

An Introduction to Behavioral Treatments for Headache

By Ethan Benore, PhD, BCB, ABPP
Pediatric Psychologist and Biofeedback Specialist

Behavioral treatments refer to non-drug interventions that can reduce the number of headaches your child experiences and the intensity or duration of the pain.

Behavioral treatments often consist of the following:

- 1) **Relaxation training** – a number of strategies to reduce muscle tension and create balance within the nervous system. Simply put—a relaxed body is less likely to experience a headache.
- 2) **Biofeedback** – a computerized system which helps children identify and control how the body functions. Research has shown that control over body temperature, muscle tension, and heart rate can reduce pain and prevent headache.
- 3) **CBT (Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy)** – a short term psychological intervention that teaches skills to identify and change unhelpful thoughts and emotions that can create or worsen a headache.

Treatments include one-on-one training with a psychologist or other therapist. However, we have also found great benefit in treating children and teens in a group setting.

All of these strategies have been supported through numerous research studies and are endorsed by the *American Academy of Neurology*, the *American Psychological Association*, and the *Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*.

Benefits of behavioral treatments:

- Little to no side effects are expected.
- These are skills children learn which can be used again and again, without continued appointments for checkups or dependence on other therapists (e.g., massage therapist or chiropractor).
- Behavioral skills can be used instead of medicine. However, these have also been shown to benefit children who are also taking medications to prevent or treat headache.
- Treatment is expected to last 5-10 appointments over the course of 2 months, however continued follow-up is provided if requested by the family or physician.
- During treatment, your child is also supported in managing headache triggers and developing healthy lifestyle (e.g., sleep, exercise, nutrition) that supports headache prevention.

To learn more, please reference the websites of the national organizations below. You may also contact Dr. Benore directly with any questions regarding behavioral treatments for headache (216.448.6253).

References:

- [American Academy of Neurology](#)
- [Practice Parameter: Evidence-based Guidelines for Migraine Headache](#) (an evidence-based review from the American Academy of Neurology)
- [Fact Sheet: Chronic Pain in Children and Adolescents](#) (from the Society of Pediatric Psychology, American Psychological Association)