



The Incredible Benefits of Deep Breathing for Preschoolers

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Abstract

For most of us, breathing is a process that we hardly notice – everyday we take about 25 000 breaths – what's there to talk about, right? However, the simple act of inhaling and exhaling has a big impact on our lives. Breathing is fundamental, we need oxygen to survive. Deep breathing has been used as a relaxation technique for thousands of years, and it's helpful for both children and adults. Breathing has been used to help when one is anxious, overwhelmed, needs to calm down or just to pause.

Preschoolers are constantly buzzing with energy and curiosity, exploring the world around them with boundless enthusiasm. However, this exuberance can sometimes lead to moments of frustration, anxiety, or even tantrums, and those stressful events send children into the “flight, fight or freeze” mode (sympathetic nervous system). Learning to deal with strong emotions (engage the parasympathetic nervous system) is a big job for a little human being, but learning to do just that is an essential part of growing up.

Teaching preschoolers deep breathing techniques may seem surprising, but it can have incredible benefits for their emotional well-being and overall development. Deep breathing exercises not only help children manage their emotions effectively, but also promote calmness (helps them to calm down during stressful events), self-awareness, and a healthy body-mind connection. There is no magic in it - deep breathing lowers one's heart rate and increases the body's oxygen levels, calms physically and mentally.

In this article, I will explore the advantages of deep breathing for preschoolers and – through the practical examples from our pre-school – will show how parents and educators can incorporate this practice into their daily routines.

Keywords: *Preschoolers, breathing, well-being.*

1. Emotional Regulation

Deep breathing is a powerful tool for emotional regulation in preschoolers. By taking slow, deep breaths, children learn to calm themselves during moments of stress, frustration, or anger since breathing acts as a pause button. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps reduce anxiety and promote relaxation. It encourages children to pause, reflect, and respond to challenging situations more thoughtfully, rather than reacting impulsively. By teaching preschoolers how to manage their emotions through deep breathing, we equip them with valuable coping mechanisms for a lifetime.

2. Increased Focus and Attention

Preschoolers often find it difficult to concentrate for extended periods. Deep breathing exercises can help improve their focus and attention span. When children engage in deep breathing, they naturally divert their attention to their breath, helping them stay present and centered. By practicing deep breathing regularly, preschoolers develop the ability to concentrate on a single task, which is crucial for their cognitive and academic development.

3. Stress Reduction

Preschoolers, just like adults, experience stress. It could be due to separation anxiety, transitions, peer interactions, or even academic pressures. Deep breathing acts as a stress-relieving technique that preschoolers can use independently. By taking slow, deep breaths, children activate the relaxation response in their bodies, reducing the levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. Regular deep breathing practice helps preschoolers develop resilience and cope with stress in a healthier and more effective manner.

4. Improved Sleep Quality



Sleep is crucial for a preschooler's overall well-being and development. Deep breathing exercises before bedtime can create a relaxing routine that promotes better sleep quality. The rhythmic breathing pattern slows down the heart rate and relaxes the body, preparing preschoolers for a peaceful sleep. Additionally, deep breathing helps children release any residual tension or worries they may be carrying from the day, allowing them to drift off into a more restful sleep. It also improves general health since it improves immune response.

5. Enhancing Body Awareness and Self-Regulation

Deep breathing exercises encourage preschoolers to connect with their bodies and develop self-regulation skills. As children focus on their breath, they become more attuned to the sensations and movements within their bodies. This heightened body awareness helps preschoolers recognize physical cues related to stress or excitement. They learn to use deep breathing as a tool to self-soothe, calm down, and restore balance.

Deep breathing is a valuable tool that empowers preschoolers to manage their emotions, improve focus, reduce stress, and develop self-regulation skills. By teaching children the art and science of deep breathing, parents and educators provide them with a lifelong tool for emotional well-being. By incorporating these simple techniques into their daily routines, we can equip children with the skills they need to navigate the world with confidence, resilience, and inner calm.

Teaching preschoolers deep breathing techniques can be a fun and engaging process.

We have started regular breathing practices in our kindergartens „Vaikystės Sodas“ in August 2022, and here are some tips to effectively teach deep breathing to preschoolers:

1. Keep it simple: Use age-appropriate language and concepts when explaining deep breathing to preschoolers. Keep instructions short, clear, and easy to understand, especially for the under three's. For example, you can explain that deep breathing means taking slow breaths like blowing bubbles or smelling flowers.
2. Find the right time to practice: children should be willing to practice and – especially in the beginning – they should be able to concentrate, therefore, they need to be calm.
3. Use visual aids: Visual cues can help preschoolers understand and remember deep breathing techniques. You can use props such as bubbles, feathers, or a stuffed animal to demonstrate how to take deep breaths. We have developed cards, and children are asked to choose how they would like to breathe on a particular day. Our teachers show them how to take a slow, deep breath in through their nose and exhale slowly through their mouth/nose.
4. Make it fun: Turn deep breathing exercises into a game or a playful activity, for example, into storytelling or imaginative play. Incorporate elements that capture their attention and make it enjoyable. For example, you can pretend to be a sleepy bear and take deep breaths together to calm down and get ready for hibernation. In general, pick the technique the children like best or ask for.
5. Practice deep breathing during calm moments: Introduce deep breathing techniques during calm and relaxed moments, rather than when a child is upset or anxious. It can be part of a daily routine, such as before naptime, during circle time, or before a quiet activity. This helps preschoolers associate deep breathing with relaxation and calmness.
6. Use guided activities: Utilize guided deep breathing activities specifically designed for preschoolers. There are books, videos, and apps available that incorporate visuals, stories, or songs to make deep breathing engaging and enjoyable for young children. These resources can provide structure and guidance in teaching deep breathing techniques effectively. We have developed our own cards that have beautiful and engaging visuals that help children visualise and remember what they have practiced.
7. Be a role model: Children learn by observing and imitating adults. Practice deep breathing yourself (especially during the moments of stress and/or frustration!) and demonstrate its benefits to preschoolers. When you encounter stressful situations, show them how you use deep breathing to calm down. They will be more likely to adopt the practice if they see you incorporating it into your own life.
8. Practice regularly: Consistency is key when teaching deep breathing. Set aside dedicated time each day for deep breathing exercises. When you practice regularly, in time breathing will come naturally when you need it. Keep the sessions short and gradually increase the duration as preschoolers become more comfortable with the practice.

We have also noticed that it's best to begin with just asking the children to observe themselves breathing: inhale-and-exhale. Most of the children prefer sitting, but it's possible that they will prefer lying down. Some children like to close their eyes. When you ask children to inhale, always do it



through the nose. Exhale – nose OR mouth. It's important for the children to concentrate and to pay attention to their breathing, therefore, it's best if they imagine, for example, blowing out candles. The other very helpful technique in the beginning is counting. Since the preschoolers enjoy counting, counting while breathing helps them focus and gives rhythm.

If you see that the child's chest is moving, encourage the child to move the air deeper, into the belly. If it's hard in the beginning, ask the child to lie down and place a favorite toy on the belly – a child needs to see and feel it move!

Once the children are able to breathe deeply, simple counting exercises help learning to focus and add rhythm to their breathing. For example, five-finger breathing (it's also called "hand breathing"), triangle breathing, square breathing or star breathing.

How does it help in "the moment"? After you have practiced enough, you are ready to use it when the child is stressed and/or overwhelmed. Once you have named the feeling, you can start breathing together – in the beginning take the child through each step. It is important to note that it is not enough to tell children to breathe - they need scaffolding, the research is clear on that as well [1].

Remember to be patient and supportive throughout the process. Each child learns at their own pace, so allow them to explore and practice deep breathing in their own way. With time and consistent practice, preschoolers can develop deep breathing as a valuable tool for managing emotions and promoting overall well-being.

References

- [1] <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/how-calm-stressed-kid-one-minute-video-can-help-according-stanford-researchers>