



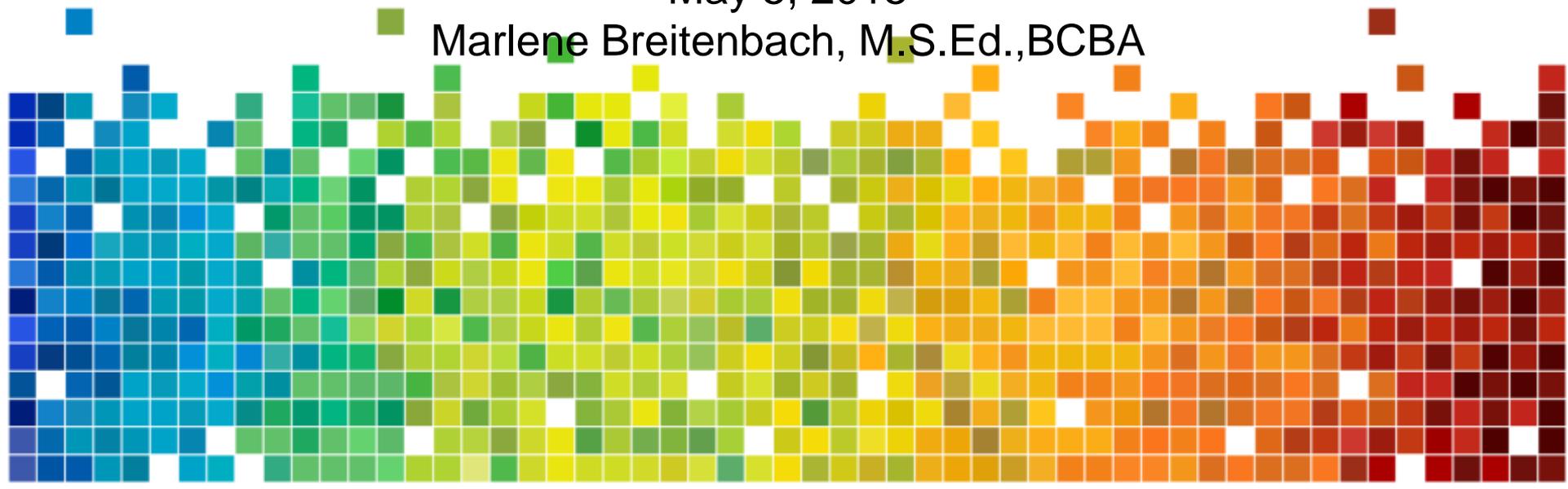
***Just Relax!***

# Why Telling Doesn't Work

Autism in Education Symposium

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Thank you

to those who provided input for the presentation!

Raeanne Adams

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Sheri Gallant



**Anxiety** develops out of worry and becomes a problem when people change their behaviour to avoid a feared person, place or event.



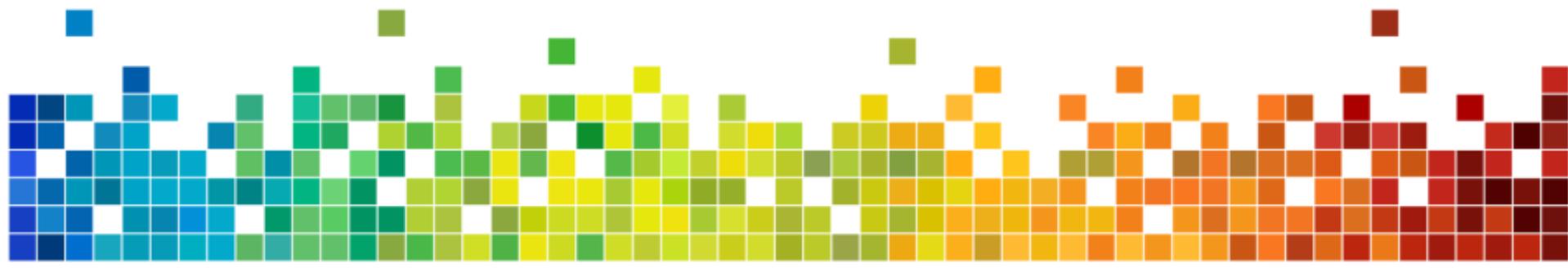
**Stress** is the body's reaction to a *perceived, anticipated or imagined danger or threatening situation*. The stressful situation can be happy or unhappy.



# How do we cope?

***Buffers*** - adaptive responses to stress

- Talking with friends
- Participating in sports, hobbies
- Exercise
- Restful, calming activities
- Sleep
- Medical intervention



# Challenges

- Communication skills may be compromised
- Difficulty understanding and expressing emotions
- Limited number of friends or support system
- Lack of self awareness
- Group sports often difficult



# Relaxation

- Why teach relaxation?
- Which strategy do we use?
- How do we teach effectively?
- How do we target generalization?



# Why teach relaxation?

- Functional skill with lifelong impact
- Can be used across environments
- Non-stigmatizing
- Perceived as neutral or pleasant in general
- Can be guided by parents or teachers
- Demonstrated effectiveness



# Which strategy do we use?

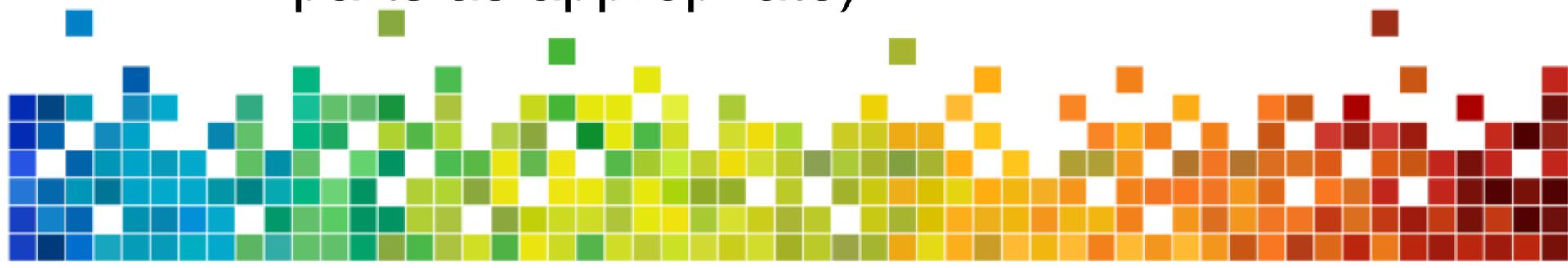
- Progressive Relaxation (PR)
- Behavioral Relaxation Training (BRT)
- Controlled Breathing
- Guided Imagery

Goal:  
The Relaxation  
Response  
(deep physical  
calm and  
mentally alert)



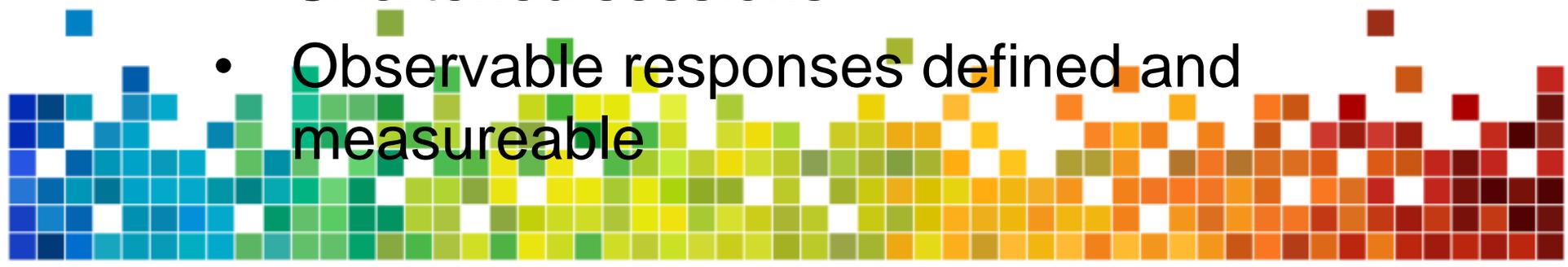
# Progressive Relaxation (PR)

- Focuses on teaching to *recognize and label the difference between muscle tension and muscle relaxation*
- Apply tension to each body part in top-down or bottom-up sequence, then release and pay attention to the feeling
- Longer exercise, more conspicuous
- Flexible (use with as many or few body parts as appropriate)



# Behavioral Relaxation Training

- PR techniques modified for developmentally disabled learners with limited verbal skills
- Rationale: engaging in the motor responses alone produces the relaxation response
- No verbal reporting from the learner needed
- Shortened sessions (Poppen, 1998; Paclawskyj, 2006)
- Observable responses defined and measurable



# Behavioral Relaxation Training

- Modelled/trained 10 behaviours in specific order from large to small muscle groups (body, head, shoulders, feet, hands, throat, mouth, eyes, breathing, quiet)
- Able to acquire relaxation response more rapidly than other forms of relaxation training
- Average session, 7 minutes; average mastery, two hours

(Poppen, 1998; Paclawskyj, 2006)

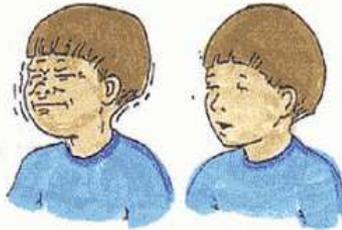


## RELAXATION ROUTINE

1. SIT ON A CHAIR...



2. "SCRUNCH" UP YOUR FACE...



THEN...  
RELAX  
IT...

3. TENSE YOUR ARMS...



THEN...  
RELAX  
THEM

4. TENSE UP YOUR SHOULDERS AND CHEST...



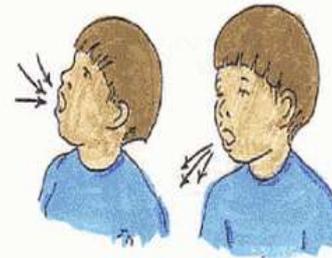
THEN...  
RELAX  
THEM

5. TENSE UP YOUR LEGS...



...THEN RELAX!

6. BREATHE IN RELAXATION...



...BREATHE OUT  
TENSION

# Controlled Breathing

- Commonly taught in school settings
- Easy; focuses on breathing alone without any other activity
- Can be done unobtrusively, anytime, anywhere
- Slow, calm, “secret” breathing
- Practices are brief but frequent

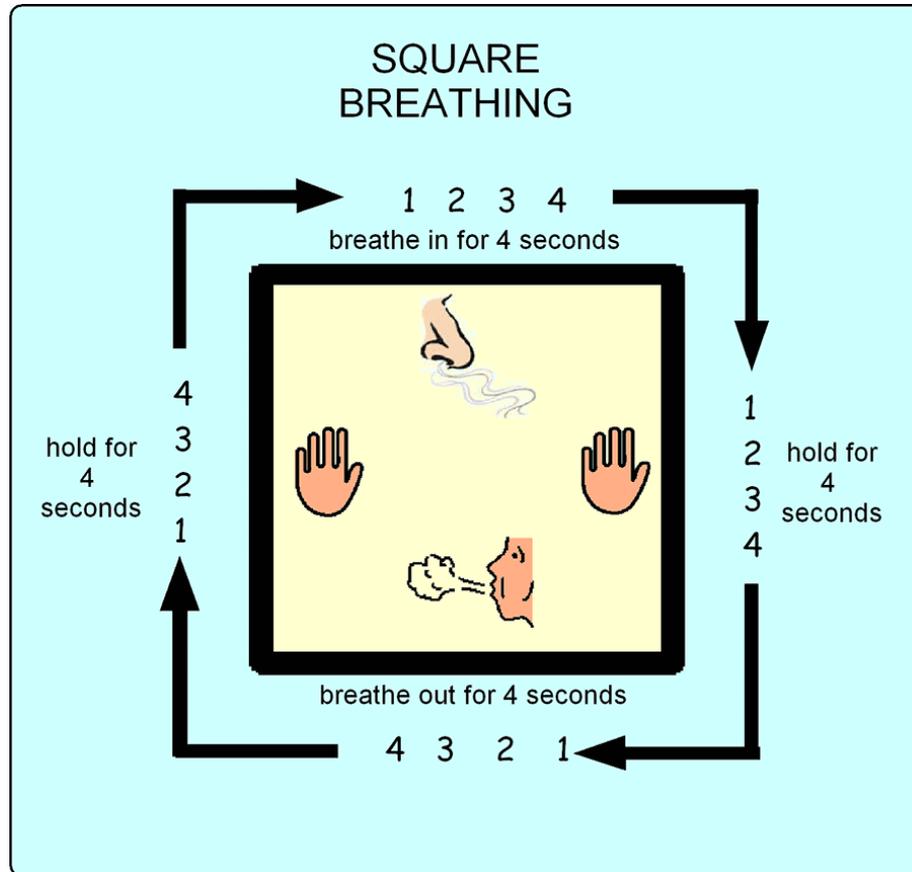


# Controlled Breathing

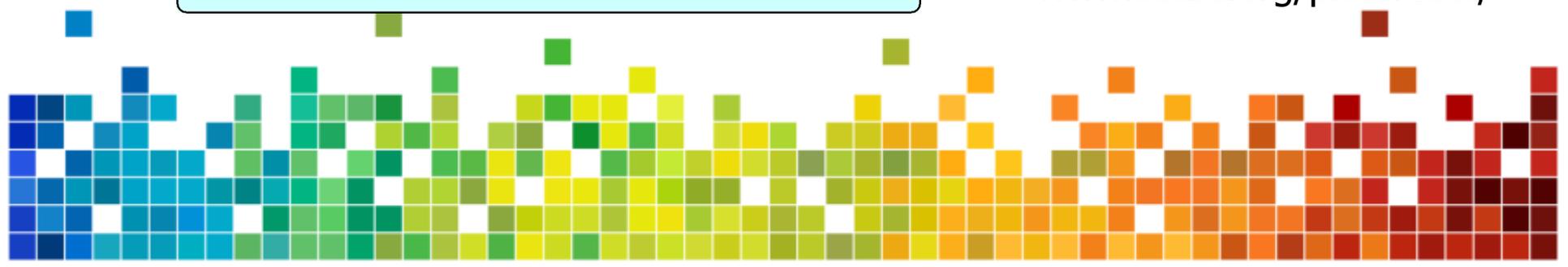
1. Sit comfortably
2. Breathe slowly and evenly
3. Breathe in through the nose, (slow count three)
4. Breathe out through the mouth, (slow count three)
5. Continue until calm



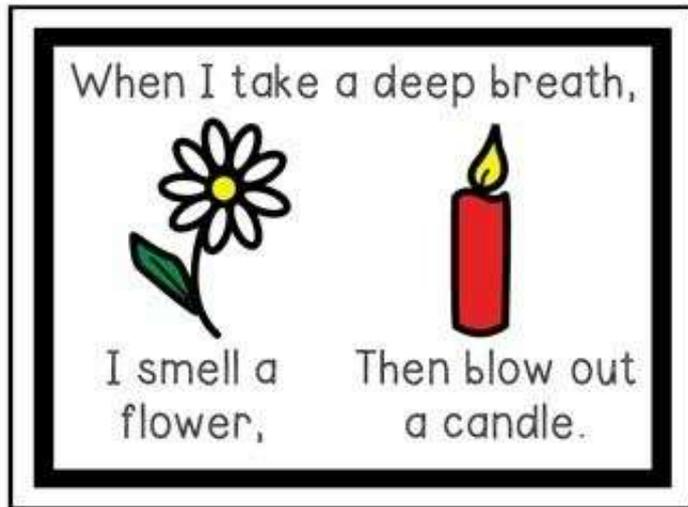
# Controlled Breathing



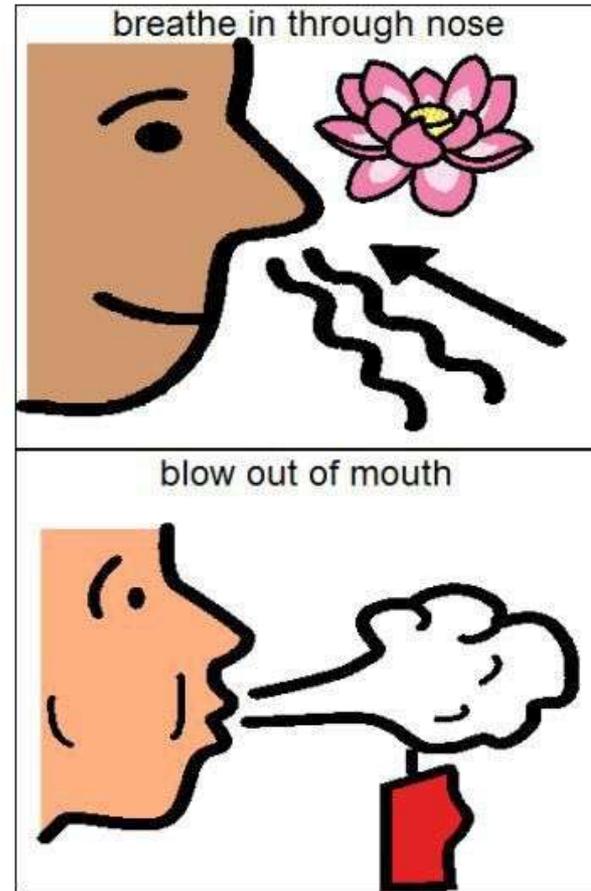
PictureSET  
[www.setbc.org/pictureset/](http://www.setbc.org/pictureset/)



# Controlled Breathing

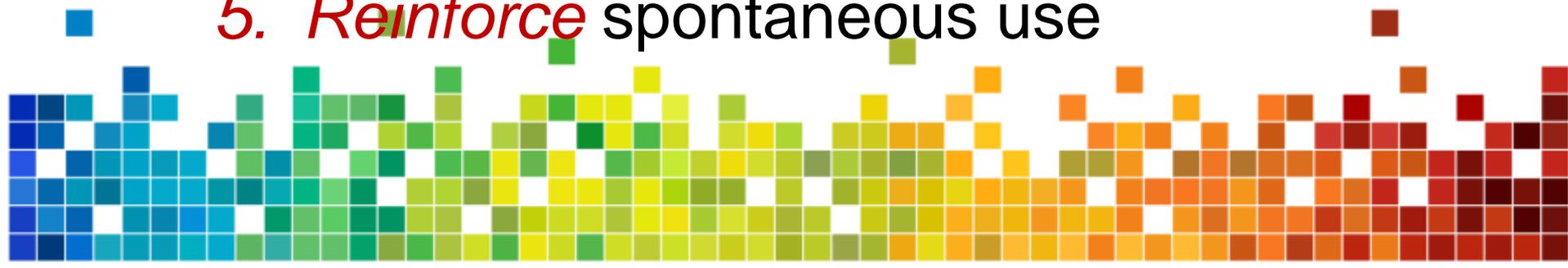


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# How to teach relaxation effectively

1. *Identify situations* or events that are associated with the problem behavior
2. *Teach and practice* until fluent in calm situations
3. *Prime and prompt* in identified target situations. Reinforce!
4. *Prime and prompt* in identified target situations across settings. Reinforce!
5. *Reinforce* spontaneous use



# How to teach relaxation effectively

- Use role play and practice together with the learner a minimum of three times a day *when NOT anxious*
- Use visual, text or concrete supports if helpful for understanding
- Provide checklists or reminders to ensure practice occurs
- Involve parents!

(Chalfant, 2011)



# Tips from the Field

*My student is in high school and thinks this is too babyish.*

- Pair with a peer model; Use video modelling
- Emphasize as a powerful and private strategy - “top secret breathing”
- Use imagery; build in special interest
- Identify concrete reinforcers or positive outcomes



# Tips from the Field

*How can we operationalize relaxing and make it more accessible to learners with language and/or cognitive challenges?*

- Combine BRT with visual supports or concrete reminders
- Teach fewer or simpler steps by combining them (Hug yourself tight and release)
- Teach through imitation or with physical prompts
- Add and/or simplify visual supports
- Use simple and consistent language when teaching (1-2 words)



# Tips from the Field

*The teacher/parent starts to teach this to the learner but gives up. “It isn’t working”.*

- Practice 3 times a day for 6-8 weeks for a more clear indication of whether the skill can be learned.
- Check to see if the effective teaching steps have been followed.
- Provide a checklist to track practice sessions and more frequent feedback to the learner and the teacher
- Consider if the steps and/or the supports need to be changed



# Tips from the Field

*The teacher doesn't recognize early enough when they should prompt the learner to use the technique.*

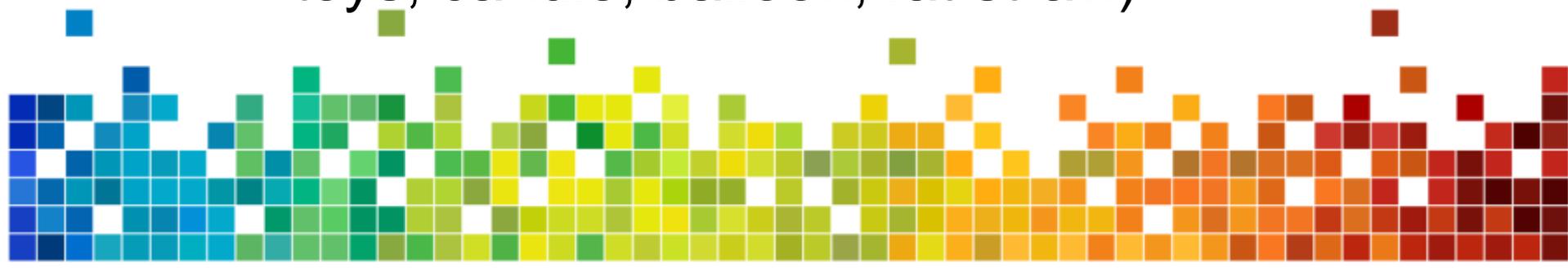
- Directly observe or involve the learner to identify more clearly the antecedents and/or observable precursor behaviours.
- Provide many opportunities to practice evocative situations in a safe environment



# Tips from the Field

*My student has difficulties with the breathing...sounds very loud and inappropriate.*

- Use gestural or number/symbol prompts to help slow and quiet the breathing.
- Use more physical prompts to help the learner identify what body parts are involved.
- Use physical props to illustrate the way the breathing should look/sound (e.g., windmill toys, candle, balloon, fat straw)



# Summary

- *Relaxation skills can be a useful strategy*
- *Can be taught one on one or in a group*
- *Usually used to supplement other intervention components*
- *Time involved can lead to significant positive benefits for the learner*



# Final thoughts.....

*Breathe in.  
Breathe out.  
Let it be.*



# Children's Books

**Lori Lite Books**, Stress Free Kids, Publisher

- Angry Octopus. An Anger Management Story for Children Introducing Active Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Deep Breathing to help Control Anger
- The Goodnight Caterpillar: A Children's Relaxation Story to Improve Sleep, Manage Stress, Anxiety, Anger
- A Boy and a Bear: The Children's Relaxation Book
- Sea Otter Cove: A Stress Management Story for Children Introducing Diaphragmatic Breathing to Reduce Anxiety, Control Anger, and Promote Peaceful Sleep



# Children's Books

Buron, K. D. (2003). *When my autism gets too big. A relaxation book for children with autism spectrum disorders.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

Crist, J. (2004). *What to do when you're scared and worried. A guide for kids.* Free Spirit Publishing. Minneapolis, MN



# Resources

## *E-learning, Geneva Centre for Autism*

<http://visuals.autism.net>

Video illustrating steps for relaxation and visual supports

## *PictureSET*

[www.setbc.org/pictureset](http://www.setbc.org/pictureset)

Relaxation picture sequence in French and English



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