

Don't Hold Your Breath! A Simple and Effective Method to Help Your Child Manage Stress

As parents, we've all experienced this scenario: Your child comes down in the morning, wound up like a clockwork toy at the prospect of a test, a team tryout, or another school event. He might say he has a stomach ache or that his head hurts, or that he slept badly or too much. We know that our kids can't escape the test or tryout or event, so how can we help them face these challenges?

There is one natural way, according to Dr. Yana Kofman, a board-certified pediatric physical therapist who specializes in Yoga for the Special Child methodology: Take and focus on a deep breath. "The power of taking control over your breathing can be life-changing," she says. In her Morristown-based practice, which combines manual body work therapy with the yogic philosophy of mind and body working in harmony, she has seen the results of teaching children to, as she says, "breathe consciously."

When presented with a stressful situation, says Dr. Kofman, our bodies go into a sympathetic response, or what we usually call the fight-or-flight response. Our heart rate speeds up, blood rushes to leg muscles to help us "run away," our brains seem to "freeze," and our breathing becomes more shallow. This natural response of the body, when continuously triggered by our demanding lives, often manifests in children as headaches, constipation, and behavioral issues, among other symptoms. In addition, the body will use the muscles of the chest and neck when breathing, instead of the stronger muscles of the diaphragm.

To balance out the sympathetic response, our bodies also have a parasympathetic response. In this state, the heart rate slows, muscles relax, and blood flow is more even to help with digestion and relaxation. And instead of breathing by exerting the neck and chest muscles, the diaphragm is engaged and breathing deepens.

Dr. Kofman suggests the following breathing exercises to help shift your child's sympathetic response to a parasympathetic one:

1. Have children sit in a chair and close their eyes. Closing the eyes is often difficult for an anxious child to do. Reassure your child that he is in a safe place with you.
2. Have children slump down in the chair and lower their chin toward their chest, curling their spine into a fetal-like position. Shoulders are curved down and in. This automatically engages the diaphragm, rather than the upper chest and neck muscles.
3. Tell them to put their hands on their belly, and imagine their stomach is like a balloon. Have them imagine gently filling the balloon with air, for a count of up to 3 (smaller children will need a shorter count). Then have them gently press on their belly as they breathe out, for the same count. This gentle pressure will assist with diaphragmatic breaths and the body's relaxation.
4. Repeat for approximately two minutes. Emphasize the duration and depth of the breath as practice deepens. As your child gets used to the breathing exercises, she will relax more quickly and sometimes only a few breaths will be needed to shift away from sympathetic response.

Talk your child through the breaths slowly and calmly. Excessive talking does not help anxious children, as their brain cannot process any information when the nervous system is in distress.

Try also performing these breathing exercises at calm moments when the child is engaged and is listening, so that your child can begin to associate deep breathing with safe, relaxing times as well as stressful ones.

"A child of any age and ability can teach their body to engage the parasympathetic response," says Dr. Kofman. "This conscious connection between mind and body is a skill that will benefit them for the rest of their lives."

For more information, visit the website of the American Psychological Association at Apa.org.

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