

Relax: Decompress School Stress

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After a lazy, hazy and fun filled summer what challenges face your children when they go back to school? Or perhaps your little one is entering a very new experience, that of kindergarten. Regardless, there will be new faces, new spaces and new teacher(s) with different rules and expectations. Change requires adjustment for us all. Change we have no control over is the most challenging. But even choosing something new can stretch us to feeling stressed.

Our youngest chose a Late French Emersion Junior High program. The school did an excellent job of providing information about the tests ahead. As predicted our dear girl's marks plummeted and there were tears over never before seen Cs and not fully understanding the French language.

How can parents help? Here are some tips to ease the stress of going back to school:

- a. Allow children to make their own choices where age appropriate. A 5 year old can choose a red or green lunch bag while a high school student can choose subject options based on career goals.
- b. Schedule DOWN TIME after school, especially for children with an introverted preference. Seven year old Katie, after being picked up from Brownies, put her hands on her hips and spit out, "They tell me what to do all day at school and then you arrange for me to go somewhere I am told what to do again. Enough!"
- c. At dinner time invite inclusive family conversation. "What was the best and worst thing that happened for you today? What did each of us learn today?" This activity allows parents to model managing daily ups and down and children to have their concerns and accomplishments acknowledged.
- d. At bedtime offer a simple body massage by gently rubbing children's backs and then stroking their forehead while speaking of your love for them.
- e. Teach children the relaxation response. A good time is at bedtime when they are wearing their comfy PJs. Using a soft and caring voice lead them through the process of being aware of their body tension and letting go. Here's a sample process:
 1. *First I ask you to lie on your back and notice where you have wiggles or tightness.*
 2. *Now tighten all your muscles from your head to your toes while I count 1, 2, 3. That's right. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
 3. *This time concentrate on your toes. Curl your toes. 1, 2, 3. Now let go.*

4. *Push your heels into the bed. That's right. Tight. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
5. *Press the calves of your legs into the bed. 1, 2, 3. Let go.*
6. *And now your knees. Tight into the bed. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
7. *Squeeze your thighs together. That's right. 1, 2, 3. Let go.*
8. *Pretend you are pushing your belly button into the bed. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
9. *Make a fist with your hands like you are feeling angry. Tight. 1, 2, 3. Let go.*
10. *Put with your left hand on your belly and your right hand on top. Let each finger relax.*
11. *Squeeze your elbows into your body. Tight. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
12. *Squeeze your shoulders up to your ears. That's right. Tight. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
13. *Scrunch your face up like a prune. 1, 2, 3. Let go.*
14. *Clench your teeth and jaw together. 1,2, 3. Relax*
15. *Notice if you have any part of your body that is tight. If you do, make that part tighter. 1, 2, 3. Relax.*
16. *Let your eyes feel heavy and close. That's right. Notice the air that is going in your nose. Just notice. Your breath goes in your nose and into your chest and then your belly. Your belly is like a balloon with air going in and out. Just notice the air going in and out.*
17. *If you have thoughts notice them when your breath goes in and let them evaporate when the breathe goes out. Notice where in your body you feel safe, relaxed, loved and ready for a sweet night's sleep.*

Note: Children with high arousal or ADHD will struggle to relax. You will need extra patience if you decide to teach them the relaxation response.

2nd Note: The relaxation response is an invaluable tool for all of us, including parents. Record your own version of the relaxation response on a tape or CD to be available to all family members.

f. Create a guardian angel for children to take to school with them. It can comfort a child to imagine that a caring and wise presence is with them. While children are in a relaxed and deep breathing state, but not yet asleep, provide a personalized guided imagery. Avoid asking questions that children may feel compelled to answer out loud. This will break the relaxed state. Here is a sample for you:

While you are feeling relaxed, safe and loved, I want you to imagine that you are somewhere beautiful. Then imagine someone gently walking towards you. It's your guardian angel. She or he is smiling at you. Notice what your angel looks like, how he or she moves and is dressed. Notice what your angel sounds like as he or she says something loving and comforting to you. Your angel will be with you all night in your dreams, will be with you at school and any time you want. Your angel has a name and I will ask you in the morning what it is. Night, night dear; know your angel and I love you.

Patricia Morgan is a counselor and speaker who helps parents and others lighten their load and brighten their outlook. She has authored *Love Her As She Is: Lessons from a Daughter Stolen by Addictions*, *She Said: A Tapestry of Women's Quotes* and four upbeat booklets