

# Evaluation of guided imagery as treatment for recurrent abdominal pain in children

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Researchers from Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, MO found that guided imagery combined with progressive relaxation was more therapeutic for children with recurrent abdominal pain than simple breathing exercises. Researchers from Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, evaluated the therapeutic effects of guided imagery on children with recurrent abdominal pain.

Twenty-two children with recurrent abdominal pain, aged 5-18 years, were randomized to either a group for learning breathing exercises alone or a group that taught guided imagery with progressive muscle relaxation. Both groups had four weekly sessions with a therapist.

Using a daily pain diary, the children reported the numbers of days with pain, the pain intensity, and the amount of missed activities due to abdominal pain. Monthly phone calls were also conducted to assess the same information. Depression, anxiety, and somatization were measured in both children and parents at baseline.

Children who learned guided imagery with progressive muscle relaxation had significantly greater decreases in the number of days with pain than those who learned breathing exercises alone after one (67% vs. 21%,  $P=0.05$ ), and two (82% vs. 45%,  $P<0.01$ ) months and significantly greater decrease in days with missed activities at one (85% vs. 15%,  $P=0.02$ ) and two (95% vs. 77%,  $P=0.05$ ) months. During the two months of follow-up, more children who had learned guided imagery met the threshold of being healed (defined as 4 days of pain or less each month and no missed activities ( $RR=7.3, 95\%CI[1.1, 48.6]$ ) than children who learned only the breathing exercises.

The authors conclude that guided imagery with progressive relaxation has therapeutic efficacy for recurrent abdominal pain in children; and that, although this technique is unfamiliar to many pediatricians, it is a simple, noninvasive therapy with potential benefit.

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