

Introduction

The Power of a Child's Imagination



★ Imagine your frustrated four-year-old calming his anger with a special “Balloon Breath.” What if your seven-year-old’s own heart could teach her to love herself no matter what? Picture your fourth grader visualizing an ice blue pillow to cool his hot headaches. Or your worried eleven-year-old improving her concentration by consulting a personal wizard to assist with homework.

Imagine if every child could tap into an inexhaustible source of strength and wisdom when life gets tough. Think of how their lives would transform.

Growing up today is harder than ever as kids cope with unprecedented stress. The nightly news is a parade of bleak images—natural disasters, terrorism, street violence, and war—making our children feel unsafe. People are more isolated; extended families aren’t the haven they once were. Troubles that challenge adults—divorce, addiction, and financial worries—translate into conflict at home as kids absorb

their parents' woes. Add to that the traditional hurts and challenges of childhood—academic and social pressure, schoolyard bullies, the death of a pet or dear grandparent—and it's not surprising that more kids are acting out or simply shutting down.

Child psychiatrists and researchers in the United States and abroad report an escalation of regressive behaviors, a rise in fear of everyday activities such as going to sleep or school, and an increase in anxiety masquerading as physical ailments such as headaches, stomachaches, tics, and fatigue—all in the last decade.¹

Children's positive views of themselves are also at risk. According to one study, while 60 percent of third and fourth graders reported that they liked themselves, by eleventh grade, only 46 percent of boys and 29 percent of girls felt that way.² Other studies now warn that the very quality we want our kids to have—good self-esteem—might twist them into narcissistic, “only thinking about me” adults.³ The conflicting research confuses parents and professionals alike. We do know that low self-esteem in children can lead to poor life choices such as truancy, drug use, teen pregnancy, or even thoughts of suicide.⁴

And while computers and technology have no doubt enhanced communication and research, they have also disturbed our natural sense of time. Everyone expects instant results: Fast food. Email. Text messages. We've simply lost patience, allowing no time to stop and think, rest and relax, or slow down and feel. No time remains to develop the emotional skills necessary for a balanced, successful, and happy life.

All this can make raising healthy, well-adjusted kids feel like an overwhelming—if not impossible—task. How can you guide and protect your children when the odds seem so daunting? When you're working so hard and your stress is sky high? When there's rarely time to work out problems as they arise? When life changes so quickly? When no one taught you how? The answer is to stop looking *out* for

answers and start looking *in*. Into the heart of your child. Into his or her mind and imagination.

Imagination Is Not Just Child's Play

Adults have long used imagery and visualization to improve creativity, physical and mental health, as well as sports and professional performance. Whether it's an athlete's focused reverie before stepping on the field, or a cancer patient's mental image of immune cells gobbling up a tumor, studies have shown that guided imagery relieves stress, reduces illness, lessens pain, improves performance, and alleviates anxiety and sleep disorders.⁵

It is equally effective with children. Researchers around the world have demonstrated the positive effects of relaxation training and imagery on children and teens. Academic achievement and sports performance improve. Behavioral difficulties decrease, as do the number and the intensity of illnesses and symptoms. Even the required levels of medication for asthma and postoperative pain relief can come down.⁶

As a child educational psychologist and associate clinical professor of psychology at UCLA, I have long believed in the healing power of a child's imagination. In fact, I built my career on it. For more than twenty-five years, my life has focused on the rich internal world of children, a magical place where wise and creative answers reside. I began this work after being assigned to an inner-city school in South Central Los Angeles while still a fresh, naïve psychologist. On a balmy September day, I drove into the poorest area of the city, armed only with my ideals, a degree from USC, and a deep desire to help kids. The streets were filled with graffiti. So many stores were boarded up, burned, or had broken windows, the neighborhood resembled a war zone.

In the very first classroom, I was introduced as the *nice new counselor* who would help the students with their problems. I could feel their piercing eyes ask, “Who are you, lady? What are you doing here, anyway?” I thought I heard a muffled laugh. Tough, bulky Jerome, with a two-inch scar over his right eye, scoffed and went on punching his neighbor. Later I learned his dad had “accidentally” cut him in a drunken rage. Mercedes, sporting a brightly flowered but soiled dress, stared at me blankly.

Who was I to attempt to reach out to these children, whose life experiences were so different from mine? How could I help them reach inside and find a space that was filled with light and laughter? Was it possible for them to find some inner peace? Could they learn to believe in themselves enough to create a future?

The conventional counseling practices I’d been taught didn’t work here. These kids were angry, depressed, abused, lonely, detached, doing poorly in school, and generally feeling miserable. How could they learn in school when they were worried about how they were going to eat, or who was going to “beat up” on them? How could they focus on academics if they were fretting about their parents’ fighting, drug use, or whereabouts at night? Desperation led me to explore avenues beyond traditional behavioral therapy. I had to use my imagination. And theirs.

I first discovered the power of imagination attending a state psychological conference in those early years. Workshop leaders had asked us to draw a picture of a favorite place. Mine looked like a six-year-old had drawn it. Then they asked us to close our eyes and led us through the most delightful inner journey to a lush, peaceful meadow, filled with tall, scented pines, shimmering emerald plants, and beautiful blooming flowers. A gentle stream trickled nearby. Listening to the rich evocative language, I was transported. They invited us to draw again. What a difference! This time my drawing was lovely, and it actually captured what I imagined. That tangible

change—from a childlike scrawl to an expressive picture in a matter of minutes—caught my attention.

The instructors then recounted the success they'd had with imagery techniques in a school district aptly named "Paradise Unified." Academic achievement on standardized tests increased; behavioral referrals diminished. Teachers reported students were better at calming themselves and staying on task.⁷ The hairs on my skin stood up. Could visualization actually help the distressed kids I worked with? On an intellectual and visceral level, this made sense.

I began to read every book, take every course, attend every lecture, and meet every person I could find who had anything to do with imagery and visualization. Devouring it all, I made it my own, learning what worked and what didn't with *my* kids; what would touch their hearts, what would shut them down.

Imagery did something that conventional therapies could not. Bypassing the natural defenses of the logical brain, it allowed children to go directly to the intuitive part of themselves and let their heart speak. Instead of *talking about* feelings, they were invited to *experience* their feelings and express them in pictures. Their images told a deeper truth than these children could say in words, and gave them a discovery process that felt more like a game than a chore. The answers they found to their problems were more effective than any advice or instruction coming from the adults around them, including me.

I took the basic tenets of imagery work—that you can engage with pictures conjured by your mind and intuition to bring awareness to emotions and find solutions to issues *ordinary thinking* doesn't supply—wove them with traditional breathing, meditation, and the focused awareness and suggestions of self-hypnosis techniques, included sound psychological principles, and created a novel approach that applied to all aspects of a child's daily life.

And by exploring and trusting in the power of my own creative imagination, backed by the research and experiences of colleagues, I

learned how to help these children help themselves. Child by child, imagination to imagination, heart to heart—I was able to reach them.

South Central was the testing ground. If these children could summon hope from despair and learn to help themselves, then these imagery Tools could work for everyone. And they did. One student tracked me down years later to tell me she was now student body president of her high school. “Every time I’m about to get up in front of the assembly, I remember an image I learned with you in fifth grade,” she told me. “I see myself standing on top of the mountain of success.”

Those early explorations developed into a full program that includes nine specific Tools I have taught in public and private schools, to clients from all walks of life, and in professional trainings and workshops around the world. They are:

- 1 The Balloon Breath—The Way In
- 2 Discovering Your Special Place
- 3 Meeting a Wise Animal Friend
- 4 Encountering a Personal Wizard
- 5 Receiving Gifts from Inner Guides
- 6 Checking In with Heart and Belly
- 7 Talking to Toes and Other Body Parts
- 8 Using Color for Healing
- 9 Tapping into Energy

These Tools facilitate a child’s inward journey to that deep place sometimes called the subconscious or unconscious. They are easy-to-use, whimsical, and remarkably effective. Each touches a world of metaphor, creating a waking dream. These images help children direct their attention to problems and symptoms they want to change or to potentials they want to develop.

Used together, the Tools teach children a way to harness inner

wisdom to understand, heal, and ultimately love themselves. While parents and children often come to me with specific concerns— anxiety, anger, stress-related physical complaints, or simply because they want to build strong inner resources—I see these issues as the key to opening that first door. Once a child learns to use imagination techniques, she can transfer these skills to many other life challenges.

Equally important, these are Tools children can learn to use on their own. How often do we (parents and therapists alike) look to others for a quick fix? Rarely do we trust our own wisdom, let alone the wisdom of our children. Yet, with just a little guidance, our kids can gain access to the answers for most of life’s questions within themselves. They learn best when they solve their own problems. As the saying goes, “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he eats for a lifetime.”

I wrote *The Power of Your Child’s Imagination* to teach *you* to teach your child how to fish . . . for the food of the soul, of the growing Self, with the tools of imagination. My hope is to create a world in which every child has the tools to heal herself and realize her dreams. And that still happens child by child, heart by heart, and now, parent by parent.

This book is a toolbox for possibility and change. You’ll help your kids use imagination to access their natural strengths and wisdom, and deal with their problems. The techniques are so simple— yet so powerful—that even a child as young as four can use them. More than power tools, they are tools that *empower*.

How to Read This Book

The Power of Your Child’s Imagination is divided into two sections. Part One, “The Tools,” sets the groundwork for building your child’s inner resources. In Chapter 1, you will find ways to help “hook”

your kids' enthusiasm, questions that draw them in, and techniques to calm any hesitation for this new experience.

In Chapter 2, I elaborate on each of the Nine Tools in detail. This is the heart of the program. Simple instructions and sample scripts will guide you in teaching each Tool to your child. I call these *foundation Tools* because they are not only the foundation of this program and book, but also the foundation for a lifetime of self-sufficiency and self-growth.

Music, drawing, and writing can enhance the problem solving that imagery inspires, acting like a booster pack for the Nine Tools. In Chapter 3, you'll explore how to use and combine these skills.

Chapter 4 is for you—the big kids. Although we all want to do our best, sometimes it just doesn't happen. This chapter shows how the Nine Tools can enhance your interactions with your children. They can be adapted so that you can experience less personal stress and more freedom to be creative in your parenting. My top ten list, "What Kids Most Want and Need from Their Parents," will ensure your success as a role model in teaching these skills to your children. Put into practice, the Top Ten will also result in happier, healthier kids and a thriving family. There is also a special guided relaxation script to nurture your own spirit.

Part Two, "Putting the Tools to Work," is a user-friendly guide that shows you how to apply the Nine Tools to eight common life challenges:

- How your child can be his own best friend
- Reducing stress-induced ailments
- Overcoming fears and feeling safe
- Dealing with bedtime issues
- Coping with loss
- Handling hurt, anger, and frustration
- Achieving success at school and play
- Living peacefully with family and friends

Each chapter in this section demonstrates, step-by-step, how to apply the Tools to these common childhood issues, sharing stories of children who have used imagination to turn their lives around.* I also include Quick Tips, Sample Scripts, Easy Hints, and lots of How-To For You ideas to help you apply these skills to your own family and situation. There are even Backtrack Alerts, which anticipate those moments when something seems to be going wrong. I'll explain how these are just part of this new learning process.

Every chapter ends with a specific guided imagery you can read to your child before or after your imagination sessions, or you can order a recorded CD version in my voice from my website, www.ImageryForKids.com. These mini-journeys deepen the healing experience. The scripts help your child relax, feel safe, and gain confidence around the problem as he progresses in this visual process toward self-discovery.

The appendix is designed for the professionals who shape a child's world: teachers, doctors, nurses, counselors, therapists, and all those who have daily opportunities to offer a positive influence on children. It suggests how the principles of this program can be incorporated into your working world.

I designed *The Power of Your Child's Imagination* to be both a reading book and a how-to manual. You can read it straight through or go directly to a relevant chapter. If you do choose to turn to a specific problem chapter, then I recommend that you read Chapters 1 and 2 first, as they introduce and explain all Nine Tools and how to apply them.

As you follow this program, you will be well equipped to offer your children the skills that build self-esteem, emotional self-sufficiency, and resilience. You will feel more confident as you

*Note: The names and identifying characteristics of the children and families mentioned in this book and the details of their stories have been changed or combined to protect their privacy.

teach your kids to solve many of their own problems. And as you encourage them to find their own answers, you will find that you actually create more trust, intimacy, and joy in your relationship with them.

These Nine Tools are adaptable to all ages, and their benefits accumulate over time. These are not just tools for childhood; they are tools for life. In the words of one wise eight-year-old, “Your imagination can help you heal.”