

## Mental Skills Training with Children in a Summer Camp Context

Nancy **Theberge**, Canada

Nancy Theberge recently completed her Masters degree in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. Her major focus was mental skills training with children and sport psychology consulting. She is now working with children and writing material for others committed to improving the lives of children.

Email: [consult\\_nancy@hotmail.com](mailto:consult_nancy@hotmail.com)

### Abstract

This article is a summary of my internship experiences as a mental training consultant at a summer camp for children. In this article I discuss how the practical application of mental training knowledge acquired through my applied graduate studies at the University of Ottawa, helped me to enrich the summer for the individuals who attended this camp, including myself. I briefly describe the context of the intervention, summarize what I did with the children, and discuss what worked best. I conclude the article by highlighting the lessons I have learned and share implications for others working with children.

I chose a children's camp for my internship experience because I have always enjoyed working with children and youth. This particular camp was designed for children between the ages of 5 and 12 and ran for eight weeks. The sessions averaged 100 children per week, and they were divided into eight groups according to their age. The number of weeks spent at the camp varied per child. The campers participated in many different sports and activities that were facilitated by a team of counselors. This was an excellent opportunity to introduce children to the concepts of mental skills training and sport psychology. The children at this camp participated in a variety of activities and were in a position to benefit from an introduction to our mental skills training program. The overall goal was to present the children with practical mental skills that could enhance their enjoyment, their performance and their lives.

Prior to beginning my intervention, I spent many hours developing the intervention material and meeting with the camp coordinator. Having previously worked as a counselor at this camp, I had prior insight into the camp routine, which helped with my preparation. Meeting with the camp coordinator before the camp started helped to establish a positive rapport. More importantly I felt confident in my abilities as a student-consultant due to extensive preparation and the knowledge I acquired throughout my applied graduate course work. I felt excited and confident in my abilities as a consultant and was looking forward to growing from each situation and to facilitating the growth of others. My main goals as a consultant with these children was to facilitate mental training activities and cooperative games, provide opportunities for group and individual interaction, and learn ways to enhance the application of mental

skills training for children and youth. More specifically, my intentions were to help children have a positive experience at camp and facilitate some development of mental training skills including confidence, relaxation, and positive imagery. Throughout the course of my intervention I also provided services to the counselors and management, however this is not the focus of this article.

During a typical day at camp I interacted with children both one-on-one and in group settings. A summary of my group and one-on-one interactions are outlined below.

### **Group Interactions**

For the most part, I interacted with children in a group setting. Many times I participated with groups of children during their daily activities. When I did this I encouraged individuals, promoted cooperation and helped children become aware of the enjoyment they were experiencing. When I played with the groups, the children really enjoyed this, and I also experienced tremendous amounts of joy. We can receive wonderful feelings playing with children and in turn project positive energy.

Along with participating with and observing groups, I also facilitated group activities. The most valuable mental training exercise that I did at camp, and the one that I believe worked best was finding joy and highlights. I have personally experienced the joys and benefits of finding and recording highlights. This is why I felt that highlight hunting was an essential activity that I wished to incorporate into the intervention process on a daily basis. I encouraged the counselors in their pre-season training session to have the children write or draw their highlight(s) for each day. Each child's daily highlight was to be placed in the groups' 'treasure box' and at the end of the week they were to be attached with yarn to create a weekly jour-

nal. During the post-camp staff meeting on the Thursday of the first week, one counselor told me that the daily schedules were tight and this activity was very good by difficult to do on an every day basis. As a group, we decided that this activity was a good idea to continue, but perhaps not every day. The staff suggested making a group highlight poster, instead of doing the journal and I applauded the staff for taking this initiative.

This was valuable input from the counselors, which lead to the creation of the Highlight Hall of Fame. Each week the campers wrote or drew their highlights on a piece of colored paper. The colors of the paper corresponded to the group color they were in that week (e.g. pink group, blue group, and so on). Also, each week there was a different theme at camp. I prepared an outline that corresponded to the theme of the week and photocopied this 'highlight border' in the group colors. For example, during the circus week the highlight paper was a balloon and during Jungle Fever week the picture was a monkey's head. All campers present each week participated in this activity. Once the highlights were completed, the outline was cut out and the children placed their most enjoyable weekly moments on the 'Highlight Hall of Fame'. This activity was effective because the counselors enjoyed it themselves and had fun facilitating it each week. Establishing the 'Highlight Hall of Fame' worked really well because the children enjoyed putting their highlights on the wall, looking at each other's highlights, and being reminded of the positive moments experienced. When we took down the wall (which was longer than a tennis court by the end of camp) what remained looked grim and bare. I learned that by remaining flexible and open in my approach as a consultant, finding joy and highlights at camp was better than I ever imagined it could be.

Another fun activity that the counselors facilitated on “Christmas in July day” was to give a “gift” of a highlight. One group painted a box that looked like a present on a large piece of paper and the children and counselors wrote in what they did to make someone else feel good during that day. Making others feel good, in my opinion, is the true essence of the holidays.

I also took time to tell group stories such as the adventures of Zuper from *To Be the Best I Can Be* (Durand-Bush & Theberge, 2002) and Umbalakiki from *Feeling Great* (Orlick, 1998). The first is my own story I am developing that encompasses many concepts of the mental training field and the latter is a truly amazing story written by Terry Orlick. I have told many different children between the ages of 5 and 12 Umbalakiki and often embellished on the details. The wonderful thing about Umbalakiki is that it gives the children a tool to ‘tree’ any negative feelings they many have experienced during an activity. I really enjoy doing this activity with children after competitive activities because it brings the teams together into one circle. It reinforces to the children that we are all playing together for enjoyment. Story-telling is an excellent tool to convey mental skills lessons. If time permitted, I also reviewed stories I told to the group by drawing a picture on a large piece of brown paper in a black marker. As a group the children enjoy adding color to the picture drawn. You do not have to be a good artist to draw for the children, as they love just being involved. On the poster I also recorded the groups’ lessons learned and highlights from the stories told. The cooperative posters were colorful additions to the ‘Highlight Hall of Fame’.

Other group activities included cooperative games and mental skills training workshops. Orlick’s (1978; 1982) cooperative games

books are amazing resources for caregivers and consultants to facilitate games that everyone can enjoy because everyone is a winner. I facilitated some of the games, and will discuss one experience which I found truly demonstrated the value of cooperation in active play. I have worked many years with children and have always enjoyed playing dodge ball. Sometimes children will cry when they get eliminated, often complaining that the ball hurt, and some others may sit out of the game entirely. I experimented with variations of this game such as eliminating teams so it is an all-for-one structure, but even in this format if a child is hit with the ball they must sit down. When I read Orlick’s version called non-elimination dodge ball, I was eager to try this activity with the children. The group is divided into two teams. If one individual is hit with the ball, they have to switch to the other team. Therefore all children will play continuously, regardless the amount of times they are struck with the ball. In the many times I played this version, not one child cried, not one child sat out. I realized that in some cases it was not the ball that hurt them, it was being eliminated and the emotional pain of getting eliminated. Also, the games are more active and lasted longer. I was only asked once ‘how do you win’ and pleasantly replied ‘the team that gets everyone on one side wins’. The child smiled and returned to the game. It was absolutely incredible to see how the children remained active and thoroughly enjoyed these cooperative games.

On weeks one, three, five, and eight, I provided workshops on positive perspectives, changing channels, relaxation, and imagination respectively. I adjusted the approach to accommodate the age group targeted but the content of the workshop was similar. I presented each of these workshops to between six to eight different groups. It

worked best with a maximum of fifteen children per group. More than that number reduced the likelihood of involving all the children in the discussions. An overview of what worked best during the weekly workshops is presented below.

### **Positive Perspectives**

The five and six year olds really enjoyed the story of Umbalakiki (Orlick, 1998), and sharing things at which they were good. Children aged seven through ten had fun with the activity I entitled ‘positive thought scuba tank’. In this activity the campers each had a turn to share something they could say to themselves that would make them feel good. Examples of positive self-talk saying include; ‘I have fun with my friends’, ‘I always say I am sorry’ (when I hurt someone’s feelings) , and ‘I am good at soccer’. As each individual stated their positive self-talk I wrote them on a big scuba tank that I drew. All the tanks were placed on the Highlight Hall of Fame. Time permitted one group to use these positive sayings in a relaxation/imagery script that guided them on a scuba adventure in a warm magical pond with their imaginary scuba tanks filled with positive thoughts. I was ecstatic to observe how well this activity was received by the children and learned that coincidentally a scuba tank in French is ‘Bon Bonne’.

I facilitated this activity on different occasions with groups throughout the course of the camp. Role-plays worked best with the eleven and twelve year old campers. I divided them into mini-groups and gave them a general scenario such as: You are a volleyball team that is playing a big game against a tough team. The groups were instructed to present two short plays demonstrating a negative and positive way to react to the present situation. Only one child (who was very shy) did not want to participate in this activity, but enjoyed being the judge of

the groups. The counselors and children shared a lot of laughs during this workshop.

### **Changing Channels**

Changing Channels is an activity from the Feeling Great (Orlick, 1998) and Mindmasters (Orlick, 2002) programs. I facilitated this activity with all the groups and learned that the different age groups can benefit from being provided with an effective tool like this to control their thoughts and emotions. I was given the idea from a fellow graduate student at University of Ottawa, Kelly Doell, to wrap ‘Smarties’ boxes in a white piece of paper so the children can make their own channel changers. It took time to prepare 120 boxes, but it was well worth the effort. It worked well with all the age groups to listen to Orlick’s Mindmasters CD and discuss different feelings prior to having them create their personal remote controls.

### **Relaxation**

I facilitated the relaxation workshops in the spinning room, because it was quiet, the lights could dim, and there was place to lay mats. The children arrived, got comfortable on their mats, and we discussed the benefits of relaxation. The script I used was special place relaxation (Orlick, 1998) and afterwards the children all drew or wrote about their special place. The children also rated how they felt before and after the relaxation session on a relaxation cat scale (Orlick, 2002). I played quiet, calming music as I read the script in a slow and soft tone. I relaxed myself before the workshop began because it was extremely important that I, as a consultant, feel relaxed before facilitating a relaxation workshop. Again the Mindmaster’s CD (Orlick, 2002) was a very valuable resource. I have an English and French copy which allowed for a counselor to take the few French-speaking children

into a separate room to enjoy the benefits of relaxing.

Following the relaxation component of the workshop, I asked the children how they felt and when it would be good to feel like they do now. Many replied ‘before a test’ or ‘when I am in trouble’. The older children in particular enjoyed this activity so much that they asked for a relaxation session after lunch on several different occasions. The counselors also enjoyed this relaxation time and reported that the groups were very attentive and calm following the session.

### **Imagery**

The first three workshops were scheduled into the weekly routines by the camp coordinator. The theme during the last week of camp was ‘imagination’ so I gave the counselors the option to schedule an imagery workshop into their week. I was delighted that all groups wanted a workshop. Two imagery workshops that I believe worked best, the 5 and 6 year-old groups and the 11 and 12-year-old groups, are discussed below.

With the little ones, I started the discussion on imagination according to the suggestions provided in *Feeling Great* (Orlick, 1998). I guided them through ‘soaring’ (Orlick, 1998), butterfly (Orlick, 1998), and then allowed them to choose what picture they wished to draw from their imagination. Some children enjoyed drawing, but others were getting fidgety so we played space robots (Orlick, 1998). Space robots worked really well with all age groups. This is an effective activity to demonstrate to children that they can control their energy levels. All groups played space robots twice. The second time the children suggested other imaginary buttons. For example, if an animator touched their ear, the children said a short sentence, or if you touched their

shoulders they pretended to fly with their jet pack. The counselors also were very involved in this activity and everyone participated. Space robots was particularly effective with the oldest children following the ‘Star Track’ imagery script (Orlick, 1998). The room where the workshop was conducted was cold, so I added into the script that a star sprinkling stardust was making them feel warm all through their body. I repeated ‘you feel warm and comfortable’ three times slowly. When the session ended, one child sat up and exclaimed ‘when you said I was getting warmer, I was actually getting warmer. It was so cool!’ The others agreed. Following the relaxation script, the older children loved space robots because it brought their energy levels up.

I believe that the workshops with the children were valuable and effective. In a long, active day the children enjoyed having a quiet time for discussion or reflection, and an opportunity to relax. The workshops worked well because I introduced enjoyable activities and I encouraged discussion by asking the group questions. These workshops also provided alternative education to what these and other campers are generally exposed to at camps. A soft respectful tone and clear voice worked well for all workshops and interactions, especially the relaxation workshops.

The workshops were very rewarding experiences and many staff members commented on my positive relations with the children. One individual wrote on my evaluation; “Her workshops brought calm and reflective thought to the group, even the harder kids were giving her their full attention.” There are many factors that influence the attention of the children, however I will introduce two techniques that helped me to acquire and maintain a group of children’s attention:

establishing group norms and attention grabbers.

For group interactions it is very important to establish the group norms prior to beginning. However, I do not like ‘telling’ the group the ‘rules’. Instead I ask the group what they think will make this time fun for everyone and how can we make sure that we can do all the fun things that are planned. Often the children will suggest more rules than you may have. There are times when your time is limited or you are interacting for a second time with a group. In these situations, what has worked well for me is to ask the group for ‘favors’. For example, during the relaxation workshops the favor I asked of the group was to listen and be quiet to help everyone relax.

Getting the attention of groups of children may be a challenge for many individuals. I believe I am effective in this area, and this has been reinforced through my observations and feedback from counselors and management. Speaking with a soft tone suggests that the children have to be quiet to listen, and often the individuals will emulate your communication style. If you are entering a group setting or there is a group discussion and you wish to gain or re-gain the attention of the group respectively, I have found that sitting quietly and calmly is more effective than telling the children to be quiet. Often one or more group members will ask the others to be silent. There are however times where sitting in silence may not work. I like to establish a ‘magic word’ for these situations. A ‘magic word’ is a two-part word or saying that a leader says and the group answers. One counselor came up with a great magic phrase: she said ‘Da da da da’ and the group would reply ‘da da’ (in tune).

### **Individual Interactions:**

In addition to my group work, I looked for opportunities to speak with the campers individually in pre and post camp care, during lunch, and throughout the course of the day. There were occasions when I spoke with children outside of the group environment. Some examples of opportunities for one-on-one interactions included when children were ill, injured or wanted to go home.

On every Friday there was a camp outing. One six year old was visibly upset the morning of the first outing. I asked him what was upsetting him. He told me that he didn’t want to take the bus but he did want to go on the camp outing. I thought it would be a good idea to provide him with an alternative focus so he could look forward to something he would experience after the bus ride. I knew what to expect at this outing, and that he would enjoy it, so I gave him a ‘mission’. This boy was thrilled to get his own special mission to climb a mini-rock wall at the outing and relayed this to his counselor with enthusiasm. As I was not attending the outing, it was important to ensure that a supervisor supported this mission. The counselor later told me that the boy was very focused on remembering his mission during the bus ride and that was the first thing he did when he arrived. ‘Missions’ are a fun way to help children set goals.

On a couple of occasions I was with a group when a child got injured. All counselors and myself are certified in first aid, and I believe that in this situation remaining calm and encouraging the child to focus on taking deep, relaxing breaths work well. When a child is crying it helps to demonstrate (breathe deeply with the child) and encourage deep breathing and to speak to him or her in a soothing tone. Relaxed breathing provides an alternate focus and by suggest-

ing the pain will turn into good feelings by doing this, it will be actualized.

Being concerned, but not overly excited, when children are emotionally or physically hurt seems to work best. A calm composure and encouraging relaxed breathing is very effective. It also helps to remember that smiles are contagious. By smiling you are sending positive energy to the child. Many counselors stated that they learned to remain calm and sensitive to the needs of the children by observing my interactions in 'crisis' situations. I learned that as a consultant, your actions in these situations can have an impact on the child and the caregiver. What worked best was to be empathetic, listen to the needs of the child, encourage them to shift focus and provide an alternative positive focus.

### **Personal Reflections on the Internship Experience.**

This internship experience has been intrinsically rewarding and valuable, and I have extracted many important lessons. I attribute enjoying and benefiting from the process of the intervention due in a great part to the preparation provided by the graduate program in Sport Psychology at the University of Ottawa. This program empowered me with the right tools and fueled my belief in my abilities, which enabled me to extract lessons from my strengths and challenges. The lessons I deemed relevant to my work with children are highlighted below.

1. Take care of your personal needs and your professional work will be enhanced. As consultants we have a wonderful opportunity to work with a number of different people to help them enhance their performance and their lives. This is only possible if we take care of our own needs and when working with others put their physi-

cal, mental, and emotional well-being first. Balance work and play, and even though we may work long days, our energy levels will be maintained if the work is truly enjoyed.

2. The clearest message I learned about consulting with children is what the Feeling Great (Orlick, 1998) and MindMasters (Orlick, 2002) programs effectively convey about teaching positive living skills to children and youth. These programs provide an enjoyable repose for children to focus on developing their mental skills, in particular positive imagery, finding joy, and relaxation. Orlick (1978; 1982) also has developed two incredible cooperative games books that encourage children and youth to work with each other and to have fun while being active. I recommend that consultants and caregivers, who are working with children and youth use these materials as a primary resource to enhance the quality of the active and inactive parts of children's lives. On the other hand, as consultants and caregivers we should also draw upon our own creativity to animate and develop special activities for children.
3. Utilize your resources, not just the literature, but the people around you as well. There are many people in our field and outside our field who can help in our personal and professional development. Formulate your questions and find your answers. To do this you must also be a resource. Provide others with an attentive ear or advice. To share knowledge and lessons one must allow others to share as well.

4. Communication is a vital skill in becoming an effective consultant. I have committed a large amount of effort to improve my ability to listen attentively, formulate open-ended questions, express my thoughts and emotions clearly, and send positive non-verbal messages. This has helped me as a consultant and as a person. Avoid interruptions, and listen attentively. Even thinking can disrupt the message from the client. Allow the message to sink in, and once the pause in the conversation is sufficient to understand the full message, formulate an open-ended question or response. I believe you learn more by listening, and remaining aware that one can also learn from asking questions and sharing experiences. Ask questions, but more importantly always give the client an opportunity to speak freely, safe from judgments and interruptions.
5. Believe in yourself, others will too. Believe in others, this will in turn enhance their perceptions of themselves. Confidence can help overcome any challenges, and for me has enhanced my abilities to effectively cope with stress. Stressors are present daily, even the eternal optimist must agree with that. It is with a positive perspective, analytical skills, the ability to relax, and confidence in one's self that one learns to face any of life's challenges. Choose the battles within your control.
6. In this context I learned that it is valuable to empower the staff to implement components of mental training into their daily functions and activities. Mental training consultants are not the only individuals who can help individuals enhance their perceptions of enjoyment, self-confidence, and develop positive-living skills. If time is spent on educating and training caregivers to facilitate mental training activities, one's effectiveness as a consultant will be enhanced ten-fold. I believe I enhanced my effectiveness as a consultant at this summer camp by offering a Mindmaster's (Orlick, 2002) workshop to the staff.
7. I learned that being calm, demonstrating empathy, and being positive works best in 'normal' and 'crisis' interactions.
8. Learn from every situation then turn lessons into functional strategies.
9. Smiles are contagious!
10. I have read that an effective consultant must maintain a low profile, which I still agree with. However, in the present context there were times it was appropriate to take on a leadership role, be dynamic, and energetic.
11. Treat all persons with respect. This is the best way to earn the respect of others. Give genuine compliments to others when you observe something positive, but more importantly find a compliment for everyone.

### Conclusion

I learned a tremendous amount about myself as a consultant but also as a person through this applied experience. I receive a lot of enjoyment in my life from my work with children. Children can also teach us a lot of life's valuable lessons. Interacting effectively with children clearly enhanced my relationship with both the management and

the staff because they observed a positive reaction from the children and this increased their belief in the benefits of the strategies I implemented. Knowing the benefits of mental training skills came through the literature, lessons extracted from my under-

graduate and graduate course work, but mainly by applying the tools and techniques in my work and with myself. This has prompted efforts to bring awareness to others about the beauty and benefits of mental skills training.

## References

Durand-Bush, N., & Theberge, N. (2002). To be the best I can be (2<sup>nd</sup> draft). University of Ottawa, unpublished.

Orlick, T. (2002). MindMasters: Tools for helping children master positive-living skills. The Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Orlick, T. (1978). The cooperative sports & games Book: Challenge without competition. Pantheon Books, NY:USA.

Orlick, T. (1982). The second cooperative sports & games Book: Over two hundred brand-new noncompetitive games for kids and adults both. Pantheon Books, NY:USA.

Orlick, T. (1998). Feeling Great! Teaching children to excel at living (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Creative Bound Inc, Canada.