

## **AUTOGENIC TRAINING IN SPANISH SCHOOL CHILDREN**

by **Laura de Rivera & Luis de Rivera**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a rapidly changing world, where our children have to face the growing demands of our education system, a method is required to help them cope with the pressure and conditions more and more prevalent in today's childhood, such as anxiety, depression, fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, inhibitory behaviors, and ADHD etc...

Effective, easy to learn and practice, Autogenic Training (AT) is one of the most useful techniques for this purpose. Also, it is a very successful method for treating stress related problems. Founded on a self-help basis, it aims to restore a state of calm, which is so necessary to deal with daily troubles and to keep at bay mental and psychological disorder.

Once we achieve this calmness within ourselves, everything is much easier to face, and to solve. Furthermore, creative talents and learning skills are much better channeled and expressed. By balancing both brain hemispheres and the sympathetic/parasympathetic branches of the nervous system, our neural networks also work better with the practice of Autogenic Training.

### **AUTOGENIC TRAINING IN EDUCATION**

In 1969, Luthe made the first study of the effects of AT in children aged 6 to 16 years in Canada. He observed that the children involved showed an improvement of their academic performance.

The same conclusions were drawn in another study by Luthe in 1977, this time using AT with 5 year olds, where AT worked to improve their concentration, learning skills and their creativity. In addition, Luthe determined that AT was a successful tool for preventive medicine.

In Spain, another experiment was carried out (Esperanza Morón and Luis de Rivera, 1979) using AT with 25 girls 9-10 yrs old in the last school term of the year – a period plagued with symptoms of fatigue, anxiety and stress. The girls experienced a big improvement in academic performance, as well as improved concentration skills, mental agility, autonomy and responsibility for their work.

The Autogenic method also improved personal relationships and assertive communication skills – both amongst the students and between the students and their teachers. Another interesting finding was that regular practice of AT reduced exam-related anxiety and inhibitory behaviours.

According to E. Morón, Autogenic Training is 'an easy method to use at school', helped by the positive motivation of the teachers involved, and adapting the method to each age range. On the other hand, it is essential to listen to the children's feedback, and deal with any discharges, symptoms or problems that may appear. Symptoms such as somnolence, headaches, or repeated crying during sessions should be investigated. To apply Autogenic Training at school, the monitors must be well trained and prepared to deal with any problems that may appear.

More recently, the authors of this article have applied the method to a group of 6-7 year olds, at school. The sessions were carried out every two days during the academic year, for 15 mins at the beginning of the day and with the same class of students. Afterwards, all the children were encouraged to express the feelings and sensations they had experienced during the exercise. We gave each child a special notebook to write and draw what they felt like after the AT exercise at school – and also at home, since we encouraged them to practice two more times at home.

One of our first observations was the astounding silence and focus that reigned in the class during the exercise. It was very impressive to see twelve, otherwise non-stop, noisy little kids become so quiet and relaxed, with their eyes closed for 10-15 minutes. By the end of the year, the teacher reported on the notable improvement in concentration and attention span among this group.

Our next school Autogenic Training program is scheduled for 2016-17, with three groups of 11-12 yr old children in Madrid. We have noted a growing number of kids entering adolescence with severe anxiety problems, etc..., very commonly increased by academic demands. We aim to teach these young people AT and also train their school teachers, so they can practice it for themselves and along with their pupils.

As we found from previous experience, after the children have been taught and practised their AT exercises, it is very important to dedicate a space for them to speak about their experiences, and what they felt during the exercise. These must be noted down and examined by the trainer.

Motivation increases when the method is presented as a 'game' – as something VOLUNTARY – never compulsory – and something that cannot be 'done wrongly'. 'As long as you do the exercise, it means you are doing it RIGHT!'. A huge and key motivation is giving the children good information by explaining to them the practical benefits that Autogenic Training can bring to their life, and how it can help them to deal with their day to day troubles.

#### **AUTOGENIC TRAINING FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN:**

Before Esperanza Morón's AT study began, 16 girls were found to have symptoms of depression on psychological testing. At the end of the study, only 3 girls had significant symptoms remaining.

The recent work (2013) of Oliver Klott at The Mulberry Bush School, a therapeutic residential school which provides care, treatment and education to primary aged children with severe behavioural and emotional problems, has shown very encouraging results. Students followed an Autogenic Training course and were invited to join a follow-up group that offered support and motivation. One case example described by Klott related the story of 10 yr old Luke who suffered from Tourettes Syndrome, and severe anxiety made worse by his frequent changes of foster home. Autogenic Training succeeded in reducing his Tourette symptoms. Also, writes Klott, 'He seems more mature and is more able to enjoy the social aspect of mealtimes. He generally seems to appreciate the present without thinking too much about the next activity. Luke is able to use Autogenic Training as a self-help technique and appreciated the benefits of it.'

Other authors have similarly shown how this method is useful for children with emotional or behavioral problems, such as Biermann and Mueller, 1986; Biermann, 1996; and Goldbeck and Schmid, 2003; who all confirm the effectiveness of Autogenic Training as a self-help technique for children with a wide range of psychological disorders.



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