More about Meichenbaum and a description of the ‘Turtle Technique’

Meichenbaum and Goodman (1971) published an influential paper, which described a five-step instructional program to help impulsive children to use self control techniques to increase their attention to a task and reduce errors. The five steps identified by Meichenbaum and Goodman included:

*Cognitive modelling* – the instructor performs the task, verbalising each action as it is performed;

*Overt external guidance* – the student carries out the same task under the direction of the instructor who whispers each step;

*Overt self-guidance* – the student performs the task, verbalising the instructions for each step;

*Faded overt guidance* – the student performs the task again, whispering the instructions;

*Covert self-instruction* – the student performs the task, silently talking through each step (private speech).

These five steps have been widely used as a basis for self-instructional programs to teach academic skills and appropriate behaviour. An example of such an application can be seen in a self-instruction procedure designed to help children control aggressive behaviour (the Turtle Technique).

The Turtle Technique

The aim of the Turtle Technique was to help primary-aged children who had emotional difficulties to curb their impulses towards aggressive behaviour. Working in small groups in brief daily practice sessions, the children were first told a story about the turtle:

Little Turtle was a handsome young turtle who was very upset about going to school. He always got into trouble because he got into fights. Other kids would tease, bump or hit him; he would get very angry and start big fights. The teacher would have to punish him. Then one day he met the big old tortoise, who told him that his shell was the secret answer to all his problems. The tortoise told Little Turtle to
withdraw into his shell when he felt angry and rest until he was no longer angry. So he tried it the next day and it worked. The teacher now smiled at him and he no longer got into fights.

After telling the children the story, the teacher demonstrated the response and then encouraged the class to practice the turtle response by training them with the cue word “turtle”. She explained that there were four situations when they should use the turtle response:

- when you felt that aggression with another child was about to happen
- when you were very frustrated and about to throw a tantrum
- when the teacher called out “turtle”
- when a classmate called out “turtle”.

The teacher then cued the children by calling out “turtle” whenever she saw fight about to break out. She also reinforced correct responses with lollies and praise. The children were also encouraged to cue and reinforce each other at appropriate times. Later, the children were taught muscle relaxation to use when they retreated into their “shells” to help defuse strong negative emotions. During group sessions, they were taught to alternatively tension and release various groups of muscles in their bodies and later learned to practice relaxation while “doing turtle”. In this way, the turtle response and relaxation were chained together.


### Activities

Cognitive behavioural techniques such as self-talk and relaxation strategies are now widespread.

1. Can you think of any cognitive “self-talk” strategies that you may have been taught?
2. Can you think of any other situations in the classroom or playground where a self-talk or relaxation strategy might be useful?

### References