

**JESSICA MCILVEEN**  
presents  
**KIDS YOGA THERAPY**



# BREATHING AND RELAXING



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The following are the props used in these exercises that can be purchased from anywhere that sells yoga supplies: yoga mat, feather, straw, toy, sandbag, eye mask, bolster, headphones (optional)

In previous videos we have gone through the main benefits of yoga for children. The third main benefit I see from all the work I do with children is to strengthen the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the relaxation response in our body which we want to activate and strengthen as much as possible.

After you have worked with your child doing some movement exercises and releasing tension, they have been able to fatigue their muscles a little bit, and push past their thresholds so they feel a little bit exhausted. This is the perfect time to do a bit of relaxation and start to slow down their brainwaves. This is by no means limited to what I demonstrate in this video. There are hundreds of things you can do when you are creative.

The main concept to remember is that breathing is key and the extension of the breath is the most important part. When we think about accessing our parasympathetic nervous system it is through the exhale. And then we want to bring the focus back to the body during relaxation time. However creative you want to be just remember these key points to bring into the practice.

To begin with I will go through some breathing techniques then do a little bit of meditation. Adapt to what the child is interested in. Often our children are told to breathe through things or to calm down but they don't know what this means.

### **The Feather**

In this first exercise we have a feather which allows us to get instant feedback on what a strong exhalation is. This shows them what you mean when you ask them to breathe.



Use this dialogue as you do it with them.

“Let’s practise with the feather”

“We’re going to hold the feather and pop it just in front of our mouth”

“We’re going to breathe in our nose and blow the feather away”

“We’re going to do 5 together”

“Breathe in your nose then blow the feather through the mouth”

*Do this twice then say:*

“OK for the last 3 breaths we’re going to close our eyes and do it”

“Let’s hold it up in front of our mouth and let’s close our eyes”

“Breathe in your nose”

“Breathe out”

“We’ve got two more to go and we’re going to keep our eyes closed”

“Breathe in your nose”

“Breathe out”

“Breathe in your nose”

“Breathe out”

This is about getting instant feedback on what it actually means to breathe out. We then close down our eyes because the eyes are actually receiving about 80% of our sensory information. All the information that needs to be processed mainly comes through our eyes, so at any point during the relaxation or breathing exercises if you can have them close their eyes, it will be a lot easier for them to calm their minds and bodies.



## The Straw

This is a great way to regulate the breath. With a straw we are regulating the breath, really slowing it down because the breath can only come in through a small opening.

“Breathe in your nose”

“Breathe out”

“We’re going to do 2 more breaths together and I want you to pop your hand in front of the straw and see if you can blow your hand away with your strong breath”

“Breathe in your nose and breathe out”

*Now put your hand in front of their straw.*

“OK so this time blow my hand away”

“Breathe in your nose and breathe out of the straw”

“That was really strong”

“So this time we’re going to do it laying on your back, legs out straight, beautiful”

“Can you pop your straw in your mouth and close down your eyes for this one?”

*Again put your hand in front of their straw.*

“We are going to do 3 big breaths and you’re going to try and blow away my hand”

“Close your eyes, breathe in your nose and breathe out”

“OK keep going, breathe in, breathe out”



# BREATHING AND RELAXING

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“Breathe in, breathe out”

“OK now keep your eyes closed...”

Can you notice your brain?

Can you notice your chest?

Can you notice your arms?

Can you notice your hands?

Can you notice your belly?”

“OK you can hop up when you’re ready”

After finishing the breathing it’s a nice exercise to have your child notice different body parts, because then they can feel into anything that may have changed. Every time you can bring it back to the body will benefit your child’s mind and body to be calm and present.

## The 5 Finger Breath

This one is meant to be nice and easy. Sometimes you need to have activities like this they can access anywhere – in shops, at school, without you.

“You can cross your legs or sit on your knees, it’s your choice”

“Can you pop your hand in front of you (*fingers apart*) and we’re going to trace our hand. Every time you go up we will breathe in our nose and when we come down we will breathe out. So let’s do 5 of these together”

“So go up and breathe in”

“Then go down and breathe out”

“So up, in, down out

Up in, down out



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Up in, down out,  
Up in, down out”

“Perfect!”

“How is your brain feeling at the moment?”

“Is it feeling the same or different from before?”

Sometimes when we ask these questions we really want the child to say “I’m feeling so calm”. That’s the dream and a lot of the time they will say this after the practice. But when we set that expectation and they don’t feel that, it doesn’t mean you’ve failed. It just means in that moment it’s not working for them based on where they are with their body and mind. You won’t get the same response out of them every day.

### Favourite toy

Sometimes when we want our children to go into a meditative state or feel calm and still, lying them flat on their back can be the worse feeling, and that’s something to take into consideration.

You can do movement meditations. Being still doesn’t mean it’s a success. Sometimes children will calm with slow movement or when using a focus point and that’s perfectly OK. For this one you can grab your child’s favourite toy and pop it on their belly.

“Lie down on your back. I’m just going to place this toy on your belly”

“Let’s just see if you can focus on it and notice when it moves up and down when you breathe”

“Do really deep breaths into your belly Like it’s a big balloon and



see if you can notice when the toy goes up and down”

*Make sure they can see the object. If not, place a bolster or cushion under their head.*

“Now take nice big breaths and notice the toy moving up and down”

*Do quite a few breaths, going for as long as possible. If they are happy to lay there and keep doing this, then it's perfect.*

Again this is a focus point for them, something that is going up and down. It brings attention into a single focal point. When they are off thinking about so many things during the day, it is one way to get their brainwaves to slow down and their body to feel calm and relaxed.

### **Magic feather**

For this exercise, both of you sit cross legged and face other.

“Take the feather please”

“This feather is pretty magical. Would you like to know why?”

“When we touch certain body parts with it, it helps that body part feel really calm like jelly, really floppy and relaxed. We're going to touch each body part, I'm going to say each one, and then it's going to help it to feel calm and relaxed like jelly”

“Does that make sense? OK then let's do it”

“Let's start with our feet “ (*stroke the feather across the feet*)

“And now our legs”



“Our belly, take a big breath into our belly”

“Our chest”

“Our arms”

“Now the other arm”

“Hands”

“And our face”

This exercise is another that creates body awareness. It reconnects them to their body, and by telling them how the muscles should feel, eg like jelly, or you could say it's like chocolate ice cream melting in the sun, it gives the child a visual of how the muscle is meant to feel. When we tell them to relax or calm down they don't really resonate with those words.

### Head on belly

If your child really needs contact with you then choosing activities where you have physical touch is powerful, and it's a beautiful bonding experience. One activity could be like this when you are lying down. This could be in the bedroom just before bed.

“Can you put your head on my belly”

*(If they don't want to, ask if you can put your head on their belly then get into that position)*

“Can you do a big breath into your belly so my head moves”

“Oh that was strong”

“Let's do 2 more”

“Now 1 more”

The more touch, the more relaxed they can get. Sometimes they won't want to go with it and that's totally OK. You just need to adjust and find something else that will work.





## Child's pose

Get your child into a child's pose, curled up like a cocoon so it feels safe. They have their head down, with knees and arms tucked up under their body. A lot of children who have anxiety feel really comfortable in this position.

If your child has a heavy weighted blanket or they like a lot of physical input to feel safe, you can use a sandbag on the lower part of their back when they're in this position. This works if they are a bit heightened or it calms them down before a meditation. Just rock them from side to side with the heaviness on the bottom of their back and ask them to blow up their belly like a big balloon and do maybe 10 breaths. Just keep rocking them from side to side because it's extremely soothing.

If you have a weighted blanket it's your best friend, so use it during relaxation time. If they're lying on their back you could also pop it on their belly.

## Lazy starfish

Usually the parent would be in the child's pose because of the size difference, but you can swap this around. It is about body connection, feeling each other's body and allowing focus and concentration on the child's part. If they are in child's pose sit cross legged at their tail end then lean backwards onto their body.

"Does it feel OK"

"Is it comfortable?"

"Can you feel my body move when I breathe?"

The purpose of this is for them to notice you and the way they're



feeling the sensation of your body against theirs. It is reducing the sensory concentration point to a feeling when usually this focus is in their head.

The following are a couple of meditation activities that most children I work with enjoy.

### Meditation 1

When I am speaking a meditation or asking them to do things while lying down, some children are still very distracted, so we need to limit the sounds they hear. My recommendation would be to use headphones. You can get recordings on YouTube or record your own voice. It is also helpful for them to wear an eye mask.

One of the goals is to release all of the tension out of the body which has built up during the day. One of the most effective ways we can do this is called the “tension release” exercise. When explaining it to your child use the examples given earlier: “Imagine that muscle is like chocolate ice cream melting in the sun” or “It’s like jelly” or “It’s floppy” so they can understand exactly what is required of them.

Have them lie down with their eye mask on.

“OK if you pop your hands beside your body on the ground we’re going to do 3 big breaths together”

“Breathe in your nose and breathe out”

“Breathe in, breathe out”

“Breathe in, breathe out”

“Now I’m going to say different body parts, and when I say the body parts you’re going to squeeze each one really tight. And



# BREATHING AND RELAXING

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then when I say relax you're going to relax it like it's floppy like jelly"

"So let's practise that"

"Hands by your side"

"Your first one is your feet. Point your toes and squeeze your feet muscles, squeeze, squeeze and relax like jelly"

"Now your legs. Squeeze every leg muscle squeeze, squeeze, squeeze and relax like jelly"

"Now your belly. Squeeze your belly muscles squeeze, squeeze, squeeze and relax like jelly"

"Squeeze your arms, squeeze your arm muscles, make big fists squeeze, squeeze, squeeze and relax like jelly"

"Shoulders, squeeze your shoulders really tight, go, go go and relax like jelly"

"And your face, squeeze all your face muscles squeeze, squeeze, squeeze and relax like jelly"

"Now squeeze every muscle in your body, your feet, your legs, your belly, your arms, your shoulders your neck, and your face. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze harder, harder and relax like jelly"

"Let's take 3 big breaths"

This is a simple way to release tension out of their body.

## Meditation 2

This is another way to relax their body and keep them still.



Lie them on their back and place a bolster under their lower back. Then ask them to put their legs up in the air. You could use a cushion or even have their legs going up a wall.

Often when children are in a state of anxiety they are in their sympathetic nervous system, the stress response system, and what this does is it makes all of the blood rush to their extremities. This is so the feet, legs and hands are ready to fight or run as part of the fight/flight/freeze response, so in these cases we want to bring the blood back down. This method is calming for the body.

“Pop your feet in the air. Does that feel comfortable?”

You can have them do this with a mask on and take 10 big breaths or just have them lay there for a few minutes while you count in your mind.

Throughout all these videos we have been through the three major benefits I see through my work with children.

Why this works is because we:

• Empower their body to empower their mind

- Strengthen the relaxation response of their nervous system (parasympathetic nervous system)
- Activate their interoceptive system and build reconnection to their bodies.

There are so many ways of doing each of these activities and creating strengths within the practices. There are key points in all of the videos that include these benefits. Just get creative, remember there’s no right or wrong way and meet your child where they’re at. It won’t be perfect every day and that is fine. Just have fun with it.