The use of the Squeeze Machine and proprioceptive therapy equipment in a sensory-controlled environment at Giant Steps

About Giant Steps

Giant Steps is a school and therapy centre for elementary school-aged children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Established in 1995 by parents and professionals, and modelled on the Giant Steps program in Montreal, we are a registered charitable nonprofit organization. Our mission is to build the skills and abilities of children with autism and enable their meaningful participation in their families, schools and communities.

At Giant Steps, we are passionate about improving the lives of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families. We believe that a coordinated, comprehensive

approach of specialized academics, therapies and inclusion best meets the complex learning needs of children with ASD. Tailored to each student's needs, our programs include academics, life skills and speech, music, play/social skills, behaviour and occupational therapies. After a period of intensive intervention, students are integrated gradually into their local schools. There they spend part of their school week with typically developing peers, supported by a Giant Steps Program Assistant and the consulting services of the Giant Steps team. Our long-term goal is to integrate children with autism into their neighbourhood schools full-time.

The Autism Speaks Calming Centre at Giant Steps

Sensory integration therapy is a central treatment modality at Giant Steps, one of the best practices used by our Occupational Therapy team to treat the sensory, neurological and behavioural issues experienced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Calming and organizing strategies that provide sensory and proprioceptive input are part of many of our children's treatment plans.

With the funding of The Autism Speaks Calming Centre here at Giant Steps in November 2010, we renovated and refurbished a room into a calming/sensory therapy room featuring Temple Grandin's Squeeze Machine. The Machine and

other sensory and weighted therapy equipment have been used since October 2011 to deliver controlled deep pressure therapy to our students, treating the sensory modulation issues, anxiety and behavioural challenges experienced by children with autism.

After 1 year of use, this report describes our experience and conclusion that,

under the direction and supervision of qualified therapists at Giant Steps, controlled deep pressure delivered through Squeeze Machine and other weighted therapy equipment is an effective tool for diffusing tension, calming and organizing children with autism and increasing their ability to participate in functional activities.





Background/rationale for use of controlled deep pressure therapy at Giant Steps

At Giant Steps, we use a multi-disciplinary team approach and incorporate a wide range of academic and therapeutic strategies in each student's Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.). A child with Autism Spectrum Disorder often experiences sensory and behavioural challenges that impede them from being included into a typical classroom with age appropriate peers. As this is the ultimate goal for all Giant Steps students, we address these challenges as a team by developing goals tailored to each student's sensory, communication, self-monitoring and behaviour management needs.

Our Occupational Therapists recognize that regulation and integration of input from all 5 senses is a common deficit in children with ASD. Many children with ASD are unable to recognize and process sensory input effectively. Coupled with anxiety-producing demands of varying environments and social situations, we often see a child who is unorganized, unable to focus, has difficulty with transitions and interacting with others, may exhibit aggressive and acting-out behaviours such as tantruming, and display calming-seeking behaviours such as twirling, rocking and jumping.

Sensory information travels through a child's proprioceptive system, ie. through their joints, muscles and tendons, to their brains. Sensory integration therapy includes strategies that provide pressure and proprioceptive feedback, providing a calming and organizing effect on the sensory/nervous system so the child can relax and gain focus. It is not uncommon for children with ASD to exhibit pressure-seeking behaviours such as climbing under cushions or mattresses. Firm pressure often calms children, while very light touch and pressure heighten or alerts the nervous system. Parents, therapists and other professionals have provided pressure through a variety of means such as wrapping, swaddling, having children wear ankle weights or other weighted clothing or use weighted lap pads.

At Giant Steps, our team uses a wide variety and combination of strategies to provide proprioceptive feedback to calm and organize children with ASD. Individualized for each child, these may include the use of weighted vests, blankets, lap pads, ankle weights and lifting of free weights, and are combined with positive behavioural approaches, systematic visual schedules and visual self-monitoring booklets to maximize calming.

A dedicated calming room widens our abilities to treat these sensory and behavioural issues and the addition of the Squeeze Machine provides a unique opportunity to deliver controlled deep pressure to children with ASD.

Project Objectives

- 1. To calm and reduce sensory sensitivities and challenging behaviours experienced by children with ASD such as inattention, difficulty staying on task, hyperactivity, self-stimulation, aggression and oppositional behaviours
- 2. To enable children with ASD to function more successfully in a variety of environments
- 3. To evaluate the effects of controlled deep pressure therapy on children with ASD
- 4. To share what we learn and educate others in the autism community

Activities

To fulfill our objectives, the project involved the following activities:

- 1. Providing controlled deep pressure therapy via the Squeeze Machine and weighted therapy equipment in scheduled sessions or when children are highly stressed
- 2. Providing a safe, calm and sensory-controlled environment for children when they need assistance and intervention to calm down
- 3. Giving our students new strategies for calming and reducing anxiety and sensory sensitivities

Project Preparations

Our Occupational Therapists executed the project in collaboration with our Executive Director, our Behavioural Consultant and our Speech & Language Pathologist.

First steps included renovations of our 12' x 20' windowless room to reduce distractions and provide a safe and calm environment:

- 1. Refurbishing of lighting and installation of dimmers
- 2. Installation of a one-way mirror to enable observation and training for staff and families
- 3. Installation of deep, custom-fitted floor and wall matting in a royal blue colour throughout the room

Weighted and sensory therapy equipment that provides deep pressure and proprioceptive feedback was purchased, including:

- 1. Squeeze Machine
- 2. Weighted vests, blanket and snake
- 3. Double Squeezer (delivers pressure by moving through padded rollers)
- 4. Crash mat (a deep foam-filled mat for jumping, sitting and relaxing)
- 5. Lily Pad bouncer (a rebounder for jumping)
- 6. Vibrating hair brushes, gel shapes and massagers

A clinical protocol was established by our team including:

- 1. Procedures and protocol for the use of the room and equipment
- 2. Guidelines for data collection, documentation and analysis of outcomes.

Baseline data was collected on our students' sensory, anxiety and behavioural challenges.

Staff and families were oriented to the project and equipment; all were given the opportunity to use the equipment themselves and waivers were signed by families.

See Appendix A: Policies and Procedures for Use of the Squeeze Machine Appendix B: Waiver of Liability, Release and Indemnification Agreement Appendix C: Squeeze Machine Data Form Appendix D: Photos of children using therapy equipment in the Calming Centre

Implementation

Facilitating communication

An important component of our plan was giving our students the tools to communicate their needs and desires to use the room and equipment, to provide feedback on their experiences and feelings, and to communicate their readiness to return to other activities and demands. Our kids' picture symbol books and schedules, iPads and Springboard devices were set up with the appropriate vocabulary that was needed to enable clear communication. Our Speech & Language Pathologist worked with our students and staff, helping verbal children use appropriate words and labels, and teaching non-verbal children to use pictures, photos and symbols on their augmentative communication devices to communicate around these issues.

Identifying sensory needs, target behaviours & markers

Our Occupational Therapists and Behaviour Therapist identified the sensory needs and target behaviours in each child, noting early signs of disorganization, anxiety and stress, and assisting the staff and student in determining when to utilize the room and equipment. Our Behaviour Therapist designed a data collection form to document use and behaviours prior, during and after use of the Machine. The time period of 45 minutes after use of the room was chosen in order to evaluate the effects during the next activity, classroom or therapy session at Giant Steps, which typically changes every 45 minutes. Markers consisted of documented observations and reports from staff, and we were looking for the following outcomes:

- 1. Increased tolerance to sounds, smells, tastes and touch
- 2. Wider or more flexible clothing choices
- 3. Increased attention to tasks
- 4. Decreased anxiety, self-stimulatory and aggressive behaviours
- 5. Increased cooperation with daily routines
- 6. Improved ability to function and cope in different settings, at Giant Steps and at their inclusion classroom in their local schools

Incorporating deep pressure therapy into our students' treatment plans

During the month of October 2011, our team introduced the children to the room, the equipment and the Squeeze Machine. The Squeeze Machine provides deep pressure to the lateral aspects of the upper body by compressing it between 2 foam-padded panels. The goal was to calm the child's sympathetic nervous system and bring relaxation, organization and focus through deep pressure and proprioceptive feedback.

Our Occupational Therapists worked one-on-one with each student, slowly acclimatizing them to the Machine, the sensation of the pressure and its control. Each student had regular weekly sessions in the room when they were in a state of calm to familiarize them with the equipment, reinforce their calming effects and set a positive tone for



future sessions. Our Behaviour Therapist also worked directly with students, teaching them how to use the equipment and providing support and assistance with its use.

A great deal of time was taken to allow students to explore the room at their own pace, enabling us to gain their trust and assist them in the use of the Machine. Some students were initially apprehensive to approach and use the machine due to its size. Each child was taught to rest their chin on the lamb's wool support and bend their knees to prevent strain on their backs. Students were encouraged to engage in quiet counting activities as they learned to pull the lever that controls the duration of pressure. They were given simple instructions at the end of each session such as "put on your shoes" to ensure that they were in fact calm and ready to participate in the next activity.

Data collection

Data was collected on each student, and monitoring and evaluation of their treatment plans was supervised by our Occupational Therapists on an ongoing basis. Documentation included data about when the student used the room and equipment, the duration of the squeeze in the Squeeze Machine and the behaviours being displayed by the student 45 minutes later, ie. in the next classroom or therapy session.

Results

Used in a sensory-controlled environment, we have found the Squeeze Machine and weighted therapy equipment to be effective tools here at Giant Steps, enabling our students to regain a state of control, calm and focus, and facilitating their participation in functional activities.

During the 2011-12 school year, use of the Squeeze Machine and therapy equipment was incorporated into 16 students' treatment plans. The majority of these students used the Squeeze Machine and other therapy equipment on an "as needed" basis, that is, when they or staff identified signs of a heightened state of arousal and anxiety such as an inability to participate in functional activities and/or disruptive behaviours. Three students had the use of the Machine scheduled into their day or week for the full school year. Six students required repetitive sessions in the room throughout the year for exploration and acclimatization to the environment and equipment. One student who generally exhibits a low state of arousal and focus experienced a lowering of that after 1 use of the Squeeze Machine and we did not continue to use this as a therapeutic strategy with him. The length of time in the Machine was child-led and we did not observe any negative effects with longer duration of squeezes.

In the 10 students who regularly used the Machine and equipment throughout the year, improvements and gains were seen in the following areas:

- 1. Self-regulation: students gained the ability to identify and communicate early signs of anxiety and request these calming strategies.
- 2. Return to a state of calm: students displayed calm demeanours after using the equipment.
- 3. Ability to return to constructive activities: students were able to return to their classrooms or therapy session at Giant Steps or transition smoothly to their inclusion schools.
- 4. Gains in functional skills: students showed gains in other developmental areas such as language, communication and food choices.

The following 6 "case studies" illustrate our experiences.

1. Increased attention to task in a 7 year-old female student

At the beginning of the school year, this student displayed disruptive temper tantruming behaviours in the following situations:

- 1. When she was told "no"
- 2. When she needed to transition from room to room within the school
- 3. When a preferred task was completed
- 4. When a slow cadence song such as "O Canada" was played

The Calming Centre was used as a controlled environment for her to participate in sensory activities in order to return to a state of calm and focus. She was taught to use a yellow "Break" card to communicate when she was losing the ability to stay on task in class, and then to request sensory input from the Squeeze Machine, weighted blanket or crash mat.

Once this student understood the concept of the Break card and used the equipment, she was able to increase her attention to task and remain in the classroom for longer periods of time without breaks. At the beginning of the year prior to implementation of these calming and deep pressure strategies, her average length of time on task was 25 minutes, and she needed an average of 1.2 breaks/day from the classroom in order to regain calm and control. By the end of the school year, her average length of time on task was 29 minutes, and she was requesting an average of 0.3 breaks/day.

In addition, this student's language comprehension advanced notably during the year. Initially, she was only able to respond to "what" and "who" questions. By the end of the year, her ability to respond to "how" questions was reliable 90% of the time, notably to questions such as "How are you feeling?" She is now able to verbally express that she feels much better or that she is now happy, and communicates via her schedule that she is ready to return to an activity.

2. Effective response to anxiety and aggression in a 12 year-old male student

Significant self-regulation was seen in this student after use of the Squeeze Machine and Calming Centre therapy equipment. He was experiencing incidents of extreme anxiety characterized by verbal escalation and threats of aggression and was unable to continue with his daily routine or travel to his inclusion class at his neighbourhood school. The Squeeze Machine was introduced and used to de-escalate his behaviours. He independently used the Machine, holding the lever and monitoring the amount and duration of pressure. He also used the crash mat, placing 1 weighted blanket over his body. This student was able to then gain control, demonstrating a calm demeanour and was ready to meet the demands placed on him in a typical classroom setting. While behavioural incidents continued throughout the year, the Squeeze Machine was an effective strategy for responding to these incidents.

Month	Number of Behavioural Incidents	Total time in the Squeeze Machine	Outcome
November 2011	3	6.5 minutes	Calm
December 2011	5	24 minutes	Calm
February 2012	2	4 minutes	Calm
March 2012	1	5 minutes	Calm
May 2012	5	23 minutes	Calm
June 2012	6	13 minutes	Calm

3. Reduced agitation and increased classroom/therapy participation in a 9 year old male student

This student experienced incidents of inability to focus on task, behavioural displays of agitation and physical signs such as a red face and perspiration. The Calming Centre was used to assist him when he became unfocused and agitated, and to prevent escalation and acting-out behaviours. After using the Squeeze Machine, he was calm, no longer had a red face or visible perspiration, and would verbally communicate to staff that he felt better and was ready to go back to class. He used the machine for longer durations initially, but the length of time needed in the machine and the number of times he needed to use it decreased throughout the school year.

Month	Number of Behavioural Incidents	Total time in the Squeeze Machine	Outcome
October 2011	6	26 minutes	Calm
November 2011	2	27 minutes	Calm
December 2011	3	23 minutes	Calm
January 2012	4	14 minutes	Calm
February 2012	4	9 minutes	Calm
March 2012	1	2 minutes	Calm
April 2012	3	6 minutes	Calm
May 2012	1	2 minutes	Calm

4. Self-regulation and increased attention to task and new activities in a 9 year-old male student

At the beginning of the school year, this student was often out of his seat in the classroom, not attending to task and also refused to try new food items. He participated in activities to regulate his sensory system including the Double Squeezer, the Squeeze Machine, jumping on the crash mat and Lily Pad (a rebounder). He enjoyed using these activities and learned how to recognize the need to self-regulate and request them using his Springboard device. He would often point to the word "Squeeze" and pair it with whichever staff he wanted to assist him. These sensory strategies were used in conjunction with heavy work, running in the gym and gum chewing which provided oral motor feedback. The lasting effects of these activities varied daily but on average, an increase of attention to task was noted between 5-10 minutes. He was now able to sit during calendar group work and 1-1 table top academic work. He also sat for significantly longer periods at lunchtime, explored new food items and participated actively in food preparation.

5. New abilities to cope with changes in routine and loud noises in a 12 year old female student

This student displayed self-injurious behaviours and aggression to staff and other students in response to changes in routine and loud noises. The Calming Centre was a safe, controlled environment where we used the Squeeze Machine to help her achieve a state of calm and focus. She also used the crash mat, where she was covered with 2 weighted therapy blankets in periods of distress. She learned to request these activities and communicate her readiness to return to her schedule and next activity using her iPad, and would nod her head and calmly leave the room. This student has also received instruction on how to use her iPad to request a break at early signs of anxiety or agitation. Through modelling and repetition, she is now able to independently request a break at a 50% rate and is able to focus and respond appropriately to one-step directions being communicated to her by staff.

6. Decrease in disruptive behaviour in a 13 year old student

This student was regularly unable to remain in a classroom, participate in activities or interact with peers. We assisted this student in using the Squeeze Machine and crash mat and weighted blanket prior to each of our 5 periods throughout the day, hoping to calm and organize him enough to see improved focus and classroom/therapy participation. As the day progressed, he required shorter durations of squeezes in the machine to return to a state of calm (an average of over 10 minutes with his first "squeeze" at 9:00 am, 6.5 minutes in his last "squeeze" at 2:00 pm). The graph below shows a decreased number of aggressive target behaviours were displayed when the duration of the squeeze was increased and also when the number of squeezes were increased. When calm, this student was able to complete academic work on his computer. We incorporated heavy lifting and frequent movement breaks into this student's daily routine to help him stay focused and on task.



GRAPH: Use of Squeeze Machine by a 13 year old student over 26 school days

Practical recommendations

To optimize the quality and safety of a sensory-controlled environment, we would make the following suggestions for planning this type of therapy room:

- 1. Non-fluorescent lighting
- 2. Ability to control the heating, air conditioning and ventilation system
- 3. Video capabilities to enable external monitoring
- 4. An intercom system (we use a walkie-talkie)
- 5. Installation of some method of dividing the room so that during crisis situations, 2 students could use the facility at the same time
- 6. Extra lamb's wool for the chin rest

Practices in use / future direction

The use of the Calming Centre, Squeeze Machine and sensory equipment is currently part of 14 of our students' program plans this year. Five new students were admitted to Giant Steps in September 2012 and our team is working with all these students and experimenting with these therapeutic strategies. One of these students is regularly requesting the "Blue Room" when agitated, and we have worked with another new student with his parents present. Having all family members experience the Squeeze Machine has enabled him to begin to receive controlled deep pressure therapy.

This year, and as we move forward, use of the Calming Centre at Giant Steps will include the following:

- 1. Our sensory-controlled environment, the Squeeze Machine and proprioceptive sensory therapy equipment will be permanent tools and strategies that our team will use for calming and organizing children with ASD and facilitating their return to functional activities.
- 2. Plans for how and when to use the room and equipment will be individualized for each child and will be overseen by our Occupational Therapists. Use on a scheduled or as-needed basis will be determined for each child. The room will continue to be used regularly as a safe and supervised environment where children displaying acting-out or aggressive behaviours can de-escalate and return to a state of calm. Calming strategies may be incorporated with others that provide sensory input such as heavy lifting and running.
- 3. Use of the calming equipment will be used in coordination with other teaching and therapeutic strategies in use with each student such as behavioural approaches, systematic visual schedules, social stories and self-monitoring booklets.
- 4. Our Speech and Language Pathologist will continue to work with other team members and students to provide the graphics, photos and technology that facilitates communication specific to the use of the room and equipment.
- 5. Our Social Skills Specialist will work with our Speech and Language Pathologist to teach our children how to recognize, label and communicate their feelings, their state of being, and those of others, in order to recognize early signs of anxiety, stress or sensory overload.
- 6. Our Behaviour Therapist, teachers and Program Assistants will continue to teach students how and when to use a break card so that students are able to leave anxiety-provoking situations, go to the Calming Centre and use the Squeeze Machine and/or crash mat, weighted blanket or Double Squeezer.

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Giant Steps Toronto/York Region ("Giant Steps")



Policies and Procedures for the use of the Squeeze Machine

Staff Training Prior to Use:

- 1. Staff must have attended a calming room/use of Squeeze Machine training meeting prior to use.
- 2. Staff must read and sign the Squeeze Machine booklet published by Therafin Corporation. (Additional copy is posted in the calming room for quick reference)
- 3. Staff must discuss the use of the machine with one of the calming room team leaders.

Supervision of Student in Calming Room

- 1. No participant will use the Squeeze Machine unless a waiver has been signed by the student's parent or guardian.
- 2. No student will use the Squeeze Machine unless two staff are present, one of which is on the calming room team.
- 3. A student may use the calming room and weighted therapy equipment with one staff member supervising.
- 4. All uses of the Squeeze Machine should be documented in the form posted in the room under the student's name.

Equipment Care and Use

- 1. ALWAYS follow manufacturer's recommended guidelines as posted on the machine.
- 2. The calming room will be locked each evening.
- 3. The mats must remain on the floor and attached to the walls.
- 4. Only schedules and or augmentative communication devices will be brought into the room.
- 5. Students will always be instructed on how to position their bodies correctly within the Squeeze Machine.
- 6. Staff will ALWAYS respect a participant's communication in regards to participation and being finished.
- 7. Any objects that could result in injury should be removed prior to the use of the Squeeze Machine (watches, jewellery, large hair clips).
- 8. Staff are to be vigilant when pressure is being applied and constantly observe the student.
- 9. Staff will use the emergency release button as needed or requested by the student.

Technical Set Up and Use

- 1. Staff will visually inspect the Squeeze Machine prior to use to ensure it is in good working order.
- 2. The motor is stored in the outer alcove and not brought directly into the room.

Be Aware of Signs of Anxiety Prior to Use

- 1. Watch and listen for signs of anxiety (student shaking head no).
- 2. Ensure the student's body is placed correctly in machine (as per drawing).
- 3. Reassure and be supportive of participant's experience while using the Squeeze Machine.
- 4. Be clear and concise when providing instructions; use visuals as necessary.
- 5. Only one staff should give direction to the student using the Squeeze Machine.

Giant Steps Toronto/York Region ("Giant Steps")



Waiver of Liability, Release and Indemnification Agreement

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING TWO PAGES AND COMPLETE WHERE REQUIRED

In consideration of my/our child/ward being allowed to use the Squeeze Machine, I/we the undersigned, hereby agree to and acknowledge the following:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND ASSUMPTION OF RISK: I/we the undersigned acknowledge and agree that observing or participating in activities sponsored and/or offered by Giant Steps and York Region District School Board has inherent risk, including but not limited to:

- a. All manner of injury resulting from the amount of air pressure provided to the individual's body once lying in the Squeeze Machine.
- b. All manner of injury sustained resulting from the head placement on the headrest.
- c. Failure of the emergency release button to release the pressure.
- d. Risk arising from the negligence or gross negligence including any compounding or aggravation of injuries caused by negligence, operations or procedures by persons attending to the use of this machine.

WAIVER AND RELEASE: I/we hereby agree that Giant Steps, York Region District School Board and their respective directors, officers, agents, employees, volunteers, activities organizers and all persons and organizations associated with the activities, sponsors, advertisers, owners and/or lessors of the premises used to conduct the activities and their respective sanctioning bodies, where applicable, and their respective heirs, executors, administrators, legal representatives, successors and assigns shall not be liable for and I/we hereby release and discharge all such entities from any and all losses, liabilities, suits, demands, actions or damages (Including legal fees and disbursements) arising out of the use or intended use of the Squeeze Machine including, without limitation, all claims for damage to my/our personal property or personal injuries or wrongful death to my/our child/ward. This waiver and release is binding on my/our heirs, executors, administrators, legal representatives, successors, assigns and agents.

INDEMNIFY: I/we hereby agree to indemnify and hold harmless Giant Steps, York Region District School Board and their respective directors, officers, agents, employees, volunteers, activities organizers and all persons and organizations associated with the activities, sponsors, advertisers, owners and/or lessors of the premises used to conduct the activities and their respective sanctioning bodies where applicable, and their respective heirs, executors, administrators, successors, and assigns, from any and all causes of action, claims demands, losses, and costs of any nature whatever arising out of, or in any way relating to the use or intended use of the Squeeze Machine and facilities whether based in negligence, gross negligence, or otherwise. This indemnification is binding on my/our heirs, executors, administrators, legal representatives, successors, assigns and agents.

I/WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT:

- Giant Steps and York Region District School Board do not provide any accidental death, disability, dismemberment or medical expenses insurance on behalf of the students participating in these activities. It is strongly recommended that student accident insurance or private medical coverage is obtained prior to participating in these activities.
- 2. Giant Steps and York Region District School Board reserve the right to deny access to the Squeeze Machine to any individual permanently or for a specified period of time for any breach of Safety Policies, or for any conduct that is viewed as unsafe or inappropriate.
- 3. By signing this document I/we give up substantial legal rights I/we and/or our child/ward would otherwise have.

I/we have read over the foregoing and understand its effect and the responsibilities I/we have assumed and hereby voluntarily and without inducement consent to my/our child/ward observing and/or using and participating in the squeeze machine and related activities.

Signed this ______ day of ______, 20_____.

(Please print clearly):

Full name of Parent or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

Daytime Telephone Number

Child's Health Card Number

Child's Name

Child's Date of Birth

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Appendix D

Children using therapy equipment in the Calming Centre





Child in Squeeze Machinefront view



Child in Squeeze Machinerear view



Child controlling the pressure with the lever



Unwinding on the crash mat under weighted blankets



Moving through the Double Squeezer





Getting into the Body Sock



Calm in the Body Sock



Receiving proprioceptive input by jumping on the Lily Pad