

'Hearts on their sleeves': the use of systemic biofeedback in school settings

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KEYWORDS

multi-family therapy school • systemic biofeedback

ABSTRACT

This article describes how a biofeedback device is used to 'externalize' internal physiological states. Heart rate monitors, emitting audible signals when a specific threshold is reached, are fitted to children and members of the family. This can help all those present to make connections between problematic behaviours and internal states of emotional/physical arousal. Devices may be worn for up to twenty-four hours and computer graph printouts of fluctuating heart rates can assist in contextualizing problematic interactions, particularly if other family members are also fitted with heart rate monitors. In this way biofeedback becomes 'systemic' as people are alerted to the interconnectedness of each others' states. Participants are not only helped to identify stressors leading to heightened states of emotional arousal and resulting 'out-of-control' behaviours, but also to find ways of employing (self-)calming strategies. This article outlines the application of systemic biofeedback in school settings with children at risk of exclusion. With the help of these biofeedback devices pupils begin to manage themselves in situations which would previously have resulted in stressed, angry or violent behaviours