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Help Your Child Conquer Emotional Stress and Anxiety With Guided Imagery

No doubt about it—children have incredible imaginations. Why not use it to empower them to face and conquer their emotional stress and anxiety? In her bestseller *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success*, Dr. Charlotte Reznick explains how to help kids work through their turmoil from the inside out using guided imagery.



Dr. Reznick is a nationally recognized child and educational psychologist and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at UCLA. In Part 2 of our interview with Dr. Reznick, she talks about why she wrote the book, breaks down the guided imagery process, and discusses how art, music and writing can be used as therapeutic tools. For more information go to www.imageryforkids.com.

BOYT: What inspired you to write *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: As a child educational psychologist and UCLA associate clinical professor of psychology, I have experienced the healing power of a child's imagination on a daily basis for over 25 years. I have seen the rich internal world of children, a magical place where wise and creative answers reside. *The Power of Your Child's Imagination* was written to teach parents, educators, and therapists how to teach their children how to manage and overcome the myriad of everyday and not-so-everyday life stresses and worries that can affect peace, happiness, and reaching potential. All with the tools of imagination. My hope is to help create a world in which every child has the tools to heal herself and realize his dreams. It's my honor to share the secrets of transforming stress and anxiety into joy and success that the children have taught me

over these many years.

BOYT: What are the five stages of guided imagery? Please give us an overview of the process.

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: If I'm leading a child through a guided imagery to introduce them to the process of accessing their imagination, this five-stage model is helpful. That is: relaxation, induction, the main imagery experience, the return, and processing.

During the relaxation and induction phases, I encourage the child to relax and quiet his mind. We practice the Balloon Breath, which is basic deep breathing into his belly. To lead him to a deeper state of relaxation, I'll often suggest that a white or rainbow light come down from the sky and float about six inches above his head and turn into a waterfall of light, allowing the light to gently wash over him with each breath, helping him relax deeper and feel safer. If I can, I love using soft background music as a soothing transition from regular consciousness to the deeper imaging state. Sometimes kids stop hearing my words and just following the melodies to that deeper state.

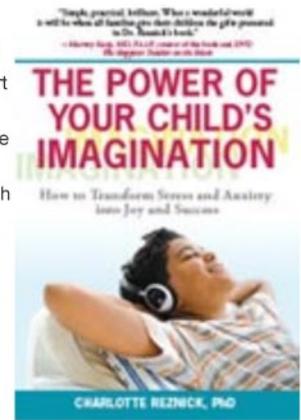
The actual imagery experience varies depending on the specific goal to be achieved. Whether we want to heal past hurts, create a safe basis for emotional growth, or clear her mind to concentrate and learn easier, there are many images one can conjure up. Sometimes I'll ask a child beforehand what her favorite place is or what will it be like when she gets along with her big sister, etc. in order to use her mind's picture in the guided imagery I create for her. She might be led to a special place where she can be unconditionally loved and accepted, or climb a majestic mountain where she may reach a goal she's already designed, or meet a special person or wise animal friend to help her with other concerns. Although there is no limit to the kind and variety of guided imagery scripts, the same imaginary journey can be taken over and over again each time with a fresh and new approach. I include a sample script at the end of each of the subject chapters in *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*, and of course there are scripts on all the CDs. I always encourage parents and therapists to create their own, based on the needs of the child they are working with and their own comfort level.

The final two phases, the return and processing, helps bring a child back to his normal waking consciousness, and to remember the experience. Kids often enjoy drawing or journal writing afterwards to help them express and let go of feelings that come up. It works as a catharsis for feelings that surface and as an anchor to deepen the effects of guided imagery. If I'm working with a group, we'll share experiences leading to group bonding. In my individual sessions there can be interaction and feedback during the imagery experience itself.

When introducing these techniques to kids, it's a good idea to start in short segments (three to five minutes for the youngest ones) and increase time as the process deepens. I often use the metaphor of sports to explain the importance of practice. Before a game, the team practices as much as they can. Before a life stress pops up, it's good to practice your imagery skills so you can be successful when you really need them.

BOYT: Why does guided imagery work so well with children? Is it more effective than conventional counseling?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: Imagery does something that conventional cognitive therapies do not. Bypassing the natural defenses of the logical brain, guided and interactive imagery allows children to go directly to the intuitive part of themselves and let their heart speak. Kids have big imaginations, and in working with imagery we make it an ally, tapping into inner knowledge. Simply discovering that he has his own wisdom is empowering. Developing the habit of listening to it and trusting it can profoundly shape how he meets life's challenges. The answers kids find to their problems are often more effective than any advice or instruction coming from adults around them—including their parents and myself. I would never say this technique is better than another. Each has its place. I can only share my experience and the great success it has had helping youth of all ages, from many backgrounds, in many different situations.



BOYT: In your opinion, what are the biggest issues facing children and parents today?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: From my experience working with kids over the years, the biggest issues facing families are the effects of stress and their resulting pressures and worries on both our kids and their parents' peace of mind and emotional happiness. The stress may come from peer pressure, disquiet at home, loss of family income, parental divorce, sibling rivalry... the list is long and continues. The American Psychological Association's annual study on stress now asks kids how stressed they are compared to the year before. Not surprising it's increasing, though many parents aren't aware of its extent. I get calls from parents every week asking me to help their kids with symptoms of stress: trouble sleeping, headaches, stomachaches, anger, anxiety, and more. They affect all areas of their life: school, friends, family. The fact is, we all experience stress—it's how we handle it that makes a difference. Imagery and the Nine Tools discussed in my book offer a positive way of coping.

BOYT: How can music, drawing and writing be incorporated into the process?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: Music, drawing, and writing can easily be incorporated into the imagery process. Playing gentle instrumental background music can strengthen the healing effects of imagery by accelerating relaxation and helping kids stay peaceful throughout the journey and conversations that follow. It's especially useful when you first teach the Tools. By practicing them with music, a child will connect the experience with a deeper tranquility, even when the music is gone.

Art supports and reinforces imagery. Once your child has accessed her feelings through imagination, she can release them in a drawing. Because it's often easier to talk about pictures than about herself, drawing will allow your child to express difficult feelings or disclose what she might not share verbally. After an imaginary journey, such as a trip to her Special Place, she can draw her experience. The picture gives you both something to look at and discuss. If the drawing illustrates a problem—say a dangerous goblin or a fire at home—ask what might solve the situation (perhaps an Animal Friend or Personal Wizard can be summoned). Or once he's spilled his feelings on paper, he can converse with them. He might use his picture of Fear to ask what it needs to calm down, or tell it to leave. It's much easier to speak to feelings when they're outside (in the drawing) than when they're gnawing away at his tummy. Even hanging pictures of a Special Place can serve as a reminder to return whenever the desire arises. And drawings of trusted Animal Friends and Wizards show support is always near.

Writing about emotional themes is healing in itself. It lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and pain levels, and can improve immune function. It decreases depression and anxiety while promoting a more optimistic life view. So writing after an imagery journey is a great way to continue these positive effects. Writing after imagery allows your child to explore her own thoughts and feelings about the experience in a private, concentrated way. It also teaches self-reflection and self-observation. Once she writes about her imagery she can choose to share it with you then or later, or keep it for herself. Older kids might enjoy non-dominant writing to more deeply explore what feelings have come up. Like imagery, non-dominant writing is associated with the right hemisphere of the brain that taps directly into intuition. It's a simple process of holding two different colored pens—one in each hand—with the dominant hand asking questions and the non-dominant answering. The written conversation continues as needed. For example, the logical dominant hand can interview angry or sad feelings, or a younger or older wiser Self.

BOYT: What is the added value of combining artistic expression with imagery?

Dr. Charlotte Reznick: The arts have been shown over time and research that they do more than communicate and entertain; they soothe our souls, clarify our thinking, and even soften our body's stress responses. Applied to the imagery experience, artistic expression can act like a booster pack, enhancing the healing that imagery inspires. When you add the creative arts, the richness of imagination becomes three-dimensional. Music deepens relaxation and concentration, while drawing and writing offer alternate ways "in" to the private world. The ability to express on paper the truth of a child's heart and mind makes those images concrete and more powerful. A child's art creations can also give a clearer sense of his inner struggle, an insight that can help guide him toward each next step.



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.