

Managing Big Emotions with Breathing

This fabulous breathing exercise and the information below was developed by Leonie of Relax Kids Canberra. You can find out more about Leonie via the Relax Kids Canberra Facebook page.

When we are stressed or upset nature's fight or flight response takes over, increasing our heart rate, making our breathing fast and shallow, and sending blood from our brain out to our limbs ready to escape or challenge the perceived threat or danger. While stress hormones are flooding our bodies and we are gripped by this programmed response it is very hard to slow down, become calm, express our feelings or think rationally about what is happening to us and how we are responding. Our thought processes and self-control are actually hindered by our biological stress response.

When stressed, children may experience an additional layer of fear or distress as they feel out of control and overwhelmed, not understanding what is happening to them or why. As adults, we are more aware of our feelings and of the physiological changes that come with these, but even we may have a hard time managing our own behaviour.

Take 5 Breathing is a wonderful way to switch off the stress response. It brings the body back into balance, slowing and deepening the breath and slowing down the heart rate, while harnessing the need to move with an action that requires focus and provides sensory feedback to our brains. Best of all, Take 5 Breathing is simple, enjoyable, free, and you can use it anywhere, anytime.

What is Take 5 Breathing?

During Take 5 Breathing, the child concentrates on taking five slow breaths in through their nose and out through their mouth. Children may need to practice this first if they are used to mouth breathing. If you notice that your child finds breathing through their nose a challenge, invite them to imagine smelling a beautiful flower or their favourite food as they breathe in, and then to breathe out with a big sigh because it smelt so good. At the same time as breathing, the child focuses on the action of tracing up and down the fingers of one hand and the gentle sensations this creates. Here is how it works:

A GUIDE TO TAKE FIVE BREATHING

1. Spread your hand and stretch your fingers out like a star. You can choose your left hand or your right hand. Pretend the pointer finger of your other hand is a pencil and imagine you are going to trace around the outline of your hand and fingers.

2. Start at the bottom of your thumb and slide your finger up your thumb, pause at the top, and then slide your finger down the other side. Now slide your pointer up your second finger, pause, and slide down the other side. Continue tracing your fingers up, pause, and down. Slide your finger slowly, watch your finger move and notice how it feels. Keep going until you have finished tracing your fifth finger (pinky).
3. Now you are ready to add some breathing. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Remember to keep it slow and steady.
4. Place your pointer finger at the bottom of your thumb, and breathe in as you slide up. Breathe out as you slide down. Breathe in as you slide up your second finger, and breathe out as you slide down. Keep going until you have finished tracing your fingers and you have taken five slow breaths.
5. How does your body feel now? Do you feel calm or would you like to take another five?

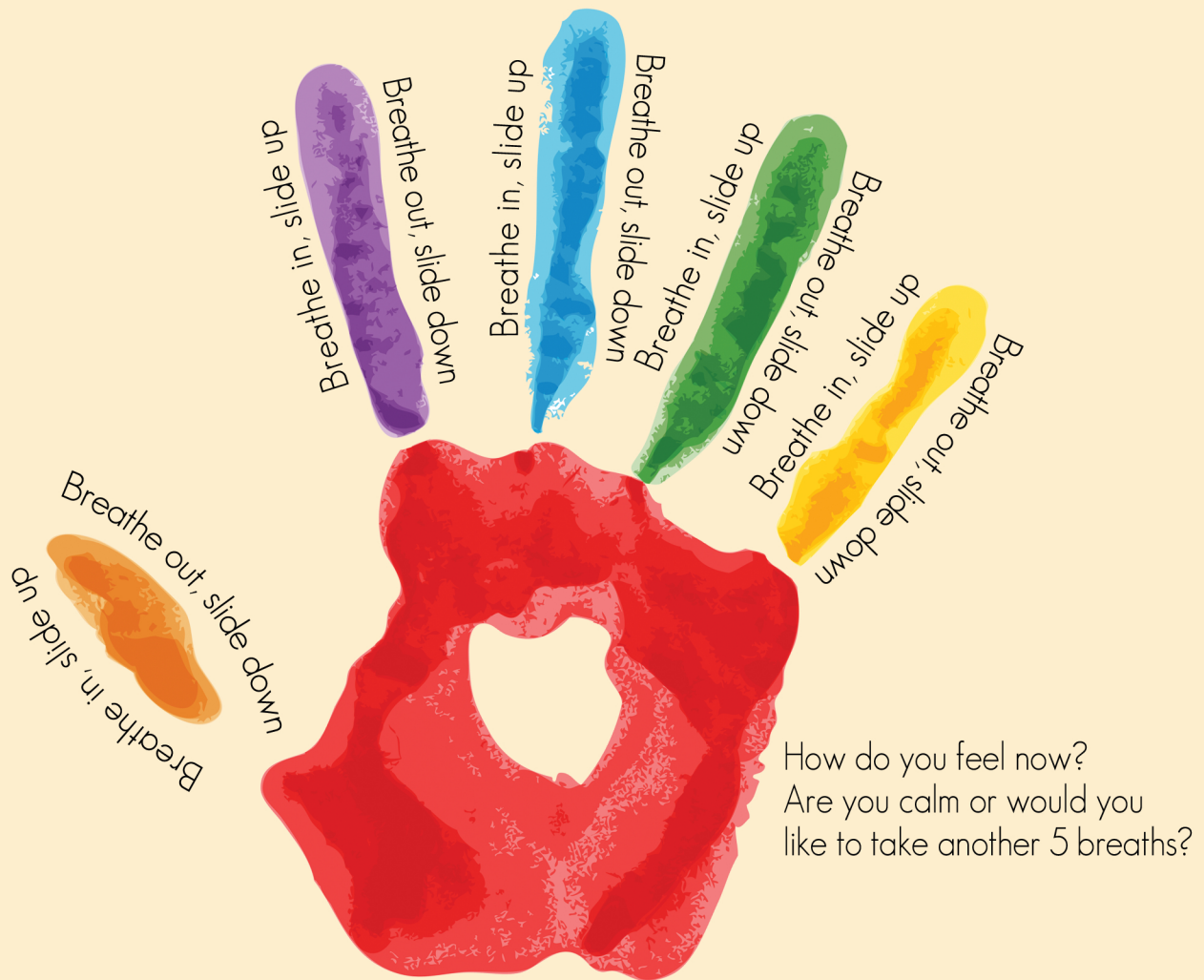
Most children find the sensory aspect of this breathing method very soothing and settling. If your child dislikes the sensation of sliding their finger up and down their hand try one of these adaptations;

- Trace an outline of their hand on a piece of card and they can trace their finger along the outline. You can create a textured outline or cut out the shape if this works better.
- An alternative that involves no touching is to stretch their fingers out like candles on a cake and slowly blow each candle out and tuck the finger into the palm.

Practising Take 5

The best time to practise Take 5 Breathing, or any calm down method, is when everyone is happy and no one feels stressed. Children find it hard to learn or use these techniques when they are already overwhelmed by big feelings (so do adults!) and it is important that we don't force, push or demand that children use a calm down method. The last thing our children need is pressure to succeed at relaxing! Letting the poster act as a reminder rather than verbally telling our children what to do when they are feeling overcome with emotion and stress can be more effective.

CALM DOWN WITH TAKE 5 BREATHING



1. Stretch your hand out like a star.
2. Get the pointer finger of your other hand ready to trace your fingers up and down.
3. Slide up each finger slowly ~ slide down the other side.
4. Breathe in through your nose ~ out through your mouth.
5. Put it together and breathe in as you slide up and breathe out as you slide down.

Keep going until you have finished tracing your hand.