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# The effects of progressive relaxation training on the disruptive behavior of a boy with autism<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This study examined the effects of progressive relaxation training on the disruptive behaviors of a boy with autism. Moreover, his overt relaxed behaviors before and after relaxation training were measured using the Behavioral Relaxation Scale (Poppen, 1988, Poppen, 1998). After the participant received training in progressive relaxation procedures a multielement design with three conditions was utilized to determine the effects of the procedures on the duration of the boy's disruptive behaviors during leisure activity sessions. The conditions were: (a) relaxation prior to a leisure activity session; (b) cued relaxation; and (c) no relaxation prior to the session, which represented a baseline condition. Results indicated that the participant acquired progressive relaxation skills, displayed more relaxed behaviors after performing the procedures, and showed a decrease in the duration of his disruptive behaviors upon completing progressive relaxation training prior to a leisure activity session. Implications for future research are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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<sup>☆</sup>This report is based on a master's thesis submitted by the first author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MA degree at University of Kansas. Jo Mullins is now at the Institute for Applied Behavior Analysis. We thank Kathleen Zanolli, Donald Baer, and Don Bushell for their valuable contributions to the project. Address correspondence to Jo L. Mullins at the Institute for Applied Behavior Analysis, 5777 W. Century Blvd., Suite 675, Los Angeles, CA 90045.

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. The effects of progressive relaxation training on the disruptive behavior of a boy with autism*

Since pioneered by Edmund Jacobson (1938), progressive relaxation procedures have benefited many individuals without disabilities. Although not as widely researched, progressive relaxation also has been shown to benefit individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities (Calamari, Geist, & Shahbazian, 1987; Harvey, Karan, Bhargava, & Morehouse, 1978; Lindsay, Baty, Michie, & Richardson, 1989; Lindsay, Fee, Michie, & Heap, 1994; McPhail & Chamove, 1989; To & Chan, 2000). Of particular interest has been the use of progressive relaxation as a behavior reduction strategy for individuals with developmental disabilities. McPhail and Chamove (1989), for example, found that progressive relaxation procedures were more effective in reducing the disruptive behavior of adults with developmental disabilities than was the control condition of reading individuals a story and asking them to sit quietly. The physical state of relaxation was not measured, however, to determine whether the degree of relaxation differed between groups. Disruptive behavior, therefore, might have decreased because the relaxation procedure functioned as a replacement behavior rather than because the individuals achieved a deeper state of relaxation.

More recently, To and Chan (2000) evaluated the effects of relaxation training on the aggressive behaviors of 10 individuals residing in a mental hospital using a pre and posttest design. Findings indicated that the frequency of some aggressive behaviors decreased by 14.7% after the relaxation training; however, the results were not statistically significant. Based on these findings, it was suggested that future research include the use of prompting to facilitate acquisition of relaxation skills, and that the variables maintaining aggressive behavior be identified to determine whether relaxation procedures are an appropriate component of an intervention plan.

As part of a multi-component treatment package, Harvey and colleagues (1978) combined relaxation training with timeout and reinforcement for positive, appropriate self-statements to reduce the frequency of violent temper outbursts displayed by a woman with moderate mental retardation. Results indicated that relaxation effectively reduced the problem behavior. Conclusions about the effects of relaxation alone could not be made, however, because components of the treatment package were not analyzed separately.

Additionally, progressive relaxation procedures have been found to be very successful in reducing autistic and stereotypic behaviors that are seemingly coupled with the stress and anxiety experienced by individuals who do not possess effective coping skills (Borkovec & Sides, 1978; Groden, Cautela, Prince, & Berryman, 1994). In fact, when a physiological stress response is a

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