

# A time to simply *'be'*:

Building resilient and happy children through relaxation techniques



In recent years, technological and scientific advances have changed our society. Along with the benefits the information age has brought, the rapid changes have also required the development of special coping skills for adults and children. Youngs (1995) highlights the impact of stress on our lives, stating:

'Virtually no one feels free from stress these days, not even young people supposedly living "the best years of their lives". Childhood innocence is now almost impossible to sustain..... the disruption of the nuclear family and loss of extended family, new work and lifestyle alternatives, changing mores and shifting values in family life – all these are quickly altering the nature of childhood.'

This is even more relevant today. Current figures from the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* reveal marked increases in the number of

children receiving child care—both formal and informal. Other recent social trends indicate that people are working longer hours and increasing numbers of households are experiencing financial stress. Additionally, one in four children do not live with both natural parents. Increasing numbers of the population are experiencing mental illness. Drug and alcohol disorders are on the rise. More Australians are experiencing the stress-related problems of a sedentary lifestyle and childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate.

Hurried parents and teachers produce harried children. In today's fast paced society, stress is becoming an ever-increasing problem for young children. Teachers and child care workers see frustrated and exhausted children on a daily basis at child care and school. Children are dropped off at one form of child care (such as long day care, preschool or school) and are often collected late by parents who are tired and depleted from a long working day.

Pushing children to achieve too much at an early age can cause them to 'burn out'. We are often so keen for children to live up to their potential that we expect them to be busy and occupied nearly every waking moment. Teachers, child care workers and parents all need to find a balance between encouraging children to experience success in life and allowing them just to be children. Success at school and other activities is important and worthwhile, but not at the expense of a child's wellbeing and happiness.

## Making a real difference in children's lives

Western society is slowly coming to understand that health and wellbeing are more than an absence of disease or illness. Health is really about the presence of vitality and the ability to function and live our lives fully, actively, energetically and harmoniously. Incorporating this approach into the daily lives of children involves a shift in mindset for most adults. This mindset shift involves planning daily opportunities in care, school and home settings to allow children to simply 'be' (Thomas & Shepherd, 2000) rather than emphasising 'doing' and 'producing' all day. This notion really is about incorporating balance and peace into the lives of children in order for them to develop resilience—the ability to deal with life's challenges in a positive way (Thomas & Lockwood, 2003). This involves committing ourselves to the importance of providing a holistic and spiritual approach to developing a range of relaxation strategies suitable for young children. Children need a peaceful household and/or child care centre and opportunities for respite from stressful situations (Greenman, 2002). Eastern traditions have much to offer when we are considering how to begin learning to relax and simply 'be' with children.

## How relaxation helps boys and girls

Relaxation techniques help children in the following ways, by:

- relaxing the body;
- quietening the mind;
- providing rest and rejuvenation;
- opening creativity and imagination;
- providing time-out and solitude from busy days;
- helping coping skills;
- developing self-awareness; and
- providing enjoyable, uplifting experiences.

### Holistic techniques suitable for children

Breathing, Tai Chi (Qi Gong) exercises and visualisation techniques done either in small groups or individually, are effective tools for reaching the relaxation state in people of all ages. When adults and children join together in practising these techniques, the benefits are mutual, as they can learn to unwind and 'let go' of the day's stresses together. The slow movements of Qi Gong enhance strength, flexibility, balance and coordination. They are a welcome alternative to the competitive, fast-paced exercise offered by school and community sports. These exercises are holistic as they are beneficial to the mind, body and spirit. They provide a necessary first step in the relaxation process—'before the mind can relax, the body must learn to relax' (Madders, 1987; Thomas, 2002). When Tai Chi (Qi Gong) exercise is followed by simple progressive muscle relaxation and visualisation techniques (going on an imaginary, peaceful 'journey'), children and adults learn to quieten their minds (from incessant chatter and worry), restore balance to their bodies, explore their creative imagination and soothe away anxiety and fear.

### Relaxation is a skill for life

We can build respectful, positive and reciprocal relationships with children by spending time together practising relaxation techniques and developing positive, enjoyable strategies for coping with life. Investing in a 'relaxation time' each day, whether as a parent, teacher or child care worker, will reap its benefits in enhanced communication, respect and positive enjoyment of sharing 'soul' time together.

### Implementing relaxation at home or school

One way of introducing a relaxation time is as follows:

- Choose a suitable area or corner for relaxation time. 'Dress' it with the children by hanging posters, lighting candles or lamps, floating flowers or leaves in a beautiful bowl, making a comfortable sitting circle with cushions and play quiet, ambient music in the background.
- Outline your aims for the relaxation session and explain what the children will be doing. For example: 'This is a quiet time where we focus on our breathing and join in simple exercises to help our bodies relax. Then we will lie down on the floor and teach our body parts to relax and let go. We will then go on a relaxing journey in our imagination'.
- Begin with some simple warm-up and breathing exercises.
- Follow on with a few Tai Chi (Qi Gong) movements.
- Lie on the floor and participate in a progressive muscle relaxation and then go on a visualisation 'journey' to a rainforest, a cloud, a garden, a beach or another special, peaceful relaxation place you have created with your children.
- End with a sharing circle, where children and adults talk about their feelings and responses to the exercises and visualisation experiences. Children often love to draw, paint or make models of scenes from their relaxing journeys.

### Routine and ritual

Like any other experience we undertake with children, we need to plan carefully and proceed slowly, according to the children's needs and ages. Once a relaxation routine has been established, the children will enthusiastically remind adults to be sure to include

it each day. Small rituals like using a favourite music CD, lighting a candle, bringing a peaceful object (a flower or crystal) to the relaxation space, will provide an 'anchor' for each experience. An enjoyable and peaceful rhythm will develop over time and wide-reaching benefits will emerge. These include life skills such as listening to others, appreciating others' stories and experiences, waiting turns to talk, sharing imaginative 'journeys', respecting others' feelings and ideas and a general sense of calmness and contentment.

Simple relaxation techniques empower girls and boys to develop caring attitudes to each other and to feel the freedom of experiencing quietness and the simplicity of 'being' in their daily lives.

### Patrice Thomas

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