



Breathing Exercises for Children

Why deep breathing matters?

When you are calm, your body is in what is known as “rest and digest” mode. Your breathing is normal, your muscles are relaxed, and your heart rate is normal. It’s how you would be when you’re watching a show and relaxing.

But then suddenly, a dinosaur is chasing you!!

When you experience a stressful event (like an unexpected dinosaur in your living room), your body automatically goes into what is known as “flight, fight or freeze” mode. Your heart rate increases, your stomach stops digestion, and your breathing becomes more shallow.

The goal of calming exercises is to get yourself from “flight, fight or freeze” mode back to “rest and digest” mode. Deep breathing helps get more oxygen into your bloodstream, opening up your capillaries. It has a physical effect on your body to help you calm down and lower stress.

So deep breathing does make a big difference for kids. But how can we teach them to take a deep breath properly?

Here are some ways to introduce deep breathing!

Quick note: The breathing we want kids to do is deep belly breaths, not shallow chest breaths. When they breathe in, their belly should expand, and when they breathe out, their belly should contract.

DEEP BREATHING USING PROPS

Use bubbles

Blowing gently to create bubbles is a good way to be playful and breathe deeply. Kids have to blow carefully and slowly to make the bubbles, which is a major reason why I like using it to help kids take deep breaths.

Using a toy animal to practice deep breathing

Have your child lay down on their back and put a stuffed animal on their belly. Have them breathe in and move the stuffed animal up, then breathe out and bring the stuffed animal back down. This helps teach kids to use their belly to take big deep breaths. Another alternative is to use a weighted stuffed animal.



Use a feather

Get some coloured feathers and pick out one feather to use. It could be a colour that they love or one that makes them feel calm. Breathe in and hold it for a count of 3, then breathe out going up on one side of the feather and down the other side.

Hoberman Sphere

Breathe in and expand the sphere, breathe out and push the sphere back in (this mirrors what should be happening to their belly)

BREATHING USING YOUR IMAGINATION

Breathe in, breathe out like you are blowing out birthday candles.

Pretend your belly is like a balloon. Breathe in and make the balloon bigger, then breathe out and make the balloon shrink.

Smell the hot chocolate, cool the hot chocolate.

Darth Vader Breathing – Pretend you have a straw in your mouth, suck in through the straw and breathe in. Breathe out like Darth Vader.

Ocean Breathing – breathe in and imagine the wave rolling in, breathe out and imagine the wave rolling out.

Soft Belly – Say to yourself “soft” as you breathe in and “belly” as you breathe out.

ANIMAL BREATHING

Whale Breathing

Sitting criss-cross applesauce, sit up tall and take a deep breathe in, Hold it while you count to 5 with your fingers then tilt head up to blow it out of blowhole. You can also put your hands up on top of head to create the blow hole to “blow” out.

Snake Breathing

Breathe in, pause briefly, then breathe out slowly while you make a hissing sound for as long as you can.

Bunny Breathing

You can do this breathing either while sitting, or add movement to it.



Sitting version – make “bunny” hands in front of chest and take quick sniffs like a bunny.
Movement version – start in a squat and hop forward while taking quick bunny sniffs.

Bumblebee Breathing

Breathe in and pretend you are smelling a flower. As you breathe out, make humming bee sound. Try different ways of making the sound – longer or shorter, high or low sounds.

DEEP BREATHING WITH NUMBERS

5 – 5 – 10 Breathing

Breathe in for 5, hold for 5 and breathe out for 10.

Count to 10

- Breathe in ONE
- Exhale TWO
- Inhale THREE
- Exhale FOUR
- Inhale FIVE
- Exhale SIX
- Inhale SEVEN
- Exhale EIGHT
- Inhale NINE
- Exhale TEN

DEEP BREATHING WITH YOUR BODY

Using your hand to take a deep breath aka mountain breathing

Put up one hand, palm facing out and fingers spread apart. Place the index finger of your other hand at the base of your thumb and breathe in while you move your finger up one side of your thumb. Move your finger down the other side of your thumb and breathe out. Do the same thing with the remaining four fingers, and take deep breaths in and out as you move your finger. After you’ve reached the second side of your pinky finger, you’ll have done 5 complete deep breaths.

You can also do this with a close friend or trusted adult. Have them spread their hand out and use your finger to trace their hand and do deep breaths. Or do the opposite: spread your hand out and have them use their finger and trace yours. You can do deep breaths together!



Hands to Shoulders

Sometimes you breathe from your chest instead of your belly, but it's hard to notice. This is an easy way to figure out if you are moving your chest or your belly when you're breathing. While sitting or standing, put your hands down by your sides. Then bend your arms at your elbows and place them on the front of your shoulders. Try taking a deep breath. If your shoulders are moving a lot, focus more on taking breaths using your belly.

Rainbow Breathing

Arms start at the side of your body; arms go up as you breathe in and go down as you breathe out (arms make a rainbow)

Volcano Breathing

Pretend your hands and arms are like lava flowing from a volcano. Start with your hands in front of your heart, with palms touching. Keeping your hands together, reach straight up and breathe in. Separate your hands and move your arms down to your side and breathe out.

Explosion Breaths

Start in a standing position. Breathe in as you crouch down. Then, jump up, spreading your arms and legs as you breathe out.

Nostril Breathing

Block one nostril, breathe in for 5, block the other nostril, breathe out for 5.

Shape Breathing

Using shapes is an easy way to keep track of breaths in and out. You can use your finger to trace the shape so you know where you are in your breathing. Refer to the Breathing Shapes handout for square breathing, star breathing, lazy eight breathing and triangle breathing.