

Well-Being in Schools – 15 Breathing & Relaxation Exercises for Children

Introduction. Working with breathing is the basis of meditation, speech work, sporting activity and much else besides. Yet we give it little attention. As a form of exercise or simply to promote alertness in the classroom it is safe and requires little experience to teach.

Breath work is an almost universal spiritual practice and is a part of most stilling and meditation work. It's medical value is well-established and its use extends to prisons and hospitals, as well as individual health and spiritual practice. Medical research has now identified many of the neurological and physiological changes that take place as a result of regular, relaxed and controlled breathing.

Part of breath work involves developing alertness to the breathing process. Focus on the breath helps to still the thoughts and this is a core element of the value of the exercises.

At the beginning children sometimes find it an odd thing to do and may breathe noisily or in a forced and unnatural way. Developing a routine helps overcome this. Most of these exercises take only a couple of minutes.

A great time to use breathing work is after breaks. It helps the children relax after play and brings hormone release - endorphins and adrenalin etc. into balance.

Try it at home yourself. It works!!

Notes on Posture. An alert, upright posture with an upright spine and shoulders supports good breathing. A slumped body puts pressure on the diaphragm and rib cage, making breathing shallower and more laboured. Attempting to get children to maintain good posture is always tricky – but encourage it by developing awareness of posture, rather than forcing it on them.

Timing. The times and repetitions given are the minimum to have lasting benefit. When you begin this work, however younger children may suit shorter sessions. As the children become acclimatized to the exercises times should be increased. You will rapidly learn to judge the optimum length of time for each exercise for your group.

Notes - Each of the exercises below is a stand-alone practice. With appropriate vocabulary, they are suitable for KS1 onwards. The more detailed exercises ask pupils to focus on their breathing, their bodies or on 'letting go' of stresses and strains. These are also exercises in 'stilling', which encourage the pupil to focus their thoughts as well.

15 Breathing Exercises for Classroom Practice

1. Breathing through nose and mouth - (*sitting or standing*) Practice breathing slowly through nose and out through the mouth. Now soften breathing so you can hardly hear it at all. *Repeat for 1 to 2 minutes.*

2. Blow out – (*standing*) Take a deep breath in through your nose. Hold it and then blow it out noisily through the mouth as you flop over from the waist. Allow head and arms to hang. Then slowly come up, breathing as you do so. *Repeat this 3 or 4 times.*

3. Shrugs - (*sat upright or standing*) Breathe in through the nose and raise shoulders up towards ears. Hold for a few seconds. Breathe out through the mouth as you release your shoulders and let them flop downwards. *Repeat 4 to 6 times.*

4. Out-Breath - (*standing*) Put your arms and hands straight out in front of you, at waist height, palms facing down. As you breathe in slowly raise your hands in that position, up to neck height. Breathe out, through your mouth, by blowing the breath out slowly, and lowering your hands to the starting position. Emphasise a slow controlled out-breath. *Repeat 4 to 6 times.*

5. Aware of Your Body – (*sat upright*) Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, breathing slowly and deeply. Be aware of how your body moves as you breathe. Do your shoulders lift and your chest move out? Or is your tummy being pushed out? We will practice breathing both ways. First, breathe by raising your shoulders and pushing out your chest gently. Do this 5 times. Now breathe by using your diaphragm to push out your tummy. Do this 5 times. Which way of breathing feels best for you?

6. Close eyes – (*sat upright*) Notice the gentle rhythm of your breathing. This is the rhythm of your life. Value each breath. Notice how it comes into you and how it goes away. Be aware that no two breaths are exactly the same in length or depth. Each time you breathe out, feel the worries or stresses or tensions are flowing out of you. Feel them melt away each time you breathe out as you become more relaxed. *Practice for 1 to 2 minutes.*

7. Close eyes and listen quietly – (*sat upright*) Listen to your breath. Breathe in and out. Continue in this manner letting go of any thoughts. Feelings and worries you may have at this time. Just listen to your breath as you breathe gently in and out. *Practice for 1 to 2 minutes.*

8. Close Eyes and Breath in for 4 seconds and out for 4 seconds – (*stood or sat upright*) I wonder if we can breathe in for four and out for four in and out through the nose. In 2 3 4. Out 2 3 4. *Repeat this 5 to 10 times.*

9. Close eyes – Tension Release (*sat upright*) Begin by focussing attention on feeling of your breathing. Notice the movement of your lungs rising and falling with each breath, and suggest to yourself that each time you breathe out any tightness and tension is flowing out of you. Each time you breathe out you are becoming more relaxed and calm. (*practice for 1 to 2 minutes*)

10. Close eyes – Peaceful (*sat upright*) Every time you breathe out for the next 2 minutes repeat in your mind the word 'Peaceful' and see what pictures come into your head. Feel the meaning of the word 'peaceful' every time you breathe out. See what pictures appear. Focus all your attention on the feeling and the pictures from this word.

11. Close eyes – Count Breaths (*stood or sat upright*) Notice the way that your breath enters and leaves the body. Listen to your breath. Begin counting each slow breath in your mind. Each time you breathe in count 1. When you have counted up to 4 breaths start again at 1. If your mind wanders bring it back gently and start at 1 again.

12. Close eyes - Count for 2 minutes (*stood or sat upright*) Notice the rhythm and feeling of your breathing as you breathe normally. In a moment I will ask you to count each time you breathe out for 2 mins. See how many you can count without your mind wandering off to other things. If your mind does wander go back to 1 and start again. Try not to miss the feeling of even one breath. I will tell you when to begin and when 2 mins have gone.

13. Close eyes – Music Relaxation (*sat upright*) Focus your thoughts on the music I am playing to you. Take 3 long deep breaths. Feel yourself relaxing more and more with each breath. Let the rhythm of the music calm you. Feel the muscles relax. (*1 to 3 minutes*)

14. Relax – Open and Shut Eyes (*sat upright*) Take 3 deep breaths. Keep your head still and look straight ahead. As you breathe in, look up and see if you see your eyebrows. As you breath out look down and close your eyes. (*1 to 2 minutes*)

15. Body and Breath – Aware of your Body (*sat upright*) Be as quiet and relaxed as you can. Now we are going to become aware of some of the sensations in our body. Become aware of the touch of your clothes on your shoulders and of the feel of your clothes on your back. And now feel your back touching the chair. Become aware of the feel of your hands. Let them rest in your lap. Feel the air on your palms. Be aware of your fingertips. Feel your shoulders. Become aware of any tension in them. Now become aware of your legs. Are they warm or cold? Feel your feet in your shoes and feel the floor beneath you. Go back to your head become aware of the air on your face. Go down to your shoulders. Be aware of your arms, your hands, your fingers. Be aware of your spine, your stomach, your legs. Notice any feeling in your feet. As you continue to go around your body, be aware of each part and move on. Now become aware of your breathing. Notice the air as it comes in through the nostrils. Be aware of it as you breathe out. Stay with this awareness for a few minutes, simply noting each breath as it comes in and as it goes out. As you breathe in imagine you are breathing in light and energy. As you breathe out imagine you are breathing out all your anxiety and tension. Stay with this awareness and then when you are ready stretch, open your eyes and gently come back to your surroundings.