



## Education



### Keeping a child focused through relaxation and imagery

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Thirty-one years ago, hardly anyone had even heard of autism. Specialists were so baffled, they could offer little help to families with these difficult children. Even worse, parents, especially “cold” mothers, were blamed for causing the disorder. Usually the kids were just institutionalized.

Thirty-one years ago, Doctors Gerald and June Groden received a grant from Rhode Island’s Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals to develop a program for educating autistic children. The Grodens were both behaviorists. At the time most mental health professionals disdained behaviorism, although it was the only approach that had any civilizing effect on severely challenging behaviors.

Now The Groden Center is known internationally for its work with students with autism, Down syndrome and other serious disorders.

Simply put, a behaviorist retrains socially unacceptable behavior using rewards and sanctions. Food and praise are common rewards. But June Groden always had a problem with strict behaviorist orthodoxy, because the techniques depend on external controls, which is to say the person doing the rewarding and punishing. Groden says, “Someone had to be always present to help them with their behaviors. So I wanted to develop procedures that help people control their own behavior. The procedures I thought I could adapt for a special population were relaxation and imagery. Everyone thought this was too sophisticated for this population.” But Groden adapted a process first developed in 1938 to help normal adults relieve stress and anxiety.

She says, “If you can get control of your body, you know you can do something for yourself. You’re not a straw in the wind. There’s so much research on the efficacy of relaxation. In sports, test-taking, general well-being. Lamaze [breathing techniques to ease childbirth] is a form of muscle relaxation. The basic distinction to teach children is what it feels like when a muscle is tight, and how much better it feels to relax.”

In these days of high-stakes testing and fierce competition, both social and academic, you’d think we might be more concerned with helping kids manage the seemingly ever-increasing pressure we put on them (and ourselves). The Groden Center’s techniques take only a few minutes.

At the Center, the day always begins with all students practicing their relaxation and imagery exercises. At one end of a classroom, three older boys work one-on-one with teachers. At the other, more advanced

students have learned to be more on their own, with one helper and the teacher who leads them all through the drill.

Autistic people tend not to learn by imitation, as typical children do. So with calm gestures, the three teachers, working individually, bring waving arms back to where they need to be. Patiently, they insist the boys watch them, and do as they do.

The leader, Brian Rutkowski, intones: "Sit up, hands down, feet on floor. Now. Make your forehead tight and ... relax.... Make your eyes tight and then ... relax." They do this twice, once standing, and when they're finished, he enthuses, "Nice job, boys."

At last he says, "Now we're going to sit nicely and relax. We're going to think about our schedule today. We have imagery and handwriting, and then we're going out to deliver Meals on Wheels." With a burst of energy, he calls out, "We earn what?" The boys answer, "Soda!" "How?" he asks. "By staying relaxed," they say.

Having relaxed, the group moves on to using what Groden calls "picture rehearsals," or imagery. Using visual cues, either cartoon-like graphics or actual photographs of the kid himself, each boy rehearses a short scene. The scenario begins with a situation that his teachers have identified as one that triggers undesirable behavior. Using the visual images, he rehearses desirable behaviors that lead to a good outcome.

So, for example, the therapist points to a picture of a teacher in front of a class and prompts, "When the teacher asks a question..." The youth finishes the sentence with "I raise my hand." At the next picture, the adult says: "I know I should use..." "Full sentences." The teacher: "Because I am..." "A grown man."

Painstaking work, this.

Another boy has photographs of himself. Teacher: "You need to finish your..." "Work." Teacher: "You ask for a..." "Break." Teacher: "Your teacher says no, not until after you finish your..." "Work." Teacher: "But that's OK because you can stay..." "Relaxed." Teacher: "You are happy that you stayed in..." "Control."

Groden says, "The beauty of imagery is that you can practice things in your mind. You don't have to be there in the middle of doing it. Olympic winners often refer to their sports psychologist who uses exactly the same techniques to boost performance."

The scripts can be written for any situation, for people with any level of disability or capability. So for years Groden has wanted to teach everyone these simple techniques for managing their own agitation. She says, "I'm a New Yorker, so I'm not naturally relaxed. If I'd learned this when I was young, it would have been very beneficial."

But the only young people being taught these self-management skills are those at the extreme end of the spectrum coping with challenging behaviors, and those at the other end trying to boost their performance to gold-medal levels. What about the rest of us?

Happily, in 2001 The Groden Center became the sponsoring agent for a charter school, Kingston Hill Academy. There Groden has had the opportunity to demonstrate the power of relaxation and imagery techniques with children of every ability. At both The Groden Center and Kingston Hill, you can see children get frustrated, back off from their task, and pull themselves together with relaxation.

Imagine what a relief it must be to both challenged and typical kids alike to feel confident that they can calm their agitation and return to a tough task with better attention.

Now that's a lesson worth teaching.

Next week we'll visit the Kingstown Hill Academy.

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