades four through six were asked to complete the RCMAS and the Self-Concept Scale. Teachers in these grades monitored the testing and answered questions or defined words as needed. The same instruments were administered and the same instructions were used with all students grades one through six in the control-group school.

Next, a workshop was presented to the experimental school students in order to give factual information about stress and lead them in discussion about its psychological and physiological effects (Appendix C). The R.S.R. program was explained to the students by the principal and the group was led through a relaxation experience.

The R.S.R. program was implemented during the fourth week of school and ran through April of the following spring. During the first month, first through third graders listened to R.S.R. scripts on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 12:45 p.m. to 1:00 p.m., while fourth through sixth graders listened on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at the same time. On non-RSR days a silent reading time was given while music played.

The scripts were read over the intercom by the school principal. The R.E.L.A.X. session was introduced by stating, “Boys and girls it is time for Ready, Set, R.E.L.A.X.”, which was followed by two minutes of the music selection. While the music played the classroom teachers turned off the classroom lights and instructed their students to clear their desks, place their feet flat on the floor, place their hands on their thighs, bow their heads slightly forward and close their eyes. At the end of the two minutes, the principal began reading the script while the music continued in the background.
As a group, the test students demonstrated decreased anxiety and depression and increased self-concept and achievement.

The R.S.R. program was designed to be more than the mere exposure of children to taped relaxation scripts.

At the end of the script each teacher led the class in a brief discussion using the questions provided at the end of each script.

In the second year of the study, test preparation scripts were also read each day for one week preceding administration of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. Initially scripts were read three times a week (M, W, F) in an effort to help students achieve proficiency in obtaining a relaxation response. After October, R.S.R. scripts were read only twice a week with sustained silent reading on the other three days. Other than the pre- and post-testing, nothing out of the normal routine occurred at the control school.

The procedure during the pilot year differed in several ways. First, all grade levels listened to the same scripts on the same days. Second, there was no follow-up discussion, which became one of the more valuable opportunities to integrate the R.S.R. messages during the second year. Third, no test preparation scripts were available. The hope during the second year was to increase students’ overall performance on the Metropolitan Achievement Tests by using relaxation and active imagination prior to the students completing the testing.

Conclusions of Study

Based on the results of the statistical analysis of the data gathered, several general conclusions can be drawn. First, children in the experimental group (receiving the intervention) showed statistically significant benefits when compared to their matched controls. As a group, they demonstrated decreased anxiety and depression and increased self-concept and achievement. Second, within-group comparisons suggest a “cumulative” effect of the program, with more significant changes occurring at post-testing during the second year. Third, achievement test results increased as reported levels of anxiety decreased. Fourth, the stability of post-test results from the first year, when compared to pre-test results from the second year, support the usefulness of the chosen self-report inventories and suggest children’s self perceptions in grades one through six were relatively stable over a four-month period. For a detailed analysis of these results please write the authors (in care of the publisher.)

The Ready, Set, R.E.L.A.X. program provides an economical and easily implemented procedure that can be used with various-sized groups of children The intent was to provide a program that would be used school-wide on an annual basis. However, the program is easily adaptable for use with individual or small groups of children.

The R.S.R. program was designed to be more than the mere exposure of children to taped relaxation scripts. Such procedures
without the context of purposeful, guided instruction have been shown through research to be ineffective. Instruction providing students with a clear, age-appropriate theoretical basis, and emphasizing transfer of learning seems to be most helpful. The R.S.R. program makes special effort to provide such instruction through the “inservice” training of staff, parents and children. Additionally, positive self-talk is encouraged and solidified through discussion with the facilitator after each R.S.R. session. Every teacher in the experimental school was enthusiastic and supportive of the program. The positive effects of adult praise and reinforcement on the children’s willingness to participate has frequently been reported in the literature. In a study by Day, a clear training outcome was evident, but eroded after the cessation of in-class practice, indicating the importance of structuring some long-term, follow-up practice.

*Teachers, counselors, nurses, physicians, social workers and psychologists are frequently placed in a situation of “putting out fires” rather than preventing them. The R.S.R. program is an attempt to prevent future fires by equipping young children to manage feelings of anxiety. Further longitudinal research is needed to determine if the R.S.R. program has beneficial effects once a student no longer practices in a structured setting. Additionally, it is hoped this effort will encourage others to use the R.S.R. program to verify the obtained results. “Mental health” is an important commodity which necessitates that all those in the helping professions expend more energy in well-grounded, research-based prevention programs.*