

RELAXATION with Boys

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Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and keywords:

The holistic definition by the World Health Organization (WHO) of 1946 perceives health to be a balance of physical, emotional and social wellbeing as well as self-determination and autonomy. Health promotion thus aims to give people a greater degree of autonomy over their health and enable them to improve their own health (OTTAWA Charter, 1988).

Gender-specific research into adolescent health considers health to be the result of a multifactorial development during which boys and girls assume active roles and the assumption of these social roles also contains a health-related behaviour component. A series of health-related behavioural patterns and lifestyles that are based on norms, values and attitudes are developing at this stage of their lives.

Educational activities are increasingly focusing on boys' and men's health. Results of research and statistics reveal differences which must be taken into account when an activity is directed towards a particular target group. The adoption of a holistic approach in health education also necessitates paying attention to the aspect of emotional and physical "relaxation". The hegemonic model of masculinity (Connell 1999), which remains an influential factor in the construction of gender for boys, despite the increasing differentiation of various masculine lifestyles, is about "using" the body for example, to constantly compete with other boys (and girls) to be "better, higher, faster, further" with a tendency to "externalise" and be constantly "on the go". Lots of boys grapple with this expectations that are frequently made of them and that they are required to emulate. This process of social development may create conflicts and tension when boys realise that these "masculine" attributes do not necessarily match their individual ideas about personality development. The one-dimensional orientation, for example gaining acceptance in the gender homogenous peer group that is based on the hegemonic model, may also be at the expense of the inability to adopt and experience other behavioural options – because they are defined as unmanly. This invariably results in a rather narrow range of experience, which gives boys less room for social manoeuvre and fewer opportunities for interaction and for the furtherance of their personal emotional development or deprives them of such opportunities. The preventive health approach focuses on broadening and allowing boys to develop their own role and on a wide range of experience in the context of health-related activities.

"Relaxation" hence has a particular significance in the context of these social, gender-related realities with which boys are confronted at the social and cultural level. Relaxation also involves "learning to go/remain inside", paying more attention to oneself, slowing down, becoming aware of one's body as a part of one's whole being, appreciating relaxation and devotion as well as experiencing emotions and encouraging individual sensitivities. If these aspects are emphasised in the context of relaxation activities for boys, they can help the boys develop self-awareness, composure and a realization of their personal needs in terms of their own health.

Similar topics:

Sexuality, aggression

Materials:

Singing bowl or triangle. The sound that is produced must resound in the room for quite a while. The volume is irrelevant; it is the duration of a penetrating, sustained, but pleasant sound, that is important.



Tip: if a boy listens to a singing bowl and intuitively feels a "nice - but...", it is certainly not the right singing bowl. He should trust his own feelings, his own intuition in his choice of singing bowl. Everyone intuitively knows what is right for him (or her).

Duration:

Exercise 1: 1 to 10 minutes, depending on the group's social situation.

Exercise 2: 10 to 15 minutes

Number of participants:

Random

Age:

6 to 12 years

Aims:

The goals of this brief, precise exercise are to:

- (re)discover one's own inner voice and concentration;
- get in touch with oneself (again);
- become aware of one's own mood and need;
- relax;
- create a balance between oneself and the environment;
- be able to enjoy and/or cope with peace/quiet;
- discover a sense of one's own mood and talk about it.

(Short) explanation:**Exercise 1:**

All the participants sit down in a circle and can see each other. The leader holds a singing bowl in his hand. The boys are familiarized with it. When they have been acquainted with the singing bowl, the repetitive group ritual is explained to them. The singing bowl is struck and the boys remain quietly seated for the duration of the sound, close their eyes - if they can - or gaze at the floor and go inside themselves (= agreement to stay quiet). It is agreed in advance that everyone in the group will raise his hand to signal that the tone/sound has left his body again. Verbal communication must not be resumed until the last boy has raised his arm as a signal. A boy begins the session by recounting his momentary feelings (excited, curious, fearful, joyful etc.) about the situation or briefly describes what is going through his mind (in terms of a situation). The leader may assist by asking additional questions and then ends the session. The first-person statements made are not commented on, they are noted by everyone present.

The sound from a singing bowl resonates for approx. 20 seconds. If individual members of the group do not manage to remain quiet, the leader interrupts the acoustic phase. He reiterates the agreement to stay quiet and the sound is reproduced until the group or everyone present has managed to remain quietly "focused on himself" while the sound is resonating, and has got in touch with himself.



Exercise 2:

Additional relaxation exercises illustrated by an imaginary journey from Volker Friebe: Children learn to slow down. Musical and playful stimulation of concentration, attention and wellbeing. Book with CD., Muenster, 2008:

Many games, songs and stories deal with slowing down. It is not simply a matter of slowing down, it is about becoming aware of our activities and speed and improving our own control through conscious change. It is consequently about increasing self-control, and the restoration of a natural sense of time as well. If preferred, songs may be sung with a change of pace, i.e. the pace accelerates as well as slowing down. Or games that involve concentration and hence encourage the boys to slow down. Repetition is essential. It is not possible to learn to slow down in the same way as a word is learnt; we must repeatedly place ourselves in this sort of a situation with games, songs and stories, we must allow ourselves to be touched by the situation and change through this contact.

This exercise is designed for use with individuals or in a group to set the mood for a change or rotation of the situation, e.g. the beginning/end of a session or to signal that all the boys present are to gather in the middle of the room.

The exercise should be used firstly, as a signal to begin a new phase of work and secondly, to slow down the dynamics. In continuous groups this exercise – if it is repeatedly used in a precise and conscious manner - assumes a ritual character and makes it easier to understand what is happening in the group.

Trucks from the building site

We play at being trucks that are bringing excavated material from the building site to the rubbish tip. We are all trucks; we are travelling in a circle behind each other. A leader announces the traffic situation. We start off standing. The children may be given the following instructions.

"The trucks are loaded up. Can you feel the weight when the excavator throws a new load of earth or rubble onto the floor of the truck? Another load. And one more. The trucks are fully loaded now."

"Start the engine, drive away very slowly, at walking speed. Can you feel the weight? The road's bad here; you must drive very carefully so that you don't end up in the ditch."

"Turn onto the country road. Drive faster now. But don't overtake, the trucks are too heavy."

"There's a junction ahead, slow down now. Stop now. Wait. It's all clear now, carry on along the country road."

"Go up the hill. This is where you'll really begin to feel the heavy load. The trucks are working their way very slowly up the hill."

"We've made it to the top. We can go faster again now. The countryside is flying past."
 "A traffic jam. One of us was careless there and has landed in the ditch. But we are all still right on track. Drive very slowly and carefully."
 "There's no traffic jam now, we can drive at the normal speed again."
 "There's the tip. Slow down, the access road is in a very bad state. Drive very slowly and carefully."
 "Stop. The loading area is raised slowly, the rubble slides down the side of the refuse tip. The trucks are emptied. – Well done! We're now ready for another trip!"

Reflection:

The sound of the singing bowl produces a focal point. The boys may focus on it as many boys have no idea how to cope with silence. The introduction of the ritual should not take longer than 30 seconds. It can subsequently be increased by up to a good minute.

Experience shows that boys really need to learn how to acknowledge their own feelings, to give them a name as well as to summon up the courage to express them in front of others. It is thus essential to give them time and to repeat the exercise over and over again, even if the first sessions do not appear to particularly productive.

The boys may tend to describe their emotional situation as normal or good. It is important to steer them away from such appraisals towards giving descriptions of their feelings (e.g. by asking them, "What do you mean by good?"). Comments about where their body is hurting them can also have a relaxing effect.

Variations:

Additional subject areas for relaxation:

1. Imaginary journeys / restful images / meditation (www.entspannung-plus.de)
2. Feast of the senses (www.projekt-mahlzeit.de/aufgeschmeckt/sinnesparcour.htm)
3. Singing and rhymes
4. Painting
5. Tactile handling of natural materials (e.g. clay)
6. Dancing and rhythm (www.entspannung-plus.de/Entspannung-fuer-Kinder/Kreistaenze-fuer-Kinder/kreistaenze-fuer-kinder.html)
7. Simple balancing exercises (individual, in pairs, balancing gyrations) (www.balancekreisel.ch)
8. Warming-up exercises
9. Attention to the body (e.g. body painting, massage, breathing exercise) (www.entspannung-plus.de/Entspannung/Entspannung-01/entspannung-01.html)
10. Autogenic training

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Apart from proper exercise in childhood, it is equally important to learn how to relax properly for health reasons. Boys and girls alike frequently experience stressful situations in their daily lives, e.g. pressure in the parental home or at school to do well, a high level of media consumption, noise, enormous time pressure, unstable family circumstances, poverty, migration experiences, mobbing and violence, lack of a sense of belonging to a group, not accepted as manly, and health/somatic conditions. According to the 1st World Vision Children's Study (2007) conducted in Germany, boys were more critical than girls in their response to questions about their general well-being.

Stress and tension are not factors that induce illness per se, but if they occur frequently and incessantly, this process leaves an unhealthy mark on the body and mind. The consequences of negative stress are learning handicaps, limited contact to other people, withdrawal, detrimental physical effects, violence and fear.

Boys who grow up with a hegemonic model of masculinity (Connell 1999) are especially likely to possess limited problem-solving skills as a result of their one-dimensional gender role models. According to Connell, "hegemonic masculinity" is understood as a culturally dominant (albeit versatile and changing) form of masculinity in a given social setting. Boys can only escape this influence and definition of power with great difficulty. The gender homogeneous setting also serves its members as a (re)production model for these masculine structures as well as a social centre and area of mutual reinforcement.

The hegemonic principle of masculinity "functions" according to a black and white model", there is only "right" or "wrong", not "as well as". The "real" boys/young men exist in this mindset and the "others" who are unable or do not wish to adopt this form of masculinity are consequently threatened with or suffer isolation, mobbing, humiliation, degradation, contempt and violence at the hands of boys and men who act according to the hegemonic principle. Boys and young men are generally aware of this situation. The preferred forms of this masculine model of socialisation include activity, dominance, using the body as an instrument and perceiving emotionality as a risk. These are the traits to which this hegemonic model attaches great importance, and it does not permit boys to develop any other social skills. They are usually denigrated and frequently stigmatised as "feminine" (= unmanly). The fact that the behavioural repertoire is very one dimensional may also have consequences for the health of the individual. The holistic balance is threatened. To strengthen, encourage and assist boys in this respect, it appears necessary to offer them an area of experience where they can firstly escape from the behavioural pressure ("that's the real *manly* way!") and secondly, gain the personal experience that will really help them individually. It is primarily about boosting emotional and social skills.

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