

BELLY BREATHING

When your child becomes tense or anxious, he probably "shortens his breath," inhaling in short, rapid breaths with the upper part of his chest. Shallow breathing like this contributes to feelings of tightness in the chest and neck as well as a feeling of light-headedness. To counter that response, your child must learn to breathe from the diaphragm. Help him visualize the action by labeling it "belly breathing."

Belly Up. Have your child lie flat on her back with her arms by her sides and her legs straight. Show her how to put one hand over her belly button and the other hand on her chest. Observe your child breathing naturally. What happens to her hands when she inhales and exhales? If she is breathing correctly for relaxation, the hand on her stomach, rather than the one on her chest, should move up when she inhales and down when she exhales.

To teach your child how to breathe correctly, have her imagine her stomach is a balloon that she must fill with air as she inhales. Explain to your child that this will happen naturally when she inhales correctly; she does not need to push her stomach out or arch her back. Place a book on her stomach so she can see the motion easily.

If your child has difficulty mastering the motion, reassure her that "it will come." Newborn babies breathe this way; your child might do the same as she sleeps. However, when you do it on purpose, it takes a little while to get the knack of it.

Encourage your child to practice belly breathing for a few minutes everyday until the skill develops. Lavishly praise her for cooperating and working to master this skill.

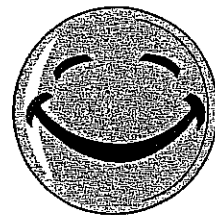
Breathing Slowly. Once your child learns to inhale with his belly rising, have him place both hands on his navel. As he breathes in and out, ask him to count aloud slowly so that it takes longer to exhale than to inhale. Instruct your child to count to three as he inhales and then to five as he exhales. Over time your child can increase the counts so that his breathing slows even further. If your child begins to tense and grit his teeth as he struggles to do this, counter the action by instructing him to open his mouth slightly.

Next, when your child practices, slowly say the word "relax" and have him repeat it with you when he exhales. Exaggerate the word "relax" so it lasts the whole time he slowly exhales. Frequently pair the word and controlled exhaling until he can do it easily.

Belly Breathing Sitting and Standing. Once your child can easily breathe lying down, have her practice in other positions, such as sitting or standing, so that she learns to use the skill anywhere she is. If your child has difficulty transferring the skill to new positions have her practice the breathing while reclining with one pillow beneath her back. Increase the pillows to two, three, and so forth until she is able to breathe correctly as she sits upright. Praise your child for each accomplishment and remind her to pair belly breathing with the word "relax" whenever she practices.



Learning to relax



For younger children, learning to relax can be made fun.

Muscles can be stretched and tensed by playing a game such as 'Simon Says', in which the child is asked to do the following.

- 1 March straight and upright around the room.
- 2 Run on the spot.
- 3 Pretend that their arms are branches of a tree by waving them above their head.
- 4 Screw up their face to look like a scary monster.
- 5 Stretch up to the sky and be as tall as possible.
- 6 Roll up tightly to become as small as possible.

After the child has stretched their muscles, the final stage is to tell them to calm down and relax. Ask them to pretend to be a big heavy animal and to move around the room very slowly. Move as quietly and as slowly as possible. Finally, ask them to be 'sleeping lions' and to lie on the floor as still and quiet as possible for a couple of minutes.