

# Relaxation: Every Child's Right to Simply Be

by Patrice Thomas and Wendy Shepherd

**W**e live in a world that is undergoing rapid and dramatic change, and our children are being placed under more and more stress — at home, in care settings, and at school. Children's time is now more and more directed by adults, and there is little time for children to contemplate, reflect, or simply be. Without this balance of child-centred and teacher-directed play, children's health, well-being, and development are affected by the negative and damaging effects of stress. Some of these include long hours in a range of care settings and spending time with a number of caregivers, overstimulation and noise, the general fast pace of life, extracurricular activities, and family situations such as the separation or divorce of parents or adjusting to blended families.

There is now limited time for play and motor development as a result of the frantic pace of life and the need for children to be secure and supervised at all times. Hence, sedentary play is promoted at home and at school. Media games, advertising, videos, and exposure to news programmes contribute to stress, and in some cases unresolved terror, for children (Levin, 1994, 1998).

Much research to date has focused on stress and stress management strategies for adults in work and home settings. However, little research has been directed at how we can incorporate holistic stress management ideas into our curricula for young children. Adults readily admit that they often transfer their stress reactions (no matter how subtle) onto the children in their care but feel unequipped to incorporate relaxation into their daily routines. Young children, often mistakenly stereotyped as innocent and carefree (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999), do not have the words or the understandings to express their worries, fears, and anxieties and often as a result are labeled "naughty" or "disruptive." Relaxation techniques are simple and easy to incorporate into early

childhood programmes and provide valuable life skills for the children in our care.

## Dispelling the Myths

Introducing relaxation exercises into an early childhood programme requires discussion, preparation, and planning. Families and colleagues need your support in providing them with relevant information before you begin to work with the children in your program. Families and colleagues need to know why relaxation is being included and how you will introduce it to the children. Following is a list of concerns that we have encountered in our work with young children.

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**Concern.** Parents and colleagues may view relaxation as a “new age” or religious concept.

**Remedy.** Inform parents and colleagues by providing written information or video programmes that describe and demonstrate the techniques of Tai Chi, progressive relaxation, and visualization exercises. Reassure families and colleagues that relaxation exercises are not promoting any religious beliefs. Discuss the lifelong benefits for children and adults. (Display a copy of this article!)

**Concern.** Eastern philosophy such as Tai Chi and the relaxation exercises are viewed as “different.”

**Remedy.** Embracing diversity is a valuable method of imparting acceptance of differences in young children’s lives.

**Concern.** Tai Chi exercises are only for adults.

**Remedy.** Reassure families that Tai Chi exercises are safe, non-invasive exercises for the very young to the very old. There is a lot of information about Tai Chi for families to read.

**Concern.** The staff do not know how to do Tai Chi or the relaxation exercises.

**Remedy.** No one needs specialized skills. Everyone can do it at their own level and pace. Just try! Hold a meeting to demonstrate the exercises to colleagues and parents. Invite them to do the exercises; they will enjoy them and feel refreshed.

**Concern.** Relaxation is adding yet another task to an already heavy work schedule.

**Remedy.** Consider replacing a less beneficial activity — for example, the preparation for the rest period of the day may be replaced with the use of Tai Chi and relaxation exercises. Some older children have grown out of the need of a midday nap. The relaxation programme is a perfect substitute for rest or nap time for those children who do not either rest or sleep. The children are settled and focused after a relaxation session. The visualization exercise is a wonderful opportunity for imaginative storytelling and communication with peers. Drawing and writing can be added as an extension to the experience.

## What Is Relaxation?

Relaxation helps children to slow down and to calm and quiet their bodies and their minds. Relaxation experiences are soothing and restorative for young children. We can teach children to handle stress through gentle

exercise and techniques that provide inner peace and security. Fundamental to learning to relax is discerning the difference between muscle tension and relaxation (Madders, 1987). We believe that before the mind can relax, the body must learn to relax. Our approach is different to that of most other practitioners as it involves the use of gentle exercise (Tai Chi movements) to relax the body, followed by progressive relaxation and visualization exercises to relax the mind, emotions, and spirit. The techniques we use are gentle and have been practiced for many years in a range of health and education settings. Teachers do not need specialist knowledge to implement these exercises as they are simple and easy to learn.

Tai Chi or gentle exercise is an ancient form of slow, repetitive movements which bring the body back into balance and harmony. Tai Chi simply defined is “moving meditation” and, as such, creates peace, harmony, calm, and quietness in children (Crook, 1988). Tai Chi also promotes good posture, muscle tone, flexibility, and suppleness. We have practiced Tai Chi exercises with children from two years of age and have found that most children love the repetition and flow of the movements.

Traditional exercises and games can be beneficial for many children. However, there are those children who find that too much competitive play and sport can be emotionally and physically damaging. Children who have limited mobility or special needs can also participate in some of the Tai Chi exercises. For example, children in wheelchairs can easily perform the upper body movements alongside the rest of the children. We assert that it is vital, therefore, to introduce children to gentle, non-invasive exercise in order to develop a healthy, balanced lifestyle instead of negative habits such as poor posture, diet, and exercise.

Progressive relaxation and visualization practices can be used successfully with young children as a follow up to their Tai Chi practice. Progressive relaxation involves focusing the attention on the different parts of the body and using rhythmical breathing to help the muscles relax. It is important that adults keep their terminology and instructions short and simple here. Visualization or guided imagery involves the children engaging in an experience led by a teacher which creates a relaxing story or scene in their imaginations. These stories are often related to scenes from nature, imaginary friends, animals, and pets. The scripts can be created by adults or children.

It is important to create a quiet time for children each day, that doesn't have the stressful associations that sleep time can often give. In quiet time, children learn to value learning to just "be" and to experience stillness, reflection, and calmness. These opportunities give children time away from busy routines and overstimulation from noise and activity during the day.

### Creating a Special Place

Select an area that is out of the traffic zones within the play room, a quiet corner. Weather permitting, a grassy space under a tree is perfect.

Once this space has been decided on, organize the environment. A large carpet defines the space, providing a clear message that this is where the relaxation exercises happen.

Have a shelf or low table nearby to display something wondrous and special: a float bowl with a flower or two drifting in a pool of water, a basket of beautiful leaves, a paperweight that has a hint of mystery about it, a piece of pottery or a figurine, a length of shimmery fabric, a music box, an art book opened to a page with a painting that will intrigue and delight both adult and child, a mask, a musical instrument — the possibilities are endless. The table or shelf could also store the tape deck or CD player for the relaxation music.

If possible, reduce the lighting in this area to a soft lamp-light, to make it a cozy space.

Cushions around the edge of the carpet are appealing, and if you decide to soften the space with small cushions, you need to be sure there are enough for each child to have one.

Once this special place has been created, do not pack it away. Maintain the space as it is so that the children can come to the area with a minimum of fuss or wait time. You will be surprised to see how well children respond to looking after this space once it has been arranged and maintained.

Children often bring along a "gift" for the special table — a feather they have found on the playground or a shell collected on holiday. Families enjoy looking at the special objects to be found on the table as well.

### How to Structure Relaxation Sessions

In our work with young children we have found that the following guidelines are useful. As you become more comfortable and familiar with using relaxation in your room, you will begin to structure your sessions specifically to the needs of your children.

#### To begin:

Spend a short time sitting in a circle and introduce what the children will be doing during relaxation time. Taking a few deep breaths with the eyes closed will "centre" the group. It is interesting to note that for some children, sitting still with eyes closed and breathing rhythmically is difficult. It is important to persevere with this process and support children with calming, gentle, encouraging words.

#### Gentle exercises:

Have the children stand up and find their own space. Undertake a few warm-up exercises as you would for any physical activity (e.g., limbering, stretching) to prepare the children for their Tai Chi. Begin with one or two Tai Chi exercises (we have provided some for you in this article) and build upon these as you learn more.

#### Progressive relaxation and visualization experiences:

Ask the children to lie on their backs with their arms and legs relaxed and their eyes closed. (Closing eyes and keeping still may be threatening for some children, so allow them to come to this in their own time.) Prepare a "relaxation script" and lead the children through an exercise where they focus on relaxing each part of their bodies in turn. For young children, begin with the feet, ankles, knees, thighs through to tummy, chest, back, shoulders, arms, neck, and head. Encourage slow breathing throughout this.

Next, create a "visualization script" or a story where you lead the children on a journey in their imaginations. Always enter into the story slowly, as they visualize themselves moving out of their classroom and to their special destination. Likewise, do not end the visualization process too abruptly. Lead the children back from their journey carefully as they slowly "re-enter" the room and give them time to "sense" their bodies and recall what their room looks like before opening their eyes. Remember, there is no need to rush relaxation time . . . you will defeat its purpose.



## Closing circle:

After relaxation, have the children sit up and form a circle where they will share their responses and reactions to the relaxation sessions. Children usually love to tell others about the sights, sounds, and adventures they had during their visualization experiences. Likewise, children often provide very insightful comments about how their bodies feel after their Tai Chi exercises. Not all children will want to talk about their experiences each time. It is important to respect those children who simply wish to "be" after their relaxation time. This part of the session can be further followed up with drawing, painting, or other creative art experiences as a way of expressing the children's ideas and imaginings. These materials and resources need to be organized beforehand and set up close by the relaxation space.

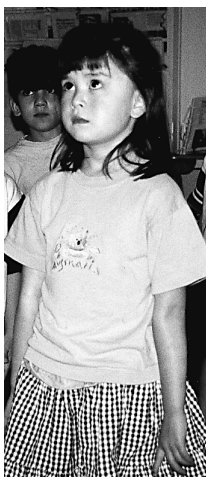
## Some Simple Exercises

Some easy and simple Tai Chi exercises suitable for young children are as follows:

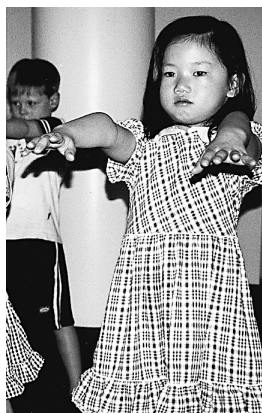
**Greeting — Sun and Moon Bow.** Have children stand with their feet apart, knees slightly bent, arms resting by their sides (this is traditionally called the "Horse Riding Stance").

Ask the children to form a fist with their right hand — this is their "sun." At the same time, ask the children to form a semi-circle around their "sun" with their left hand — this is their "moon." (See photograph.) Bring the hands to the forehead and

make a bow. This is how we begin our Tai Chi.



**Exercise 1 — Wu Chi.** Begin with the Horse Riding Stance. As the children breathe in, they raise their arms in front of



them to shoulder height. As they lower their arms to their sides, the children breathe out slowly. Repeat this exercise three or four times. (See photograph.)



**Exercise 2 — The Bird.** Begin with the Horse Riding Stance. As the children breathe in, they bring their palms up to chest height, crossing their hands at the wrists. As they breathe out, the children raise their arms out to the sides, palm down, at shoulder height. Repeat this exercise three or four times. (See photograph.)



**Closing — Embrace Tiger and Return to the Mountain.**

Begin with the Horse Riding Stance. Ask the children to hold their right hand under their left hand (palms up) just

below navel height. The children move their hands up towards chest height and turn them over (palms down). Now hands are lowered to their sides and



feet are in the starting position. Repeat three or four times. (See photograph.)

## Terminology

Young children relate well to the symbolic and lyrical language of Tai Chi exercises. For example, closing with “Embrace Tiger and Return to Mountain” becomes an enchanting ritual experience for them.

## Some Simple Visualization Ideas

We have been using progressive relaxation and visualization techniques with children for over ten years. We have written some enjoyable visualization stories (or “scripts” for adults to read to children aloud) based on the following ideas:



Reflection (above)  
Circle — at the end of the  
visualization process (right)  
— *Black and white photographs*  
by Kylie Duffy

- A Walk in the Rainforest
- A Magic Carpet Ride
- My Teddy Bear Friend
- The Fairy Party
- Walking Along a Beach
- My Symbol of Peace
- The Wise Old Tree
- My Peaceful Garden
- A Ride on a Cloud
- A Flight with a Magical Bird

As you develop confidence and familiarity in using these techniques with your children, it won't be long before you will be creating many varied and interesting stories together.

## Incorporating Relaxation into Your Daily Routine

We have established why it is important to teach relaxation to children at an early age and we have discussed how beneficial some simple relaxation exercises can be for young children. However, the main comment we receive from many early childhood teachers and caregivers is that they don't have enough time in their busy days to practice relaxation — that there are simply too many other things to fit into the curriculum. Herein lies the problem that we discussed at the beginning of this article. We all need to reflect upon our current routines and practices and ask ourselves the question:

*Am I adding to the stress of the children in my care with the routine tasks of the day and the expectations of participation in all aspects of the programme?*

We believe that many practices in care and education settings do indeed create more stress for children and staff alike. However, like any new idea, we need to develop slowly and gently until everyone becomes comfortable with the concept of a daily relaxation time.





Using relaxation with children involves much more than learning and trying out a few exercises and scripts. We like to refer to our commitment to the health and well-being of children as “developing an ecology of relaxation.” This involves questioning our current timetables and looking at our own stress reactions and verbal and non-verbal behaviours. It also means creating aesthetically beautiful and peaceful spaces for relaxation times — places where children and adults *want* to be. This ecology of relaxation also involves exploring our attitudes and values towards health and well-being and the importance we place on quiet, reflective time for children and adults each day.

Fundamental to the success of any programme with children is the way we incorporate parents and colleagues into the planning, design, and implementation. At Mia-Mia, we shared our ideas for setting up a relaxation programme with our parents and asked for their contributions and questions. We communicated the progress of our sessions at evening group meetings by videotaping meetings and sessions with the children and loaning these tapes out to parents, and through newsletters, interviews, and surveys. In this way, the parents were in tune with the relaxation programme and supported it by practicing the techniques and discussing them with the children at home.

## Conclusion

We believe that every child has a right to quiet, reflective time each day — what we call “spirit and soul” time. Relaxation activities uplift the spirit and soothe the soul. Early childhood settings are unique in that they have the potential to embrace relaxation settings each day as part of their programmes. In this way, children and adults alike can share the benefits of exercise, relaxation, and imaginative time. At Mia-Mia, we have developed the concept of relaxation as a “way of being” — which is fundamental to the underlying philosophy and practices of the whole centre. We continue to include relaxation as an integral part of our preschool programme because we have observed our children enjoying Tai Chi exercises and soaring creatively and imaginatively through visualization experiences.

It is our hope that many other early childhood practitioners discover the health and learning benefits of using relaxation with children. Small beginnings lead to a sense of peacefulness, calmness, wonder, and enchantment for all those who tread the path of relaxation — a path we hope will be more traveled in the future.

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