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Imagining Happy, Healthy Kids

by Casey McAnn

A child's imagination is powerful. It helps him to learn and create. It can also help him to process loss, manage stress and respond well to difficult emotions. In today's media-saturated and high-alert culture, children often absorb the anxiety of adults around them amid their own worries and issues. That's when the power of imagination can be used to help young people feel safe and strong.

"I don't know one kid who is really enjoying their childhood, because of all the pressure they feel," says Dr. Charlotte Reznick, a practicing child educational psychologist and associate clinical professor of psychology at the University of California-Los Angeles. "By giving kids tools to find their own answers to daily challenges," she adds, "we open a world of possibility for self-empowerment."

Reznick has spent decades guiding children and adolescents toward positive ways to deal with their stresses and concerns. Her Imagery for Kids™ program is designed to help troubled youngsters calm and center themselves as they

mine their imaginations and intuition for helpful solutions. Reznick likes to use guided imagery to help her clients build confidence, self-esteem and the ability to express feelings not generally verbalized.

Reznick explains that if a person asks a child why he or she hits a sibling, for example, the child typically won't be able to give a reason. But if an adult asks the child's imaginary animal friend, he or she will likely get an inner response from the child. By tapping his imagination, the child bypasses his natural intellectual defense, according to Reznick. The process may begin with breathing techniques (see "Balloon Breath" sidebar) and soothing music designed to reduce anxiety and induce peace. Reznick then tailors the imagery session to the child's particular needs. A boy with chronic headaches may be guided to breathe in a cool blue color to soothe his "hot" head. A girl who's feeling rejected may choose to invite a wise and loving guide into her mind for comfort and counsel (see "Animal Friends and Other Guides" sidebar). If children are feeling unsafe, Reznick may help them create inner sanctuaries where they can retreat and relax.

"It's a place to pose endless questions about life issues, and create numerous positive solutions," says Reznick, recalling a 6-year-old client with extreme test anxiety who created a special place where she and her best friend could study amid rainbows, fluffy clouds, a shiny sun and flowers. Another child conjured an image of Albert Einstein as her study partner. Reznick explains that the Imagery for Kids process engages the right side of the brain, which is oriented toward creativity, emotions and intuition. After a guided imagery session, Reznick may encourage kids to write or draw about their experiences as a way to process any residual emotions and anchor new insights.

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These techniques are not just for kids. One parent reported using them to practice meditation, and Reznick uses imagery in her own life when worries or fears loom large. She notes that worry is a form of negative imagination that can be transformed with positive thoughts. "We can use the example of thoughts in our mind being like a TV screen," Reznick says. "So if a child is worried about doing poorly on a test and her internal TV flashes with anxiety, she can switch the channel and create a picture of doing well. Having the positive picture can reduce the anxiety that makes kids freeze during tests."

As young people learn to cultivate positive images internally, it's important for parents to be aware of the external messages surrounding their kids. Reznick advises parents to censor violent news and media images at home whenever possible. "If there is a big news story like the events of September 11, everyone is going to hear about it," says Reznick. "But talking about it isn't as harmful as seeing the images. There is something profoundly shocking about bringing such images right into our homes, and most kids I know just cannot handle it."

Not all sources of childhood stress are as extreme as terrorism and natural disasters. Sibling rivalry, divorce and peer rejection also can traumatize a child. Reznick remembers a 7-year-old who was devastated when her friends stopped playing with her.

"She called in her 'wizard' who gave her gifts of a heart and star-shaped crystal to remind her to love herself and that she is a star no matter what," recalls Reznick. "That gave her the con-

fidence to make new friends at recess and, amazingly, once the old friends saw that she was so independent they wanted to be friends with her again." For parents who may wish to try guided imagery with their kids, Reznick recommends starting in short segments (less than five minutes for the youngest ones) and increasing the time as the process deepens. Time spent teaching kids to go inside for their own wisdom and positive solutions can produce skills that last a lifetime.

Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., is a psychologist who specializes in helping children and adolescents develop emotional skills for a happy and successful life. She's the creator of Imagery for Kids™: Breakthrough for Learning, Creativity, and Empowerment techniques and the author/producer of two therapeutic CDs, Discovering Your Special Place and Creating a Magical Garden and Healing Pond. For more information visit ImageryForKids.com.

Imagery for Kids

Balloon Breath

What it is: A simple technique of breathing slowly and deeply into the belly (as if filling a balloon there) while focusing attention about two inches below the navel. Breathing from the diaphragm centers and calms people.

How kids use it: A 15-year-old who was frequently upset calmed himself and significantly reduced his stress by practicing balloon breathing several times a day. He says that it made him feel especially peaceful when he focused attention on his heart.



Animal Friends and Other Guides

What it is: An inner imaginary guide who is kind, loving and has the child's best interests at heart. It helps children tap into their innate wisdom. These guides can offer solutions to problems in creative ways that transcend logic and linear thinking.

How kids use it: A 7-year-old girl invented Sapphire the unicorn, who lives on top of the cloud in her rainbow "special place." Sapphire comes every night to help her fall asleep by sprinkling white powder on her head and repeating "falling asleep" as she drifts off to her favorite dream.

Source: Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D.
