

“Just breathe”

The development of self-regulation has been identified as a crucial element in children’s success both socially and academically (Borba, 2016, p104-5). Self-regulation refers to the ability to use thought to guide behaviour. According to Berk (2001, p49), “the self-regulated child follows social rules; makes deliberate, well-reasoned choices and decisions; and takes responsibility for his or her own learning and behaviour.”

Although self-regulatory abilities gradually improve throughout childhood and adolescence, early childhood is a crucial period for its development, a time when children learn to overcome impulses by thinking before they act. At Ballymore, our focus on building positive relationships, sees the scaffolding of children’s emotional, social and cognitive self- regulation, as a paramount aspect of our work.

How we, as teachers and parents, might assist children in building these abilities will be an ongoing conversation throughout this pre-school year. But one of the most basic strategies we can pass onto our children is the ability to focus on, and develop the ability to control their breathing.

Borba suggests these steps for building “mindful breathing”:

1. **Teach “Yourself” to “Just breathe”** – when adults are practised at focussed breathing, then we can pass this skill onto children. Find a comfortable, quiet spot, relax shoulders and then focus on taking deep slow breaths breathing in through the nose and out through your mouth. The exhales should be twice as long as the inhales to maximise the relaxation effect. When you mind wanders (as it will), gently bring your mind back to focussing on your breaths.
2. **Explain the benefits** of focussed breathing to your child – “Taking slow, deep breaths helps you to relax and calms your brain so you can think clearer and stay in control. You can use it before taking a test, to get to sleep, or any time you’re frustrated, worried, sad, or just need to chill. And you can use it anywhere. The more you practise, the easier it is to calm and relax.” (p111)
3. **Teach belly breathing** – sit straight in a chair or lie flat on the floor with hands low on the belly. Inhale deeply though your nose, gently hold it, and then let the air out slowly through your lips. “Feel your tummy rise and fall with each breath (placing a soft toy or beanbag on their tummy can help with this). Try to keep your mind on your breaths, but if it wanders, just tell yourself to focus on your belly breaths.”
4. **Make mindfulness a family ritual** – find ways to do breathing exercises together a few times a day – before leaving home, in the car, at dinner, before bedtime – so it becomes a ritual. Short, repeated practices work best to get you, and your child, into a habit.



For many years, breathing exercises have played a significant role in our days at kindy. We often commence the year by teaching children how to do **zipper breathing**. Holding an imaginary zipper at our tummy, we breathe in as we pull up the zipper and we breathe out as we pull it down. We can then challenge ourselves to pull the zipper slowly and breathe in/out slowly or to hold the zip at the top for a short while (holding our breath) before we pull it down again.

We use breathing exercises at group times, to settle ourselves before a story or before singing or talking/listening together. Assisting children to breathe slowly and deeply is also an important strategy when we help them to manage emotional or social situations. "Let's take some deep breaths together and then you can tell me what happened in the sandpit." "Let's do some breathing and we can think about how to solve this problem."

Breathing helps us all, children and adults alike, to calm our emotions and our bodies, and to focus our attention and our thinking. Modelling for children how we use deep breathing is a valuable strategy in building their own abilities – "I'm going to take three deep breaths and then I will be able to concentrate as I read the words in the story." "I was really bothered by that tidy up. It didn't go very well. I'm going to do some zipper breathing and then we will talk about it together and see if we can make it better."

Other breathing exercises that we use at kindy include:

- **Flower breathing** – holding our hands together at chest height in the shape of a flower. As we breathe in, the flower opens and as we breathe out, it closes.
- **Hand breathing** – holding one hand stretched out, we trace along each finger, breathing in as we go up the first finger (thumb) and then breathing out as we go down the other side.
- **Counting breaths** – as we breathe in we lift each finger of one hand one by one (ie breathing to the count of 5) and then close each finger one by one as we breathe out.
- **Snake breaths** – we inhale a large breath and then exhale with a long drawn out hiss, emptying our lungs. Our next breath in is a deeper, fresher one to refill the lungs.
- **Rocket breaths** – with hands held together in front of our body, we shoot them into the air as we breathe in quickly, and then exhale loudly and forcefully as they come back down to the sides of our body.
- **Balloon breathing** – imagine your tummy is a balloon and make it grow bigger as you breathe in.
- **Alternate nostrils** – use a finger to hold one nostril closed. Alternate nostrils as you breathe in and out.
- **Cooling breath** – with teeth together and tongue pressed at the back of teeth, breathe in through the mouth and out through the nose. Can you feel the cool air?



References:

Berk, L.E. (2001). *Awakening Children's Minds*. New York: University Press

Borba. M. (2016). *UnSelfie: Why empathetic kids succeed in our all-about-me world*. New York: Touchstone.