

Meditation for Children

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Source: http://www.ivillage.co.uk/parenting/school/schealth/articles/0,,186623_530733-1,00.html

Could meditation be the key to raising balanced, focused children who perform better both academically and creatively? Anna Selby investigates

'Stress' became one of those buzzwords of the 1990s, humming its way through the decade as the cause of all ills. At one end of the spectrum we were presented with bloated businessmen suffering heart attacks as they ran for the train, at the other working mothers pulled every which way and reaching for the Prozac. Stress was the bogeyman that would dog you if you had a high-powered job or if you were long-term unemployed, if you were getting divorced or buying a house, or even if you were going on holiday. In fact, it could make just about everyone suffer - except for one significant group of children.

Childhood stress

Most of us would like to think that childhood is a time of happiness and innocence. The reality is that children are under just as much pressure as the rest of us. Exams are now taken by children as young as six and seven - and children are only too aware of the importance of academic performance to most parents. But these are not the only stresses for children. Peer pressure and bullying are rife, more families break up than ever before, and even time off tends to be a relentless bombardment of noise and image in the form of television and computer games. Born into a mercilessly hectic and noisy world, children may find that the only quiet moments they experience are when they are asleep.

As adults, we have tried some unusual methods of stress-busting. We have suspended ourselves in dark flotation tanks, inhaled flower essences and become addicted to everything from aerobics to rebirthing. However, long-term stress is another matter, manifesting itself as high blood pressure, raised cholesterol levels, anxiety, depression and insomnia.

The seeds of stress

To overcome these problems, a quite different form of deep relaxation is needed, in which severe stress of both body and mind can disperse. Rather surprisingly - for a practice in which to the observer it appears that nothing much is happening - regular meditation has emerged as the most effective way of achieving this. A considerable body of research - focusing mainly on the most dramatic and measurable manifestations of stress, such as heart disease - has shown it results in substantial reductions in high blood pressure and cholesterol levels. The seeds of these diseases of middle and later life, though, have generally been sown long before we become aware of them. Perhaps even as long ago as childhood.

The authors of *Teaching Meditation to Children*, David Fontana and Ingrid Slack, two psychologists who specialise in working with children, certainly believe so. They suggest that children should be taught to meditate because 'The more we can help children to be at peace with their own bodies, the better chance we have of helping them avoid these killers in later life.' The benefits, however, are not just for the future.

The benefits

Meditation gives even very young children power over their thinking and their emotions, not by a repressive self-control, but by enhanced self-understanding and self-acceptance. Fontana and Slack advocate meditation as a gentle and effective means of overcoming a wide variety of psychological and behavioural problems, such as anxiety, hyperactivity and aggression, and they back this up with case histories. They also see meditation as a much more general tool, applicable to all children and bringing the following benefits:

- Physical relaxation
- Improved concentration
- Increased tranquillity and ability to deal with stress
- Improved awareness
- Improved creativity
- Improved memory

Transcendental Meditation

At the moment, the concept of children meditating is still in its infancy. One of the few places where children can learn is with Transcendental Meditation. If the Maharishi conjures images of the Beatles, beads and kaftans, you might be surprised to learn that one of TM's most vociferous advocates these days is retired chairman of ICI, Sir John Harvey-Jones. He believes its stress-busting powers make it vital for anyone working in business. Over four million people have now learned the technique worldwide - and technique is the relevant word here. Adherents point out that it is, in essence, a mind exercise. Religious beliefs are irrelevant and, once you have been trained to meditate, you practise the technique alone, so no further involvement with the TM organisation is necessary.

For adults, the technique consists of mentally repeating a mantra twice a day for 20 minutes. Effortlessness is emphasised - it doesn't matter if you are constantly distracted by thoughts or even if you fall asleep. You just go back to the mantra when you realise you're not saying it any more. For young children, it is different, because it is not considered advisable for children to sit for any length of time with their eyes closed - even if they could. Instead they do it as they walk to school or play with Lego. At five they 'do their word' for five minutes twice a day and thereafter add one minute for each year of their age.