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Change Kids' Bleak Outlook of Life with This Technique

Being a kid today is more stressful than ever. From the often bleak world outlook on the nightly news, to divorce, to financial issues, to schoolyard bullies, there is plenty going on in a child's life to cause poor self esteem, anger, frustration, and even the symptoms of physical illness. Dr. Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist and author, has helps kids cope using guided imagery.



We interviewed Dr. Reznick to discuss her bestselling book, *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success*, and to introduce our readers to this fascinating approach. In Part 1, we talk about counseling with guided imagery and how the technique works. For more information go to www.imageryforkids.com.

BOYT: Why did you decide to focus on counseling children through guided imagery?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: My inspiration to focus on guided imagery came from desperation. I was working as a psychologist in the inner city schools of Los Angeles and I was supposed to take care of the emotional needs of 1200 angry, depressed, disconnected high risk children. I wondered, what could help these kids find some inner peace? Could they learn to believe in themselves enough to create a future? I knew the conventional cognitive approaches that my traditional USC education trained me for were a dismal failure and were not reaching them. I had to find something to touch their hearts and move them toward hope.

As synchronicity would have it, I found myself in a workshop at a psychology conference where another school had great success using guided imagery in terms of lowering behavioral referrals and boosting standardized academic test scores. I was so impressed with their results that I started contemplating how visualization could help the children I took care of. I read everything I found about the subject, met with every expert, attended every seminar, and made it my own, learning what worked and didn't with *my* kids. I started practicing and developing techniques beyond what was done before. Although the poverty stricken inner city of LA was the testing ground, I found these techniques work for children from all walks of life—from the rich kids of Beverly Hills to the children of working middle class in most neighborhoods.

BOYT: You have developed nine tools to use in guided imagery. What are they and what is the purpose of each?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: As I developed these Nine Tools, my goal was always to help a child access internal strength and resources to help solve everyday problems and to be successful no matter what was going on around them.

The first step toward this goal to connect with inner wisdom is through the breath. A simple form of meditation or diaphragm breathing I call the Balloon Breath (Tool 1)—partly because it's an easy visual, and partly because I couldn't use the word "meditation" in schools when I first started many years ago. The Balloon Breath has calming effects and facilitates a waking state of focused concentration and receptivity to positive suggestions.

Second, it's important to find a safe sanctuary inside where kids can rest, relax, and have a respite from ordinary stressful life—a mini-vacation, so to speak, and a sacred spot to do their inner work. It's an important skill on its own. Having a private place where you feel safe, loved, and appreciated can be incredibly healing. I call this Discovering Your Special Place (Tool 2).

The next step is to teach kids how to connect with the wisdom within through consulting an Animal Friend (Tool 3), a loving protector that has her best interests at heart, or meeting a Personal Wizard or Wise Person (Tool 4), a magical teacher and mentor to offer wise counsel from another perspective. Both can offer Gifts (Tool 5), to empower and help solve a particular problem.

Another aspect of inner guidance is teaching kids how to connect to the information found in different parts of their body. I separate the wisdom of the heart and belly as I have found this to be a special category. Connecting to Heart and Belly and Talking to Toes and Other Body Parts are Tools 6 and 7. "What does your Heart say?" or "What do your gut feelings tell you?" are great starts to connect with the body's intelligence and develop intuition. And feelings reside in all sorts of body places—consider where fear is lurking... or courage? Imagine having a conversation with them and learning how courage could overcome fear.

Using Color for Healing (Tool 8) is a powerful tool for transforming pain, whether physical, emotional, or a spiritual longing to connect. Almost everyone can relate feelings to colors (e.g.: green with envy, feeling blue). One child's tummy pain felt like green gunk, and she used gold love from her heart to clean it out and remove the hurt. Another young boy found that breathing in white love and blue calm worked wonders to extinguish his red anger.

Teaching Tapping into Energy for Healing (Tool 9) introduces kids and parents to become aware of the energies around them. Healing energy practices have existed across many cultures since time immemorial. Think of this tool as similar to sending loving energy when you hug your child or look at them through compassionate

eyes. Kids can learn to send warm loving energy to their ailing tummy or sad heart.

Each of the Nine Tools is powerful on its own, and when you mix and match them to fit a child's changing needs it can make a real difference in their life. There are specific scripts for each of the Tools in *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*, and The Nine Foundation Tools CD is available to make it even easier for kids and families to practice.

BOYT: Please tell us about a particular instance where guided imagery helped a child make a profound transformation.

One child in particular has touched me; imagery was able to make a profound change in his life. I share part of his story because it concerns the most common stress related pain children experience—headaches, which 90% of school aged children experience.

At ten years old, Ethan had been having horrible headaches since he was seven. He feared he might have a brain tumor, although CAT scan results were normal. He was taking medicine, but his pediatrician didn't want him to rely on medication, nor was it always effective. And Ethan wanted to get a handle on the stresses that might be contributing to his frequent headaches. In a bad month, he could miss a week of school.

Ethan described some of his headaches as pounding cannonballs; others felt like "humungous pliers" gripping his temples. His fearful imagination created a character for his headaches, a muscular hard-hat construction worker wearing a T-shirt announcing he's a "Bad Guy." He held an enormous drill in each hand and opened the top of Ethan's head, drilling directly into the brain. The intense pain often made Ethan weep, "I wish I was dead."

Using the Nine Tools, we turned his fear-based images into positive ones that could help him. He found a "Wise Guy" in the form of a SWAT team paratrooper dropping Tylenol into his brain, coming to his rescue. That brought some relief and he imagined the trooper helping even without the Tylenol.

Talking to Body Parts helped Ethan realize what might set off a headache. He discovered his Anger, which was "like fire exploding," and Worry, a "dark blue mouse" frantically scurrying in his head. The visual connections between his headaches and anger, stress, and frustration motivated him to practice the Balloon Breath on a regular basis to quiet things down. He often pictured the pain melting out of his head, sending its Energy into the air and disappearing.

Within months, Ethan's headaches decreased considerably. He didn't need as much medication and managed to attend school regularly. He even made a list of healthy habits for other headache sufferers that you can read about in *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*.

BOYT:What encouragement and advice can you offer parents who want to start using your guided imagery techniques with their children?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: Have fun. Set aside Imagine Time. Make it a game. Make it about what matters. Find out what's important to your child and start there. Follow the process. Practice on yourself. Be patient; learning new skills takes a bit of time.

I've made the learning easy and laid out all the steps to follow in *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*. There are countless examples to give you a good feel of what you might expect. Lots of scripts, trouble shooting tips, how-to-for-you suggestions, and even back-track alerts so you don't panic when it seems you're taking two steps back. Many CDs are available as added tools for your convenience. Most importantly, trust yourself, your intuition, and your own big imagination. Enjoy... and email me anytime!

About Dr. Charlotte Reznick

Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D. is a child educational psychologist, an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at UCLA and author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book, "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success" (Perigee/Penguin). In addition to her private practice, she creates therapeutic relaxation CDs for children, teens and parents, and teaches workshops internationally on the healing power of children's imagination. You can find out more about her at www.ImageryForKids.com.

