

# **BODY-MIND RELAXATION TRAINING: A DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTION FOR INNER-CITY PRESCHOOL CHILDREN A PRELIMINARY REPORT**

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The need to provide positive developmental conditions for inner-city, minority children has been a profound concern of the human services professions for decades. While many research studies have shown that preschool interventions yield positive developmental outcomes, these interventions were expensive and labor intensive.

The program to be described in this paper, Kids' Wellness, designed by Voght (1999) focused on body-mind relaxation training for preschool children for easy implementation in classroom settings, with minimal staff training and minimal costs required. This brief preliminary report includes a rationale for the program, a description of its design, and presentation of evaluation data.

## **RATIONALE**

### **At-Risk Preschool Children**

Inner-city children often come from households of lower socioeconomic status. Studies show that such children are more likely to score highly on scales of negative emotionality and parental conflict (Shaw, Keenan & Vondra, 1997). These children later may show lower than average achievement scores and higher than average school drop-out rates (Dossey, Mullis, Lindquist & Chambers, 1988). Considered at-risk, these children have also been found to have a propensity towards negative, rather than the more innately positive, representations of self (Ayoub, Raya, Miller & Geismar, 1996). Such a negative self-concept can lead to other negative outcomes; other studies show that negativity is strongly correlated with the emergence of problems in preschool children (Campbell, 1995).

Preschool interventions have been found to be successful over time reflecting such positive outcomes as significantly higher achievement in reading (Reynolds & Temple, 1998). However, these interventions were extremely complex and required a great deal of special staff training.

Thus it seems as if a preschool intervention that was inexpensive, required little staff training, and was effective, could have great implications for extending the benefits of early intervention to many inner-city preschoolers.

### **Relaxation**

Relaxation involves regulation of muscle tension. Research on relaxation documents the positive effects when individuals are taught to relax (e.g. Benson, 1987; Hannaford, 1995; Kenyon, 1994; Kuzendorf & Sheikh, 1990; Singer & Singer, 1990). Relaxation programs have been part of the Swedish school system for years; just recently they have been introduced in Canada and Wisconsin.

The premise of this paper is that “hands on” relaxation training for preschool children enables them to enter into a psychosomatic state of learning readiness. As they relax and regulate muscle tension, their innate motor capacities become more accessible and their distractibility is reduced, thereby making their interactions with their environments more productive. The relaxation training, by increasing children’s physical comfort, would then increase their patience, self-regulation, and cognitive ability.

### **The Kids’ Wellness Program**

The Kids’ Wellness Program offers a variety of playful body-mind relaxation, breathing, and stretching exercises. The objectives of the program, specifically, are:

- To more fully involve children’s bodies in the learning process
- To expand attention spans and healthy behaviors by teaching children to move synchronously
- To encourage children’s bodies to give voice to their imaginations
- To provide the physical and mental tools required for each child to build his/her own optimal well-being
- To develop creative rapport and common understanding between adults and children by providing them with a common language

The skills taught through the Kids’ Wellness Program are based on five core, documented principles on the relationship between body-mind learning:

1. The brain’s function is to help the body best adapt to its environment, mediating external stimulation with each human’s internal and external environments.
2. Through physically felt repetitions, we develop both reflex and conditioned learning to the real and the imagined. This leads to creative learning and strengthens positive inner images.

3. Anxiety and hyperstimulation induce corresponding chemical and muscular feelings in the body. Muscle relaxation and breathing combined with positive mental imagery and movement rebalance the body's chemistries allowing it to more effectively stimulate, educate, and strengthen development in all domains.
4. Sports visualization techniques help develop muscle memory as athletes practice mentally imaged body movements stimulating whole brain/whole body learning. Kids' Wellness applies similar concepts to children's activities, thus encouraging better performance.
5. Balanced optimal learning and well-being requires the continued interplay of whole brain/whole body functioning. As young children grow and adapt in verbally oriented society, they transmit from a whole brain/whole body preverbal sensory image mode to an increasingly verbal left brain mode. Kids' Wellness program activities support whole brain/whole body learning during the transition to a more verbal mode.

The Kids' Wellness program incorporates and integrates these five principles. Among the activities are exercise scripts, repetitions of activities, relaxation activities, body-mind warm ups and similar activities that teach essential skills for improved intellectual capacity and physical and mental well-being.

### **Implementation of The Kids' Wellness Program**

The Kids' Wellness Program, following scripts from Wellness, Inc.'s Kids' Wellness Guide, was implemented with fourteen preschool children in an inner-city preschool. They were trained using five playful body-mind relaxation, breathing, and stretching exercises described in the scripts. The exercises embraced simple imitation to complex imagination. These were done to soft music to further enhance relaxation. For five weeks children spent approximately 15-20 minutes during circle time physically exercising the activities described in the scripts, and approximately 10 minutes before nap time mentally exercising (imagining) the movements. This pattern of training was designed to synchronize the physical and mental learning reinforcement of the skills, conditioning automatic relaxed responses.

### **Program Effectiveness**

A comprehensive methodology for evaluating the Kids' Wellness Program would be based on the following premises:

- Observing a positive, progressive change in individual children's physical and mental behavior baselines

- Observe children's use of physically expressive behaviors, corresponding positive thoughts, and words
- Observing more focused attention during the mental version of the exercise script
- Administer psychometric tests with pre-and posttest evaluation.

Results of initial evaluation efforts that utilized anecdotal reports and intelligence test results of a short form of the WPPSI-R follow.

### **Intelligence Test**

Of the 14 children tested, 3 were female and 11 were male. Before the six-week intervention, IQ scores ranged from 79 to 112, distributed in a normal fashion with the mean pretest IQ being 95.7 with a standard deviation of 9.39 and a median IQ of 97. After the program, IQ scores ranged from 86 to 120, on a normal distribution with a standard deviation of 10.64 and a median IQ of 103. The overall mean difference pre-and posttest scores was statistically significant  $t(25)=2.241$ ,  $R= .034$ . In other words, after experiencing the program, the IQ scores of the children were significantly higher.

### **Anecdotal Observations**

Care workers reported that the program was easy to implement and that they thought it was successful. They reiterated that the children enjoyed the program. Following the relaxation training, they were "more attentive and less easily distracted after the training." As a more specific example, they stated "Michelle (child care worker) has picked Kids' Wellness to teach the children that positive communication through words and actions, gains others' respect. This is the best part...the parents' response to the change they have noticed in the children is wonderful. She has received many comments (from) the kids using their "words" to communicate. The kids are also becoming more helpful at home. The Director of the YMCA sponsoring the preschool, Dr. Elizabeth D. Langan, stated: "Three weeks into the curriculum, we were astounded to see one of our kids who had A.D.D. (attention deficit disorder) and serious behavioral problems intervene in a conflict between two other children by calmly reaching toward both of them and announcing 'I think we need to blow some bubbles!' Kids' Wellness provided individual children with healthy and expressive ways of identifying and coping with their own feelings and the feelings of others, and it provided an incredibly efficient and effective in-house training for staff in positive behavior management strategies."

### **Implications**

While further and extensive evaluation still needs to be done, these preliminary results suggest that relaxation programs for inner-city

preschool children, while little used currently, have great potential. Commonly recognized developmental issues in at-risk preschoolers, such as inattentiveness, lacks in social skills, inadequate physical and mental self-regulation, gaps in language development and imagination, anxiety, and tension that impede learning are addressed.

The following are currently indicated for future development:

- Formal training in delivering relaxation programs for children for child and youth care workers.
- Routine practice of relaxation programs: more time spent on relaxation activities over a long period. Continued evaluation of these programs to further determine what positive outcomes are associated with particular components and time formats.

Further information on the Kids' Wellness Program is available from Wellness, Inc., 790 Boylston St., Suite 21C, Boston, MA 02199  
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