

# Calming Exercises For Parents and Teachers

We have a long nerve in our body that runs from our brain to our intestines. Its main job is to calm our body after it has been stressed. In order to do that, we need to stimulate it in some way.

Many grownups use reasoning and language to try to calm children. But when kids are in a stressed state of mind, their thinking brain is offline. Focusing on stimulating the vagus nerve can be more helpful.

## Activities that Stimulate the Vagus Nerve

### 1. Balloon Breath Breathing

- Sit in a comfortable position.
- Imagine a big balloon that needs to be blown up – what color is it?
- Now take a really deep breath and imagine putting your lips around the opening and blowing a long, slow breath into the balloon until your breath is all used up.
- Then take in another big breath and blow another long, slow breath into the balloon.
- Do this 5 or more times until the imaginary balloon is full.
- At the end, just sit still and relax with your eyes closed for a minute or so.

### 2. Humming, singing, or sighing

- Learn letters, colors, or other information by singing songs.
- Sing fun songs in the classroom when the kids need a little break.
  - Pumpkin, Pumpkin - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjLDlexWi8M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjLDlexWi8M)
  - Wishy Washy Washer Woman - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k2aD2XGXwM&ab\\_channel=TheLearningStation-KidsSongsandNurseryRhymes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k2aD2XGXwM&ab_channel=TheLearningStation-KidsSongsandNurseryRhymes)
  - Boom Chicka Boom - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nKq4jm4LD8&ab\\_channel=JackHartmannKidsMusicChanel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nKq4jm4LD8&ab_channel=JackHartmannKidsMusicChanel)
- Listen to familiar background music and encourage kids to sing or hum along.
- Have sighing sessions seeing how high the kids can start and low they can end.
- Make animal sounds together.

### 3. Chewing - Chewing stimulates the vagus nerve.

- Although chewing gum isn't usually allowed in school, you could pretend that you are all cows chewing your cud and making cow sounds.
- Have a bubble-blowing contest at home or at school during a reward day.

#### 4. Smiling

- Play games that make the children smile.
- Do nice things for others in the school so that everyone smiles.
- **Grow a Smile** - Close your eyes and think about something that brings a smile to your face. Put your hands on your heart, or on the place your body feels good when you're smiling.
- Hold it there and imagine your small smile slowly growing into a big smile.

#### 5. Laughing- Encourage children to laugh (but not at each other).

- Spend time with friends who make your children laugh
- Listen to funny songs or read funny books.
- Have assemblies at school just to have fun and laugh.
- Do laughing yoga - Laugh out loud together using different voices and arm movements. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDdnfzpC2s4>
  - Surfing – laugh while pretending to surf  
Ha ha – ha ha ha (with claps) (repeat 2x)  
Raise arms, breathe in through the nose, and then laugh out the air.
  - Other verses (use arm movements) - monkey, gorilla, baby, grandparent, Santa Clause, bicycle, lawn mower, etc. (kids can think of other ideas).

#### 6. Gratitude

- Make a list of all the things you are thankful for.
- Keep a gratitude journal and add 1 or 2 new things every day.
- Use any art medium to create things children are thankful for.
- Sing/play songs about being grateful.
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeSdQmO51Ps&ab\\_channel=TheJuiceboxJukebox](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeSdQmO51Ps&ab_channel=TheJuiceboxJukebox)
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir7SlxwttoyM&ab\\_channel=SherryStahl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir7SlxwttoyM&ab_channel=SherryStahl)

#### 7. Focus on the Present - When we're anxious, our minds often focus on either events from the past, or bad things that might happen in the future. Focusing on the present helps our brains to stop and see the beautiful and interesting things around us.

- **Make Calm Down Jars** to use when the students need to quiet themselves. <https://preschoolinspirations.com/6-ways-to-make-a-calm-down-jar/>
- **Stop, Look, and Listen** - This can be done in the classroom or at home but it's most fun outside. When the leader says, 'Stop, Look, and Listen,' everyone stops what they're doing. The leader then asks questions like:
  - How many different colors can you see?
  - Which color do you like the most and why?
  - With your eyes closed, what are the different sounds you can hear?
  - Is there anything you can smell or feel on your skin?

- Take a walk in silence and notice how many different things you can hear. After the walk, talk about your favorite sounds.
- **Mandarin Orange** (or any food) - Give a mandarin orange to each child and talk about what it looks like. Then have them close their eyes and ask them how it smells. Open it, feeling the texture of the peelings and watch for juice splatters. Discuss the taste and how it feels in their mouth, etc..

**8. Imagination** – Our imagination is very helpful when we need to calm our bodies and our anxiety. See [Imagination Activities](#) for examples of ways children can use their imagination to take charge of their nightmares, anxious or frustrated thoughts or body symptoms. There are countless ways for children to use their imagination to improve their mental health.

**9. Touch** – Touch stimulates nerve endings that talk to the vagus nerve.

- Touch students/children on the shoulder as you pass by them.
- Have a regular snuggle time at home.
- Have stuffed animals for young children to hold or hug.
- **Butterfly Hug** - Make a butterfly by crossing your arms at your wrist with palms on your chest and hook your thumbs together. Gently take turns tapping each hand on your chest. This can also be done by giving yourself a hug and taking turns tapping or rubbing the top of your arms with your hands. Do this for 3-5 minutes.

**10. Drumming** - lower frequency vibrations resonate through the body and activate the vagus nerve. Make hand drums out of desks, buckets (or something else) and drum together.

**11. Loving Kindness** – Self-generated kindness strengthens our vagal tone.

- Read books about kindness.
- Sing or play songs about kindness.
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H98Rfjxmsc&ab\\_channel=TheJuiceboxJukebox](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H98Rfjxmsc&ab_channel=TheJuiceboxJukebox)
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXAo\\_5voOP0&ab\\_channel=Peacockjr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXAo_5voOP0&ab_channel=Peacockjr)
- Write thank-you notes or cards.
- Paint kindness rocks and hide them for others.
- Send some child art to a grandparent.
- Study about kind things kids have done historically or in the present.
- Bake cookies and take them to someone who needs a visit.
- Make a list of kind things your family likes to do for others.
- Talk or write about how to be kind to oneself.

**12. Body Relaxation** – Ask the children to hold their breath and squeeze parts of their body really tight as someone counts slowly to four. Then let out a big sigh and relax.

- Fingers and toes – arms – legs – chest and back – stomach – full body.
- Start and end with 2 balloon breaths.

**13. Balancing** – Helps turn thinking brains back on.

- While balancing on one foot, throw an object into the air and catch it.
- While balancing on one foot, balance a pencil/pen on one or two fingers.

**14. Cold Exposure:** Cold *slows our bodies down* by activating our vagus nerve.

- Splash cold water on the face.
- Hold a cold compress to the back of the neck.
- Drink ice water.
- Take cold showers or swim in cold water.

**15. Exercise** – Exercise increases vagus nerve activity.

**16. Improving Gut Health** – The vagus nerve is activated by good gut health.

Eating lots of fiber (fruits, vegetables, legumes [lentils & dried beans], whole grains and fermented things like kimchi, kombucha or fresh sauerkraut will improve gut health.