

# Nurturing Inner Calm in Children

Linda Lantieri

**A noted peace educator describes activities that help children find serenity and better cope with the stresses and difficulties of life.**

As adults, we often feel the pressures of today's fast-paced world and think back longingly to a time when our daily lives were a lot less stressful. Today one-third of Americans report that they are living with "extreme stress" and almost half feel that the stress in their lives has increased over the past five years (American Psychological Association 2007). Unfortunately, today's children are not immune to the stress of everyday life, either. Our society has changed in many ways that increase pressure on children and compromise their childhoods.

A poll conducted by the national Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused them stress and what coping strategies they used the most to deal with the stress in their lives. The top three sources of stress that they reported were grades, school, and homework (36%); family (32%); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21%). The top three coping strategies were to play or do something active (52%), to listen to music (44%), and to watch TV or play a video game (42%). Of the ten coping strategies that were chosen the most, not one involved going within and being able to calm oneself (Lyness 2005).

While we, as adults, must work to reduce the sources of excessive childhood stress, it also would be helpful to provide children with a wider range of skills for coping with it. Fortunately, many teachers in New York City are doing just that. They are teaching young people practical contemplative practices for managing the stress that comes their way.

A few months ago I witnessed this firsthand in a first grade classroom in a public school in East Harlem. This particular classroom had lots of Special Education students who were very hyperactive. Their teacher, Tom Roepke, was getting them ready to listen to a specific CD — something they were very used to doing. The students quieted down and became still and the CD started. The man's voice told



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them to listen to some sounds. The voice reminded them not to name out loud the sound they heard, but just say to themselves what they thought the sound was. As they listened to the instructions, they began to listen with their whole bodies; for example, when they heard the sound of a bird, they moved their arms like a bird. They managed to not speak and stayed calm and focused for a full six minutes. The voice on the CD was that of Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). The words, however, were mine from my newly published book *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children* (Lantieri 2008) which accompanies the CD that was being used. Tom is one of many teachers who are part of The Inner Resilience Program, a nonprofit organization which I founded soon after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Since then, we have been training teachers who, in turn, are teaching thousands of students how to strengthen the neural pathways that help children pay attention and manage impulsivity.

In fact, a growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. In his groundbreaking book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998), Goleman identified EQ — emotional intelligence — as being as important as IQ in terms of children's healthy development and future life success. He writes (1998, 19):

Given how much emphasis schools and admissions tests put on it, IQ alone explains surprisingly little of achievement in work or life. When IQ test scores are correlated with how well people perform in their careers, the highest estimate of how much difference IQ accounts for is about 25 percent (Hunter & Schmidt 1984; Schmidt & Hunter 1981). A careful analysis, though, suggests a more accurate figure may be no higher than 10 percent, and perhaps as low as 4 percent (Sternberg 1996).

Goleman's work has helped us understand the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one's IQ; that is, one's cognitive skills and knowledge. He made the connection between our feelings and our thinking

more explicit by pointing out how the brain's emotional and executive areas are interconnected physiologically, especially as these areas relate to teaching and learning.

Brain science tells us that a child's brain goes through major growth that does not end until the mid-twenties. Neuroplasticity, as scientists call it, means that the sculpting of the brain's circuitry during this period of growth depends to a great degree on a child's daily experiences. Environmental influences on brain development are particularly powerful in shaping a child's social and emotional neural circuits. Young people who learn how to calm down when they are upset, for instance, seem to develop greater strength in the brain's circuits for managing distress (Goleman 2008).

In New York City classrooms and elsewhere, teachers are beginning to equip young people with the skills to more effectively be both aware of and regulate their emotions. And we are finding out that the regular practice of these skills strengthens the brain circuits that underlie emotional regulation. Given the busy, sometimes frenzied nature of our lives, reflective moments are often missing. The more children can begin to experience quiet and stillness, the more they can feel an inner balance and sense of purpose which can offset the overstimulation that is so abundant in most of our lives. The benefits of such a regular practice can include (Lantieri 2008, 10):

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved concentration
- The ability to deal with stressful situations more effectively by creating a more relaxed way of responding to stressors
- Greater control over one's thoughts, with less domination by unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between adults and children, because thoughts and feelings are being shared on a regular basis

We, as the adults in children's lives, can't keep telling our children countless times to "calm down" or "pay attention" without providing them with some practical guidelines for how to do so. By offering children systematic lessons in contemplative techniques, we can help them cultivate their budding capacities and facilitate the development of their neural pathways. Through our work and current research, we are finding out that teaching these practices to students is increasing not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience: the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity.

### General Guidelines for Ourselves

The following are some guiding principles for how we can begin to create the fertile ground upon which we can cultivate children's inner lives in our classrooms.

#### Begin with Ourselves

Before we begin to teach young people to calm down and relax, we have to set aside at least a couple of weeks to regularly engage in a contemplative practice ourselves. Daniel Goleman's audio book, *The Art of Meditation* (2001) is an excellent resource for beginners and more experienced practitioners alike. It provides four different reflective exercises to choose from.

#### See Children as Co-Learners

When young people have the opportunity to construct their own knowledge, they need a guide to help them, not an all-knowing authority. The best guides are genuine learners themselves. When we help children nurture *their* inner lives, at the same time we expand *our own* inner pathways of knowing. It is a reciprocal relationship. Our role, then, is simply to be willing to learn alongside young people and to help create a fertile ground for that learning. Sometimes young people may be the ones teaching and leading us inward, if we allow that to happen.

#### Allow Time for the Learning to Unfold

Learning to be more mindful and appreciative of silence is not likely to unfold in a straight line for either children or ourselves. There will be days when it might seem that nothing we're doing is working. Then suddenly, things will gel: when we lose our

cool, one of our students might prompt us to take a breath and we'll realize just how deeply they have been integrating these ideas. Gradually, practicing to be still and reflective will feel less forced or artificial and will become more automatic and authentic. The ideal scenario is to have a daily quiet time in our classrooms. However, we might build up to this gradually.

### Selected Techniques for Children

#### Create a Peace Corner

A peace or calming corner is a special place that is set aside in the classroom. Young people can go there whenever they need calm and stillness, in order to regain their inner balance and flow. It could also be used when a classroom member is feeling overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally — times when being alone would be helpful. The whole class designs the space. Some peace corners include pictures or photos of some of students' favorite peaceful places, elements from nature, calming pictures, journals, chimes, and mandala coloring books, etc. Mandalas are harmonious patterns, which usually include a circle. Coloring these circles fosters the focused attention of mindfulness. The space should be large enough for at least one student to lie down in, with comfortable pillows and a CD player and earphones with soothing music or recordings of sounds from nature.

#### Teach the "Keep Calm" Activity

This simple, four-step breathing activity comes from the book *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* by Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias, and Brian Friedlander (2000). It can be used whenever young people are upset and self-control is needed. Students can practice these four simple steps. Perhaps these steps can even be posted in the peace corner as a reminder:

- Stop and take a look around.
- Tell yourself to "keep calm."
- Take a deep breath through your nose while you count to five, hold it while you count to two, and then breathe out through your mouth while you count to five.
- Repeat these steps until you feel calm.

### Use Calming Music

Transitions and other stressful times during the day (such as when you're getting ready for lunch or trying to meet other pressures of time) offer great opportunities to stop for a moment and honor the shift from one activity to another. The sound of soft, slow classical music can really help change the way we feel at such moments. Music could be used as background, but it's even more effective when there is a "music break." A "music break" involves stopping for as little as three minutes to listen quietly to a piece of music. Such breaks happen during times of transition when young people are focusing on something intently and need to stop, or when they start to feel the symptoms of heightened stress. It is a well-documented fact that listening to calming music has a direct correlation with a lowered respiration and heart rate, and can change our emotional moods.

### Make Room for Silence and Stillness

One gift we can give ourselves and our children is that of silence and stillness; it is simple to give, but rarely given. We can find times in the school day to take a quick break to pause and be still and quiet, and take a few deep breaths together. For example, if we have a habit of teaching right up until the end of the day, we might make it a classroom practice to have a few minutes of silence at the end of the day and ask young people to notice what they see, hear, feel, etc., during that time. We can also choose to bring moments of silence into other engaging activities, such as drawing, writing, or walking.

### Address Violent or Disturbing Events

If young people are unexpectedly exposed to something disturbing during the day — perhaps there is a discussion about a violent or frightening news story in current events, or there might be the sound of an ambulance rushing by with sirens blaring — it can be helpful to make it a practice to pause for a moment and send positive thoughts to those in need (Dermond 2007). Rather than integrating only the fear and stress reaction, the positive outlet will enable children to release much of the stress of the moment. When young people have the time and space to talk about their concerns to fully present and supportive adults, they may remember and inte-

grate a particular scary event very differently than they might have otherwise.

### Honor Nature and Provide Opportunities to Be Outdoors

Being in nature calls upon us to be present in our bodies and reconnects the mind/body dichotomy (Lantieri 2001). At the most basic level, the outdoors provides room for young people to run, shout, and play, releasing pent-up energy from their bodies accumulated through various stressors. We can breathe more deeply outdoors, simply because there is often more oxygen than indoors. And looking at a faraway horizon or sky can help us gain a much needed perspective. Sometimes that's all it takes to shift us out of the bad habits that keep us from being our best selves. In addition to providing opportunities for young people to be in nature, we can help them to be present by engaging their senses. Young people come to know their surroundings through their bodies, not just their minds. Focusing on one of the senses at a time or simply noticing changes in the seasons can be a very useful way to do this. The goal is for young people to develop a mindful presence outside; that is, to be aware of their surroundings at a profound level of detail that transcends the relatively detached way we often experience our environments.

### Help Young People Check Bodily Cues

When children are younger, they often have the ability to tune in to their bodies' signals. As they grow older, they get messages from the outer world to turn off their natural sensitivity. However, before they can release stress, they need first to be aware that they *are* stressed. We can model this awareness ourselves by making a note of times when our hearts are beating fast, our breathing has become shallow, or noticing other signs of stress. This helps students to notice their own stress triggers as well. When children have this kind of inner awareness, they start to be able to reduce the body's stress reaction itself.

### Use Literature

Reading a book out loud together with young people can be a wonderful way to experience a contemplative moment — especially if it is done with intentionality. When reading a book, the pace is im-

mediately slower, providing opportunities to pause along the way. Young people also experience one another's voices and can notice the various emotions that are stirring within each of them. There can be lots of unplanned moments where the story can take us to a deeper place.

### The Opportunity We Have

Until a short time ago, most of the research into the effects of these kinds of practices had been conducted on adults. Today several studies are under way throughout the United States and Canada. Our program, The Inner Resilience Program, is conducting one such research effort, and we hope to have statistical findings available fairly soon. Meanwhile, the teachers who are part of the research group in New York City have shared many impressions with us. Michael Loeb, a third grade teacher, described his experience this way:

I have been listening to the progressive relaxation exercise for "Ages 12 and Up" on the subway each morning. In class we tried the "Getting Relaxed: Ages 8-10." Today, after two days of having gone through the whole lesson, several students noticed that it wasn't in the schedule and exclaimed, "Hey, when are we doing the relaxation exercise today?" Another student in fact requested to listen to it by himself when he was upset and went into the "peace corner" and put on the headphones.

The children in Vera Slywinsky's fourth grade classroom realized the importance of not only directly learning emotional and social skills but also creating the conditions in the classroom that would support the use of those skills. She describes the experience she and her children had with setting up a peace corner:

The most astounding development of introducing these techniques into my classroom has been the children's interest in the peace corner. They have brought beautiful photos, postcards of warm and exotic places, and stuffed animals to decorate our corner. And they have not been at all hesitant to utilize it. Within the first week of its creation, I had a student whose uncle died after a long battle with cancer in Ecuador. Un-

fortunately the family couldn't afford to attend the funeral. She was grateful for the peace corner. Another child was evicted from her home. The peace corner brought much comfort to her. Her family is now back in their space and okay but this student was able to find a way to deal with those unpleasant feelings at school so she could in fact be more ready to learn.

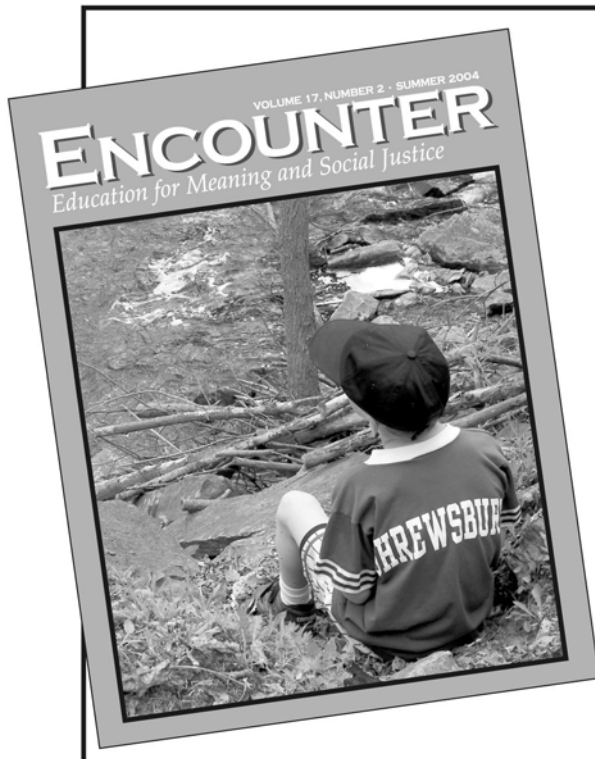
This simple addition in our classroom has allowed my students to seek peace amidst the turmoil they face in their lives daily. How foolish for those who think children can learn without acknowledging, and making space for processing the incredible challenges and painful obstacles they face. I am so happy that my children have collectively forged a safe place to begin to heal, survive, and appreciate the joy we have in supporting each other!

When I think about the children who are an integral part of my life, I ask myself: What is it I really want for them? What are some of the hopes I have for each of these children? A variety of answers arise, depending on the particular needs, strengths, and challenges of the child I am thinking of. However, I know that whether or not a child will successfully realize any of their hopes is dependent on whether or not we have equipped them with the inner strength they will need to meet the challenges of daily life. Are they capable of being resilient in the face of obstacles, as well as opportunities? Can they bounce back and even surpass their level of coping when the tests of life come their way? We've got to give our children this kind of lifeline. The world is too uncertain for them not to build an inner reservoir of strength from which they can draw. The benefits are far reaching — from better health and increased ability to learn, to more fulfilled and happier lives.

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