



Guidelines for teaching younger children good breathing habits



About this Guide

Children that habitually breathe through the mouth are more likely to develop breathing disorders like asthma, allergies, and frequent respiratory infections. These children will be more prone to enlarged adenoids, tonsillitis, and glue ear.

Uncorrected breathing dysfunction can lead to dental problems such as malocclusions, crooked teeth, and narrow airways and this can contribute to breathing-sleep disorders including restless sleep, insomnia, obstructive sleep apnoea and bed-wetting.

Children are fast learners but under fours generally don't have the attention span necessary to learn formal Buteyko exercises. The best way to engage them is to teach a slightly older child, perhaps a sibling, and get the older child to teach the younger.

Parents are encouraged to do the course for themselves. It may help to attend the entire course without your child to fully understand the exercises, principles and guidelines.

This guide includes some tips for encouraging better breathing habits in younger children. It is compiled from my own and fellow practitioners' years of clinical practise. Experiment with these and be innovative to find what works best for you. And please give us feedback on these and any other suggestions that have worked for you.

Lead by Example

Breathing is a learned behaviour, both good and bad. If you are a good breather, your child can also learn to be a good breather. If you can slow your breathing and try to always breathe through your nose your child may follow your good example. Try to always breathe through the nose around your children.

If you are holding your child or they are sitting on your knee try to breathe only through your nose and from the belly (diaphragmatic breathing). To help calm your child's breathing, calm your own. Breathe gently in and out of your nose and slow your own breathing until you feel a sensation of slight air hunger. It is important that you stay calm and relaxed if you want the same from them.

Read to your child following the guidelines given for breathing and speaking on page 20 of the Buteyko course book. This is also a useful breathing exercise for you.

Breathing is a family affair: If either parent or older siblings suffer from asthma, hay fever, nasal congestion, persistent cough or other breathing-related issues this can influence the younger child's breathing pattern. For this reason, it is useful for all family members with breathing issues to complete a breathing course.

Games

You can engage them in games that involve short breath-holds, like, walking down the path holding your hand and their nose at the same time. Have a rule that mouths should always be closed when playing games like ball games. If the mouth comes open you lose a point or restart the game.

Can they pick up toys and put them in a box while they hold their nose or just keep their mouth shut?

Most kids at this age are not competitive, but more 'me' focused, but if they will cooperate and can pick up one toy, then see if they can pick up two or more.

The Water Game

Both of you walk around with a mouthful of water. See who can keep it in their mouth longer, you or your child?

Alternatively, take a drink from one cup and spit it into another cup, as confidence grows put the cup a bit further away, then into the next room, then across the garden.

A variation of the water game: Take a small sip of water and hold it in the mouth. They must not swallow. The objective is to walk or run keeping the water in the mouth. If running, get them to stop after a time and stand very still, breathing quietly with the water in the mouth (see hibernation breathing page 4). Remind them not to swallow the water. Then after 1-2 minutes get them to spit the water back into the cup.

The Paper Game

Instead of water, get them to hold a piece of clean paper or something light and thin like a card between their lips. Make sure they are holding it between the lips and not gripping between their teeth. You can get them to see how many times they can walk or run up and down a hallway, around a room or outside around the yard.

Encourage them to do it for as long as they can and always finish with 1 or more minutes of hibernation breathing (page 5).

Variations

See if they can hold the paper between their lips while they walk, run and jump etc. This would be breathing like a cheetah or other cat.

Keep the games short and stop them before the child gets bored. Keep it fun and be enthusiastic. Try different games and ideas to keep them interested and engaged.

The Clock Game

One approach that might help is trying to get your child to keep their mouth shut for longer and longer periods as they watch the sweep hand on a watch, stopwatch or big clock get further and further around the clock as they improve. For example, start the nose breathing, mouth shut at the o'clock position and see if they can get keep their mouth shut until the hand gets to the three, then the five etc. Use visual encouragement by pointing to the number rather than expecting them to understand numbers. One way this can work is to put some tape across the mouth of one of the soft toys and see how long Teddy can keep his mouth shut, and then the child might be willing to have the tape on their mouth just while they sit there and play the "clock" game.

Manic Statues

How about a game that involves lots of movement, running around or flaying the arms like windmills and jumping around to music. When the music stops everyone must stop wherever they are and be like a statue, breathing very quietly through the nose. The manic movements help raise CO₂ which can help make breathing and nasal breathing easier.

Hide and Seek

Children can learn to hide their breathing when they are hiding. If their breathing is really quiet it will take you longer to find them. This breathing is called invisible breathing.

Other Tricks

Let your child draw on a white board. If they open their mouth they must erase the drawing and start again. Use discretion with this.

Coughing

If your child coughs, play a game where we try to "keep the cough in". Or "hide the cough". Cup hands over mouth before, during and after coughing, also good manners.

Breathing Jar

Using two glass jars make a mouth breathing jar and a nose breathing jar. Start by putting about 20 coins or buttons in the mouth breathing jar. Take coins out of this and place in the nose breathing jar when they are breathing through the nose. There are no negatives, so no transfer takes place if the child is breathing through their mouth. When the nose breathing jar is full you might have a treat or reward in mind.

Breathing Exercises for Younger Children

Nose Clearing for Kids

Kids copy what they see, so do the nodding head clearing for about 3 nods and then a HUGE flourish of removing the hand and a BIG nose breath while keeping the mouth closed. Once they can master this, then you can gradually change this to a tiny nose breath at the end.

Steps for Very Young Kids

Parents sit opposite each other on the floor, about 1.5 metres apart and the child walks back and forth. When they walk towards you hold your nose with your elbow above your head so that they can see your mouth is closed (don't talk). Then when your child gets close, whip your hand off with a big sweeping motion. Now see if they will do the same. Get them to walk towards you keeping the mouth closed and gently pinching the nose and holding their breath, as you did. You can try increasing the distance for a longer breath-hold. This should always be followed by at least 1 minute of hibernation breathing (see below). Make sure they are breathing quietly, gently and preferably through their nose afterwards.

Hibernation or Invisible Breathing

One way to get young children to sit and breathe quietly through their nose is to ask them to do invisible breathing. Invisible breathing means the body is very still and the breathing very quiet. The chest and shoulders shouldn't move, and they might imagine they are breathing from their tummy.

Another suggestion is hibernation breathing. Animals slow their breathing down very low to hibernate and can sleep for 3 months in this state. To breathe like a hibernating animal, you need to be very still and breathe very quietly through your nose.

To help children learn to breathe with their diaphragm try putting one hand on their tummy and the other on lower back. Ask them to breathe gently between your hands. They shouldn't overdo it. You should feel gentle pressure on the palm of your hand over the tummy on the in-breath.

Children are visual so it may help to use a timer when getting them to do breathing exercises. Use the sweep of the second hand on a wall clock. Say that you must sit still and quiet for 2 sweeps of the second hand around the clock face (2 minutes). An old fashion egg timer is very visual, and you get an extra minute of compliance if you are lucky.

Try one of these online timers: www.online-stopwatch.com/rocket-timer/

Children have short attention spans so a four-year-old is unlikely to sit still for more than 2-3 minutes. A five-year-old might be able to sit for three. I have seen three-year olds sit for 3 minutes so it can be individual.

Breathing awareness

It is vital that habitual mouth breathing is identified as early as possible, and steps taken to avoid craniofacial changes that become harder to reverse as children get older. Disorders like inflamed adenoids and tonsils, glue ear, dental problems nasal congestion, asthma and allergic rhinitis are most often caused by and not the cause of mouth-breathing. By getting in early and correcting breathing dysfunction it is possible to avoid adenoid and tonsillectomy and other disorders listed above.

Observe your child at play, drawing, watching TV and watch for signs like open mouth, audible breathing, sighing, catchup breaths, drooling, frequent sniffing, runny nose and dark rings under the eyes. If your child is watching TV or on the computer with mouth open warn that the TV goes off if they don't close the mouth. Turn the TV off for 2 minutes if your child continues to breathe through the mouth. If it happened again TV off for 5 minutes and so on. Older children have the option to wear a strip of micropore tape (not suitable for under four years). For obvious reasons don't penalise children with chronic blocked nose.

Guidelines at Bedtime

- No refined carbohydrates or dairy before bedtime
- Reduce stimulation of any kind close to bedtime

Avoid stimulating food drink or activities close to bedtime as this may stimulate breathing and lead to disrupted sleep. Do a few minutes of breathing exercise before bed to promote a good sleep pattern. Use the nose un-blocking exercises/steps if necessary to clear the nose.

Don't over-heat the bedroom. Do not run a dehumidifier in the bedroom during sleep time. Make sure the room is dark and preferably no night light.

Raise the head of the bed for easier breathing. Roll up a blanket or put cushions between the mattress and the bed base at the head end of the bed to raise the head.

Food Choices

Do not encourage overeating. Feed your child when they ask for it and do not force them to eat more than they want.

The other thing that can make a big difference is the removal of dairy, and soymilk from the diet. The other class of foods linked with poor breathing patterns are

refined carbohydrates: foods and drinks containing sugar and high glycaemic foods such as wheat, breakfast cereals, bread, toast, pasta. So, try to reduce these foods and you may see an improvement in the breathing.

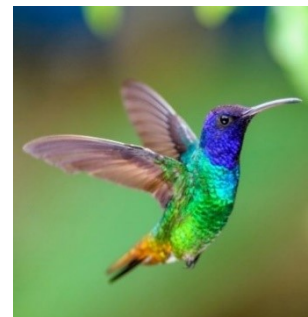
General Breathing Habits

Teach your child to close their mouth to keep flies from flying in. Teach children to close their mouth to stop the asthma witch or coughing witch from flying in and causing asthma or a cough. Do not over-do this one as it may backfire and cause anxiety or bring on nightmares.

Encourage them to smell the air, flowers and other things and objects - breathing through their nose. How about breathing through their nose while picking toys up off the floor and putting them in a basket, making their bed or getting dressed.

Humming to unblock a nose and fight infection

Most children enjoy humming. You can hum songs or tunes. Humming can have a calming effect and is good for helping to relieve nasal congestion as it stimulates secretion of nitric oxide in the nasal passages. Nitric oxide is a bronchodilator and vasodilator and can help relax airways. It is also a germicide helping to combat inhaled germs.



Humming Exercise for five years and up

1. Breathe through the nose, mouth closed and tip of the tongue resting behind top front teeth.
2. Exhale slowly through the nose and make a sustained hmmmmmm sound.
3. Breathe gently and don't push the air out with force.
4. Now, breathe in gently through the nose and repeat.

Imagery

Cats are cool and cats always breathe through their nose, even when running.



The fastest mammal on land is a cheetah and cheetahs always breathe through their nose.

Only sick cats breathe through their mouth. Talk about breathing like a cat, rabbit or some other animal that the child is familiar with. Humans are the only animals that have forgotten to breathe through their nose.

Sometimes children will ask about dogs and their panting. Dogs are nose breathers. They only pant to cool down because unlike humans they don't have sweat glands in their skin. So, they are not breathing through their mouth when panting, but just moving air in and out of their throat to cool down. They always shut their mouth to breathe in between panting and once they have cooled down.

The games, exercises and tips in this guide are to help your child get started on the path to better breathing and health. The guide does not constitute all or part of a Buteyko programme. Please phone our clinic in Auckland on +64 -9-360 6291 if you would like to know more about the programme.

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