

Self-awareness of breathing for children with motor planning difficulties

Background Information

Many programs currently used in classrooms to support the social emotional development of children include exercises in deep breathing. These exercises help students to regulate themselves so that they can feel calm and focused. Programs such as Mind UP™ and the Zones of Regulation® include lessons focused specifically on breathing. Children learn to think about their bodies as they inhale and exhale and to recognise the calm and focused state they can achieve. The ability to use deep breathing is a helpful, lifelong and easily accessed strategy to manage anxiety and stress, and to increase focus and attention.

Children with special needs, such as those with Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) or motor planning difficulties, also benefit from learning how to breathe deeply and calmly. DCD is a motor skills disorder that affects five to six percent of all school-aged children. DCD occurs when a delay in the development of motor skills, or when difficulty coordinating movements, results in a child's inability to perform everyday tasks. Children with DCD have reduced body awareness including decreased feedback from muscles and joints. Although DCD is primarily considered a motor disorder there are many studies that also report psychological and social concerns with children with DCD. Developmental Coordination Disorder can make children vulnerable to negative secondary consequences such as social isolation and bullying as well as feelings of anxiety and frustration. Children with other special needs may also experience motor planning difficulties that influence their social emotional development.

Consciously controlling and coordinating breathing in a rhythmical way is a motor skill that children with DCD may find challenging. Because of impaired body awareness these children may breathe too rapidly, too shallowly or in an irregular pattern. Increasing children's awareness of the breath is a good starting point

before introducing a specific breathing technique. “Ten Breaths” is an enjoyable way to do this:

Ten Breaths

In this game you pay attention to your breathing for ten breaths. Don't worry about breath control just observe your breath.

On the first inhale, say to yourself, “I'm breathing in one.” As you exhale, say to yourself, “I'm breathing out one.” On the next inhale say, “I'm breathing in two,” followed by, “I'm breathing out two,” and so on.

You'll probably notice that different breaths have different rhythms. Sometimes they will be regular and sometimes there may be long gaps between breaths. Some are shallow, others deep. All you do is observe and name the number.

You might notice that your mind wanders and you are distracted by thoughts. That's okay. Congratulate yourself on noticing these thoughts then refocus by starting at the beginning: “I'm breathing in one.” The fun and challenging part is to see how close to ten you can get before you find yourself distracted. Some days it may be the first few breathes before you forget what you were doing. Other days it will be easier to focus and you may actually reach “Ten Breaths.”

Ways to Offer Support

There are a number of additional strategies to help children with DCD to develop the motor coordination involved in deep breathing.

- Provide posters with pictures or diagrams of the breathing technique.
- Provide clear modelling of deep breathing.
- Do not expect children to close their eyes while practising deep breathing. Children with DCD need to use their eyes to direct their movements.
- Use a cognitive approach to encourage slow and deep breathing. Ask children to imagine they are blowing up a balloon or sniffing a slice of pizza and then blowing on it to cool it.
- Teach “Take 5 Breathing”. Count on your fingers to help coordinate pace and rhythm. Lift one finger at a time as you breathe in through your nose and count in your mind: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Pause for a second. As you exhale, count backward (5, 4, 3, 2, 1) putting down a finger for each number.

- Teach “Square Breathing”. Draw with your fingers around the sides of a square or rectangular object in the room as you breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds and hold for 4 seconds.
- Teach “Belly Breathing”. Place your hands palms down on your belly or place a small stuffy on your belly to see and feel the movement as you breathe. Notice your hands or the stuffy rising as you breathe in and lowering as you breathe out.
- Expand and contract a Hoberman Sphere to help organise posture and regulate the pace of breathing.
- Set up apps such as “breathe2 relax” that can be customised to an individual’s own breath rate.
- Provide frequent opportunities to practice.



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