

# Relaxation for your child

**This information explains the importance of relaxation on gut health and introduces some relaxation exercises. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for your child.**

## Why relaxing is so important for your child's gut health

It is common for young people to feel stressed at times. Some stress can be helpful to motivate us and improve our performance. However, when the stress gets overwhelming it can become a problem. Stress can affect our gut health and contributes towards many gastrointestinal symptoms, such as abdominal (tummy) pain, feeling sick (nausea), constipation and diarrhoea.

The gut is what we call the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. This starts at your mouth and includes your food pipe, stomach, large and small intestines (bowel), all the way down to your bottom.

Our body's natural ('fight or flight') response to stress and anxiety can affect how our gut works. The brain and gut communicate through our nerve network. This is sometimes called the gut-brain axis.

This can cause the muscles and nerves in our gut to not work together in a coordinated way, and can:

- change the speed and smoothness of movements in the gut
- increase gut sensitivity to bloating and other pain signals
- change the types of bacteria that live in the gut

These changes can cause gastrointestinal symptoms, or make these symptoms worse.

Children with gastrointestinal symptoms might also feel more stress as a result of living with these symptoms, making them more likely to feel overwhelmed at times. Helping your child to cope with stress, and teaching them how to relax, is important. It can reduce the body's natural stress response and activate the body's soothing system (sometimes called the 'rest and digest' mode). This can help their gut to work more effectively, reduce their symptoms and help them cope with their condition.

## Causes of stress, worry or anxiety for children

Some children and young people find it difficult to recognise or talk about the things that are making them stressed. Young people who have been feeling stressed for a long time can get used to this feeling, so might not recognise that they are stressed.

Sitting down and talking with your child about things that are worrying them can be a helpful first step. Suggesting they write things down can be a good strategy to get thoughts off their mind and allow them to step away from them. If they are finding it difficult to identify or talk about their worries, you can look out for clues in everyday conversations with them. You could try asking them if they would like anything in their life to be different.

Common sources of stress for children and young people include:

- exams
- pressure at school
- bullying
- friendship issues
- illness of a friend or family member
- financial pressure on the family
- conflict within the family
- appearance concerns
- issues about identity
- bereavement or loss

Once you have identified what is bothering them, help them to work out if anything can be done to stop or change the cause of the stress. Can this problem be solved? For example, helping them plan how to resolve an argument with a friend.

If it can be solved, help them to work out how to do this. Some tips for this are below. If there is nothing that can be done to stop the cause of the stress, you can help your child to manage the stress by practicing relaxation skills (see below).

## How you can help reduce your child's stress

Helping your child to deal with the cause of their stress can help them turn off the body's stress response and help the body to relax. Children might need support with problem solving so it can be helpful to talk to your child and work through the problem together. We have listed some helpful tips to help with problem solving below.

- Create an action plan
  - What are you going to do?
  - When are you going to do it?
  - Where will you do it?
  - How will you do it?
- Some larger or overwhelming tasks can benefit from being broken down into smaller, more manageable, parts to make it feel less daunting.
- Consider if your child needs extra support with any part of the plan, and think about who they can ask to help them.
- Sometimes it can be helpful to practice what they might want to say. Roleplay the situation with your child to help them develop their communication skills.
- Talk with your child about the possible outcomes. Help them prepare for these by asking what they would do if ... were to happen.
- Be careful about avoiding something completely. Sometimes avoiding a situation, or avoiding thinking about it, can be helpful in reducing stress in the short-term but, unless the situation is resolved, the stress usually come back.

## How you can help your child to relax

Sometimes you cannot change the things causing your child to feel stressed, (or perhaps not quickly). In these situations your child can learn to relax their mind and their body

The following exercises are most effective when practiced regularly and made part of everyday routines. The exercises will be more helpful if your child practices them often. It is a good idea to practice them at first when your child is relaxed (not stressed or in discomfort) so that they can develop these skills and are ready to use them when they are stressed.

We recommended finding 5 to 10 minutes each day when you and your child can get comfortable, and are free from distraction, to practice these exercises. It might be helpful to do the exercises on your own first, so that it is easier to guide your child.

## Relaxed breathing

You can use slow, gentle, deep breaths to help your body to relax. This type of breathing activates our soothing 'rest and digest' system.

- Get into a comfortable position, either sitting up or laying down.
- Imagine that there is a balloon in your belly that gets bigger as you breathe in and then gets smaller again as you breathe out. Your belly should rise/expand out as you breathe in and then sink back as you breathe out.
- Take a slow deep breath in for 4 seconds. Remember to imagine this balloon inflating so that your belly gets bigger.
- Hold your breath for 1 to 2 seconds.
- Breathe out slowly and smoothly for 4 to 6 seconds. Imagine the balloon deflating so that when you stop counting the balloon is completely deflated.
- Hold your breath again for 1 to 2 seconds.
- Repeat for a few minutes.

### Additional tips

- Make sure your breaths are smooth, steady and continuous, and not jerky.
- It can help to count silently in your head as you breathe in and out.
- Some people find it helpful to say the word 'relax' slowly and calmly in their head as they breathe out
- If you find it difficult to count to 4 or 6, change the timing to suit you. The aim is to just do slower, deeper breathing than normal.

## Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

This can help you to increase your awareness of tension in your body, and teach you how to relax your muscles. There are many different ways to do PMR and you can find lots of them on YouTube. The main component of PMR is tensing and relaxing your muscles in a systematic way. An example of PMR is below.

Before you begin, think about any injuries or conditions which might mean that you will want to miss out certain parts of the exercise. If your child has pain doing any of these, stop and skip to the next one. If you have any concerns, speak with your child's consultant before doing these.

Ask your child to do each step 2 times.

- 1 **Feet.** From a sitting or standing position, squeeze your toes as if you are barefoot in wet sand or mud and imagine the sand or mud between your toes. Do this for 5 seconds then relax your feet.
- 2 **Legs.** Sit upright in a chair with your legs straight out in front of you and point your toes towards the sky. Hold the stretch for 5 seconds then release, letting your legs slowly drop to the floor.
- 3 **Bottom.** Squeeze your buttocks together, hold for 5 seconds and slowly release.
- 4 **Stomach.** Pull your stomach in as if you are trying to squeeze through a gap in a fence. Hold this for 5 seconds, then slowly release.
- 5 **Chest.** Put the palms of your hands together in front of you. Keep your elbows at shoulder height, and your hands slightly higher than your elbows. Push your hands together. Hold this squeeze for 5 seconds then slowly release.

- 6 **Arms.** Put your arms straight out in front of you, palms of your hands facing the sky. Slowly clench your fists and keeping your elbows still, slowly pull your hands back towards your head, squeezing all the muscles in your arms as you go. Hold this squeeze for 5 seconds then slowly release.
- 7 **Hands.** Imagine holding half an orange in each hand, and squeeze as if you are squeezing all the juice out of the orange. Hold this squeeze for 5 seconds and then slowly release.
- 8 **Shoulders.** Pull your shoulders up towards your ears like you are a turtle hiding in your shell. Squeeze your shoulders backwards and together. Hold this squeeze for 5 seconds then slowly relax your shoulders.
- 9 **Face.** Imagine there is a fly on your nose and you need to get it off by squeezing your face and wiggling your nose. Do this for 5 seconds and then stop.

### Additional tips

- Encourage your child to release the tension from each squeeze or stretch as slowly as they can to increase the feeling of relaxation.
- Ask your child to notice the difference in how their body feels when the muscles are tense and when they are relaxed, to help build up their awareness of tension in their body.
- You can change the order of the exercise or skip some out if necessary. Your child might even want to create their own ways of tensing their muscle groups.

## Other relaxation strategies

There are lots of other relaxation exercise that your child can do. You can look on YouTube for guided relaxation exercises, and at phone apps to help them relax. You might need to try different ones until you find one that works for your child. Here are some other activities that can help young people to relax:

- mindfulness
- yoga
- reading
- listening to relaxing music
- prayer or meditation
- exercise

## More sources of information

**Relax kids**, for downloads to help with relaxation (charges apply), [web](http://www.relaxkids.com) [www.relaxkids.com](http://www.relaxkids.com)

**Headspace**, for downloads including meditations, wind-downs and mindfulness (charges apply), [web](http://www.headspace.com) [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)

**Calm**, for meditation and sleep stories (charges apply), [web](http://www.calm.com) [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com)

**Mind yeti**, for children's mindfulness (channel on YouTube),

[web](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiaUKiwbiHMQDQLCXoPaMMYotldKIUQCw) [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiaUKiwbiHMQDQLCXoPaMMYotldKIUQCw](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiaUKiwbiHMQDQLCXoPaMMYotldKIUQCw)

**Smiling mind**, for free daily mindfulness and meditations,

[web](http://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app) [www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app](http://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app)

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's stress or mental health, please speak to your child's GP

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [web](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets) [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)

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