

Visualization with Children

For Health and Happiness

I know a little girl who could make herself 'catch' anything by just thinking about it!

One day she was seated across from a child who had warts on her fingers, "I wonder what it would feel like to have a wart?" she thought. She imagined it in vivid detail as she watched the other child disembark from the bus. The next morning she awoke with a wart on her middle finger. After many such experiences, she realized that it might be an idea to apply her imagination more productively, like using it to help her get rid of colds, for example, and anxiety. As far as I know, she still finds it more effective than any pill.

Visualization is a term given to the conscious use of the imagination for a purpose, and has long been recognized as a powerful tool for both healing and personal growth. Interestingly, as with many self-help modules, we adults often overlook it when it comes to our children. Is this because we forget, or do we just consider it to be inappropriate for children? This question has always fascinated me, because in my experience (from my own childhood and working with children - using the imagination as a conscious tool - for my entire adult life), visualization is absolutely natural and even effortless for most children – far more so than for adults, as they have considerably less 'baggage' to distract them.

But before I further delve into just how effectively visualization can be used to benefit children, let me first clarify why it's important to pay attention to our imagination, and exactly how our innate human capacity for imagery affects us, deeply and persistently, in just about every way.

We all think in images, 'visualize' constantly, from the day we are born until the day we die. Research has shown that over 90% of us visualize literally – we 'see' images in our minds - and almost the same amount of us are also able to 'hear' images, while about 60% experience images kinaesthetically. Some people experience all three types of images simultaneously, others only one or two types. Still others simply think about the words in an image. Regardless of how you experience images, the fact is images are occurring internally, in your mind, 24/7, whether you are conscious of them or not. We feed the

images in our minds with our emotions, which in turn are fed by more images, and we can very easily end up in a perpetual cycle. For example, the image of a possible hospital visit will be exacerbated by the anxiety or fear of it coming to pass, which in turn will make the image of such an experience more vivid, which will quickly increase the anxiety, and so on and so forth. On the other hand such a cycle can be a pleasant experience, such as when the thought and images of a wonderful holiday memory make us smile, triggering feelings of happiness or contentment and making us more likely to smile to the next person we see, resulting in a return smile which triggers a thought of appreciation for living in such a friendly village, et cetera, et cetera. How we handle this domino like process in which our innate ability for imagining plays such a significant role, determines how we perceive the events of our lives and in turn how we react to and experience life and other people. For most of us, little conscious consideration is given to this internal process, allowing it more or less to determine what we feel and how we act moment by moment, giving us the experience of constantly having to react, of being at the mercy of outside forces, of having life 'happen to us'.

This on its own offers enough fodder for discussion and exploration to warrant an entire book (and indeed I've written several!) However there is even more to the dynamic of imagery and emotions than our perception, responses and behaviour. There is a very basic fact that you may already be aware of, that is critical to life itself: *our imaginations and how we feel emotionally, contribute immeasurably to our health and our capacity for healing*. Scientists have found that, although not always obvious, our mind's images have a direct and profound impact on our body – and on our brain. The more emotion that accompanies our thoughts and images, the more of an impact will be had – particularly when the images, for whatever reason, are experienced as negative or stressful.

Stress is, as most of us know when we reflect on it (and as more recent studies have found), the result of our perception. It is the body's reaction to fear-based images and assumptions or projections about an experience or the future – 'what if?'s that we conjure up in our minds. Although these can sometimes be both appropriate, (such as alerting us to possible danger) and helpful, (such as in motivating us into action), usually our 'what if' images merely cause unnecessary and unhelpful anxiety and stress. The greater the stress, the more insecure we become about our ability to handle whatever we are

imagining and the less we believe in our own coping abilities and, here again, a perpetual cycle ensues resulting in stress hormones circulating throughout the body. These stress hormones (such as cortisol) inhibit the 'thinking brain' and also speed up the ageing process and deplete our immune system, to name but a few outcomes. The brain is important here because the more inhibited our 'thinking brain' is, the less we use it to think clearly and the more likely we are to perceive an anticipated situation as stressful and even imagine additional stress we had not previously considered. This never-ending cycle damages our very cells and makes us increasingly prone to sickness.

Naturally, when we are in the midst of such a cycle, we are often not aware of it and tend to project our angst-ridden images onto the people in our environment, which include, of course our children. And we unknowingly teach the very process that is damaging us – extremely effectively in most cases – to our little ones. How often haven't you heard parents (or yourself) stop children from doing something slightly risky by conjuring up vivid images of what could happen to them? Children are amazingly adept at adopting their parents' fears and 'what ifs', and all the damaging effects that follow. Unfortunately, we parents are not quite as good at teaching them how to take charge of the worrying 'what if' images and the accompanying emotions, or how to create positive, life-affirming imagery.

Happily, I'm delighted to report it's never too late to start! Regardless of what state of health you and/or your children are in, using the imagination consciously to change emotions and initiate feel-good hormones will boost the immune system, increase health AND help you both act and interact in more managed ways, again reducing stress and so improving health. Better yet, utilizing visualization as a tool with children can be a pure delight, for here is a way to use their sponge-like absorption of parents' words (and ways) to positive effect. It is also especially rewarding as it is usually near second nature for them. Children have both a natural need and an ability for creative play that makes consciously applied use of imagery almost effortless for them. It certainly makes more sense to them than many other things they are taught!

Being such a natural tool for children, visualization helps them to grow up far more aware and centred than they otherwise would, developing skills that allow them to stay connected to and take charge of their own internal imagery and emotions. The immense significance

of this tool shows itself most clearly in the increased self-confidence and sense of inner security that children who use visualization have – not to mention their increased ability to self-soothe, self-motivate, and even boost their own healing from illness or injury.

So how does one begin using this tool with children? Well, the best way I have found is to first start practising it yourself. Once it becomes natural to you, integrating visualization with your children will naturally evolve.

Pick a time when you can be undisturbed for just five minutes – for example, right before you go to sleep, (sit on the edge of your bed so you don't fall asleep in the middle of it), or just as you're waking up. Sit with your spine straight and your limbs relaxed. Focus on your breath. Just observe it for a few breaths, then begin slowing it down. Breathe in deeply for 5 counts, then breathe out for 6 or 7 counts (it's important to extend the out-breath, as exhalation activates the body's relaxation system). Once you have slowed down your breathing, focus on a point in front of you and slightly upwards. Allow your eyelids to become heavier and close gently. Now take your attention into your chest and area around your heart. Visualize a beautiful place in nature, a peaceful, quiet place. Picture yourself in it. Use all your senses – picture the colours, be aware of any sounds, feel the texture of the ground beneath your feet, smell any scents and notice any taste that may occur. Enjoy how good this makes you feel, and notice how it feels in your chest and in the rest of your body. Breathe into this good feeling several times and tell yourself you will recall this feeling whenever you want.

Before you open your eyes, make a small physical motion to 'ground' the memory of the feeling, such as placing the tips of your first two fingers together with your thumb, or lightly tapping or touching you chest with one finger, brushing the tips of your fingers across your forehead, or placing one hand gently on your chest. You can make up any small gesture that feels natural to you, as long as you *associate it with your good feeling state*. Be sure you have made this connection in your mind, before you open your eyes. Then, throughout the next day, whenever you remember, make the gesture and recall the good feeling in your chest and body. Really make sure you *feel it in your body*.

The more often you practise this, the easier it will become. Soon, all you will have to do is make your chosen gesture and take one deep breath and you will feel your internal state shift to a 'feel-good' state. Whenever you catch yourself having a negative thought or image in your mind, hit 'Pause' on your image, then make your chosen gesture, focus in your chest and breathe into a feel-good image and feeling.

Knowing you can take charge of your feeling state this way can make a world of difference to how you handle challenges and life in general. Once mastered, when you teach your children to do the same, you will know how best to help them apply it to their particular emotions or experiences, and be able to answer any questions they might throw at you.

The above is a general and basic way to use visualization to begin to take charge of emotions and health. You and your children's imagination or visualization abilities can be used in many other ways and for more specific issues, quickly becoming – in the words of one eight-year old I worked with – “a Force for good!” It can be used to heal, to prepare for an upcoming challenge (such as exams or learning a new skill), or to help the development of empathy and compassion in situations where this may be difficult. There are a multitude of books and CD's now available that teach this very valuable tool, - including my own books - and should be easy to locate. I think you will find it well worth the effort – in fact, you may even discover, as I have, that your child takes to visualization so easily and effortlessly, that she'll be coaching you before you know it!

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