

Meditation For Moppets

Stressed-out kids are finding relief in relaxation techniques such as TM. **BY SUSAN GARLAND**



LEARNING AID?

Meditating twice a day at the Chelsea School in Maryland

EVERY MORNING AND evening, 12-year-old Haig Monokian sits in his room, closes his eyes, and focuses on his mantra. The straight-A student from Morganville, N.J., believes transcendental meditation helps him to calmly handle days packed with school, music lessons, basketball, karate, chess club, and the pressures of preteen life. "If I'm stressed out about something, [TM] makes me feel better," says Haig, whose parents taught him to meditate. "I don't lose my cool that easily."

In an era when youngsters face all sorts of stress, Haig's use of this age-old practice may be ahead of the curve. Several decades of academic studies show beneficial effects of TM in adults, including lower levels of the stress hormone

cortisol. TM has its roots in Hinduism but was brought to the West and secularized about 40 years ago. Now, researchers are finding that even in children, this technique of deep relaxation can reduce anxiety and improve everything from blood pressure to creativity and self-esteem.

As alternative medicine moves into the mainstream, other relaxation therapies have proved effective as well. While TM focuses on a sound or thought, "mindfulness meditation" relies on awareness of breathing or other sensations. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing muscle groups. Tai chi and yoga use movement.

TM in particular is making its way into some classrooms. In Silver Spring, Md., 11 students at the private Chelsea School for fifth-to-twelfth graders with learning and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders

recently began meditating twice a day. The effort is part of a study to determine whether meditation can make it easier for these children to learn. Researcher William Stixrud, a clinical neuropsychologist in Silver Spring, says meditation has been shown to improve "executive functions"—planning, organizing, regulating emotion, and keeping to a task. "If meditation quiets the mind and improves brain function, wouldn't it be particularly helpful to those with learning disabilities and ADHD?" he says. Stixrud tested the children's executive functions before they learned to meditate and will test again in June to see if there is any improvement.

Children 10 or older who practice TM typically sit with their eyes closed for 10 minutes twice daily. To get into the meditative state, they silently recite a mantra, or incantation, that relaxes the mind and helps produce a state of both alertness and tranquility. Younger children with shorter attention spans are often taught a simpler form of meditation in which they walk around quietly for five minutes.

HAPPIER SELF-IMAGE

ON MAR. 10, RITA BENN, director of the integrative medical education program at the University of Michigan's Complementary & Alternative Medicine Research Center, released a study documenting positive effects of TM among students at the Natak Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit. Twice a day since 1997, fifth through eighth graders have been filing into the gymnasium, sitting back on a reclining floor seat, and closing their eyes. Benn found the students who meditated rated themselves as more alert, happier, and less frustrated than those who did not meditate. Benn's next study will examine meditation's impact on

academic achievement. Another study to be released Mar. 26 by the Medical College of Georgia found teenagers who meditated could lower their blood pressure.

Parents who would like their offspring to learn relaxation techniques can pay upwards of \$100 for an hour with a trained therapist or \$2500 for many sessions at a TM center. Make sure whoever you choose has experience with children. And if you're feeling stressed out yourself, maybe you can get a special family deal on mantras. ■

For kids, just 20 minutes a day can have an effect