

As the school year is in full swing you may notice that your child may be experiencing more anxiety; whether that is due to an increase in demands at school, or just being overwhelmed due to everyday tasks and transitions. Below is a tip from Dawn Huebner, Ph.D, author of “What to Do When You Worry Too Much” on how to help your child when they are experiencing anxiety.

“Why Breathing Doesn't Work (and what does)”

We all do it. When faced with a panicky child we say *Take a breath*. And then one of two things happens.

Compliant child: Opens mouth to sob in more air, only to find her chest is too constricted so not much goes in, which is scary, escalating the panic as she wails – *I can't breathe!*

Less compliant child: *That doesn't help* (and she's right).

It doesn't help to simply tell kids to take a breath. When they are already hyperventilating (or close to it), they can't breathe effectively, which only serves to escalate their fear. And when it's the first thing we say, it feels (to a frantic 5-year old, 7-year old, 9-year old) hopelessly inadequate.

Think about the last time you were really worked up. How would you have responded if someone met your sobbing (ranting, panicking, clenching) by telling you to breathe? *I am breathing, damn it!* It doesn't really help.

And yet, it does. Not telling someone to breathe, but the act of breathing. When we are worked up (frightened, angry, tense) our breathing changes. It becomes more shallow, less restorative because we are slowly starving ourselves of air, throwing off the balance of oxygen and CO₂. This imbalance makes it harder to remain calm, to think and figure out what to do. We need to breathe to restore our inner stasis, and kids do, too. Here's how to help them do it:

1. **Start with an out-breath.** When chest muscles are tight (which happens as our feelings escalate), it is hard to breathe in. Not being able to breathe in is scary, triggering a danger alarm deep within the brain, adding to the sense of panic already spiraling out of control. Coach your child to breathe out, first. Purse your lips and blow out slowly like you would to gently extinguish a candle.
2. **Do it with your child.** Even before you start speaking, blow out some air. That's a cue for your child, a nonverbal reminder to exhale. Keep your breathing nice and slow. Focus initially on the out-breaths, making them long, with shorter intakes through your nose in between. Gradually lengthen your own in-breaths, so you are breathing in deeply (through your nose) and breathing out long and steady through slightly pursed lips. People have a natural inclination to match the pace and emotional pitch of their

companion. You are consciously bringing your pace down, to help your child de-escalate, too.

3. **After your first out-breath, say something empathic.** Reflect what you are seeing, or put your child's feelings into words in a calm, steady voice. Something like, *Wow, that seemed scary* or *You feel really mad right now*. Keep all judgment out of your tone. You are letting your child know that you get it. You see what your child is feeling and whatever it is, it's okay.
4. **After that first reflective comment, add something supportive.** Say something along the lines of *Blow it out* or *Let's work on making your body feel okay so we can figure out what to do*. Breathe as directed above, setting the pace, modeling for your child, letting your calm presence soothe her.
5. **Resist the temptation to jump in with lots of words.** Questions, admonishments, threats – all of these are disorganizing to kids when they are already in a heightened state. Practice what Dr. Teresa Bolick has described as **Low and Slow** (from [Asperger Syndrome and Young Children: Building Skills for the Real World](#)), bringing the pace, tone, volume, and complexity of your speech down a few notches.
6. **Practice with your child.** All of this will work substantially better if you help your child practice breathing ahead of time. Start with a simple explanation: *You know, when we get worked up it's hard to think clearly. We need to calm down before we can figure out what to do. Making sure we're breathing nice and slow can help us calm down. Let's practice so the next time we're super-mad or really scared (or whatever feeling your child tends to have trouble with), we know just what to do*. Then aim for two or three brief practice sessions a day (we're talking minutes here – in the car, before bed, etc.). Simply prompt with, *Let's do a few of those breaths*. And you do it, too.
7. **Some kids respond better when there is a visual component.** Have your child imagine a smell to breathe in – brownies, sun tan lotion, horses. Encourage your child to picture the object and sniff in the scent, pulling it into her nostrils.

It might seem silly to practice breathing with your child, after all, she breathes just fine most of the time. But learning to take long, slow breathes in the midst of a highly emotional state is a skill that doesn't come naturally. An added bonus: it will work wonders for you, too.

Source: <http://www.dawnhuebnerphd.com/Articles/Breathing.aspx>