

[PARENTING FAMILY HEALTH](#)

How breath work can help calm your kids

A new study shows 5 minutes of breath work is more effective than mindfulness meditation. These exercises work for children, too

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A new study shows five minutes of breath work, even for children, is more effective than mindfulness meditation.

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Feeling stressed? Take a breath. And if your children are stressed, too, you can get them doing breath work, as well.

[Breath work](#) is a trendy word for an ancient concept: controlled breathing. A recent [study](#) published in Cell Reports Medicine found that just five minutes a day of breath work leads to a greater reduction in anxiety and negative thoughts than mindfulness meditation.

Among the authors' recommendations is a practice called cyclic, or physiological, sighing, which involves deep inhalations and prolonged exhalations. According to [Stanford University researchers](#), cyclic sighing slows the heart rate and has a soothing effect on the body.

While all of the participants in the Cell Report Medicine study were adults between the ages of 18 and 81 — with the [mean age coming in just a hair shy of 28](#) — these same techniques can also help the little humans among us we call “kids.”

In fact, not only are the results likely generalizable to children, such short exercises are perfectly designed for kids, [Dr. David Spiegel](#), one of the study's authors and director of Stanford University School of Medicine's Center on Stress and Health, told the Deseret News.

“The fact that we saw this kind of benefit with such a short intervention, if anything, it would be better with kids because their attention span is shorter than adults,” said Spiegel, who is also medical director of Stanford's Center for Integrative Medicine.

Cyclic sighing

“All of the breath work helped to some extent, but the one that clearly did the best was cyclic sighing,” said Spiegel, who explained that he and the other researchers believe that cyclic sighing is effective because it favors the parasympathetic nervous system over the sympathetic nervous system.

The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for your body's response to stress, getting you amped up and ready for “fight or flight.” Think of it as the uphill. The parasympathetic nervous system is the opposite — it's the downhill, helping to soothe your body after the “fight or flight” response occurs. The parasympathetic nervous system is associated with “rest and digest” because it helps regulate digestion, as well.

The trick to getting your parasympathetic nervous system to kick in via cyclic sighing lies in the ratio: It's got to be a 1:2 — that is, you exhale for twice the

amount of time as you spend inhaling. Breathe in, hold the breath and then inhale again, filling your lungs all the way. Then slowly let it out. (Spiegel himself will walk you through it on this [YouTube video](#).)

For kids, you could conceptualize this as filling a balloon — which never takes just one breath — and then slowly letting the air out.

While cyclic sighing might be tough for the littlest ones to get a hang of, other breathing techniques are effective, as well.

“Children can use deep breathing to help them throughout the day, whether they’re feeling overwhelmed or anxious, need to relax or go to sleep, to calm their body after exercising, or even just to pause and reset when they are high energy,” according to the website of [Children’s Health](#), a pediatric health care provider in north Texas.

Here are a few exercises to try at home with your kids.

Smell the flower

An easy-to-remember phrase helps children take a deep breath and then to exhale. Just instruct them to “Smell the flower, blow out the candle.”

Another similar exercise, the flower breath, has children visualize a flower, breathing in the scent and breathing out the petals. [Watch the Yoga Guppy to see how it’s done](#).

If your kids are into animals, you can piggyback on their interest and teach them to do animal breaths like “[bear breaths](#)” or “[giraffe breaths](#).” (You can adapt this for young dinosaur fans, as well.)

Snake breaths, [as explained here by the Children’s Bureau of Southern California](#), are another fun one: they entail breathing in for three seconds, holding it for one, and then hissing the breath out. And don’t forget about dragon breaths, too.

Breaking out a bottle of bubbles can also be a way to get your kids doing some breath work without even realizing it.