

Creative Ways to Teach Deep Breathing to Kids

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No matter what population you work with in therapy, a majority of clients struggle with some level of anger, anxiety, or stress. Unfortunately, this includes our youngest clients as well. I have always valued the art of meditation and proper deep breathing techniques with adults, and have recently witnessed how effective these skills can be for children. Children are often brought to therapy for anger management, anxiety, and poor attention (ADHD). Deep breathing has worked with each one of these diagnoses. The key is making the skills fun to learn and easy to remember outside of the therapy office.

Reasons to Practice Deep Breathing

In order to effectively teach deep breathing, we must first believe in its use and effectiveness. Below are some reasons why deep breathing is an important technique to teach to children:

1. Proper deep breathing tricks the body into thinking it is in a calm state (as opposed to the fight or flight state). When we are in a state of stress, our bodies are in a “fight or flight” response. Our bodies in this state react with an increase in heart rate and breathing becomes rapid and shallow, as opposed to the calm state of deep, “within our gut” breathing and slower heart rate.
2. Deep breathing gives the body energy. The act of breathing deeply helps to deliver nutrient rich oxygen throughout the body.
3. The delivery of oxygen also helps to eliminate waste in the body and helps maintain healthy cells.
4. Deep breathing is a technique that can be used anywhere. It is a useful technique to have ready when the time comes. Practice in a calm state so when one feels stressed, the technique can be easily implemented.
5. It is free! There is no cost to practice deep breathing.

Making It Fun for Children

Children will be more motivated to learn, practice, and implement deep breathing if it is fun. Below are some fun activities to help children learn this important life skill.

Blowing a Pinwheel

Such a simple, yet fun toy, who doesn't love to watch the pinwheel colors mix together as it spins?

1. Have the child take a deep breath (remind them slow and deep).
2. Instruct them to hold their breath for 2 seconds (count out loud).
3. Then, release the breath by blowing the pinwheel.

4. Repeat 3 more times.

Candle and Flower

1. Gather together a candle (you can light it if you feel the child is old enough) and a flower.
2. Starting with the flower, have the child take a deep breath (remind them slow and deep) through their nose as if they are smelling the flower.
3. When they are breathing in the flower, have them pretend they are breathing in good, calm feelings.
4. Instruct them to hold the breath for 2 seconds.
5. Then, release the breath by slowly blowing out the candle, pretending that they are breathing out the negative feelings.
6. Repeat 3 more times.

Blowing a Feather

1. Purchase several large feathers from a craft store in various colors.
2. Ask the child to choose the feather that is most calming to them, or that brings them positive feelings.
3. Have the child hold the feather in one hand.
4. Slowly, take a deep breath and hold for 3 seconds.
5. While slowly breathing out, blow the feather up one side and down the other.
6. Repeat 3 more times.

Additional Tips

- Practice these activities while the child is calm. This will make it easier for the child to use deep breathing in times of need.
- Dim the lights to create a more soothing environment.
- Set a timer for the child to practice a calm state and increase that time as they improve their skills.
- Include the primary caregivers in the session and teach the deep breathing technique to them so they can coach the child to practice the deep breathing strategy at home. Once a day is recommended, at bedtime.
- There are plenty of deep breathing videos online. If your client is a visual learner, this may be a useful aid. There are also deep breathing Apps such as Breathe2relax.

References

www.webmd.com www.kidsrelaxation.com

<http://www.stress-and-relaxation.com/deep-breathing.html>

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Kim Peterson, MA, LPC-S, RPT, is a Licensed Professional Counselor-Supervisor and Registered Play Therapist in Humble, Texas. She provides counseling for individuals, families, and couples, as well as clinical supervision. She is especially passionate about helping new mothers with postpartum adjustment and early infant attachment, as well as child and teen mental health issues and parenting dilemmas. Kim is also committed to educating the community through her popular counseling blog, Kim's Counseling Corner (www.kimscounselingcorner.com). For information on Kim's practice, visit www.kimscounseling.com, or email kim@kimscounseling.com.

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