Playmaker 202: Health
Training Manual
Practice of Playmaking
Life is good Playmakers Overview:

Life is good Playmakers, formerly Project Joy, is a national movement, started in 1989, to help children overcome life-threatening challenges – especially those children whose lives have been deeply impacted by the trauma of poverty, abuse, neglect, community violence, and severe illness.

Play is an essential part of the cure for these wounded children. Empowering, joyful play with sensitive, caring adults can help to restore what trauma and illness violently strip from a child. Life is good Playmakers ensures that the adults closest to these children – often frontline childcare providers like yourself - have the knowledge, skills, and resources to deliver the powerful medicine of play to the children who need it most. Our goal is that this manual, coupled with your experience at this training retreat, will help you use play to lovingly connect with your children, diminish their fears, renew their joy, and boost their capacity to heal and grow.

The Impact of Childhood Trauma

Psychological trauma can be defined as an extremely threatening experience, or series of experiences, that completely overwhelms a child’s psychosocial capacity to cope. Sadly, exposure to childhood trauma has impacted millions of children nationwide (some estimate that as many as ¼ of the nation’s 80 million children have been victimized by trauma) and is considered by many to be the greatest health crisis facing our nation today.
In 1998, The United States Center for Disease Control conducted the largest study of its kind ever to show how exposure to trauma, which they called ACE (an acronym for Adverse Childhood Experience), was the root cause of many common diseases that prematurely claim the lives of millions of Americans each year. What they proved was that millions of Americans experience one or more ACEs during childhood. As a result of these experiences, many went on to develop social and emotional impairments. As a result of these impairments, some engaged in health risk behaviors (such as drug use, drinking, smoking, etc.) in an attempt to cope with the ensuing loneliness and emotional pain. In some cases, these health risk behaviors eventually led to disease and disability and, as a result in some cases, they even led to premature death (see Figure 1).

**Designed to Survive: How Children Respond to Trauma**

For all human beings, severe threat automatically triggers a physical response that is initiated by the oldest and most primitive region of our brain. This response, often referred to as the “fight or flight” response, is brilliantly designed to help us respond immediately to threat and hopefully help us get to safety. However, when the threat is
so severe that it overwhelms the individual and prevents them from taking effective action, the brain (and the entire person for that matter) can get thrown out of balance. In the words of esteemed trauma psychologist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, “Preventing people from moving and taking effective action is what makes trauma trauma.” The bodies and minds of young children are even more susceptible to the impact of traumatic stress because their brains are still developing.

According to Dr. Bruce Perry, “Our brains develop in use-dependant ways.” This means that if people, especially children, are put into situations where they are constantly forced to respond to threat, then the areas of their brains that are responsible for responding to threat (which are the lower, more primitive regions of the brain) will develop more than other important regions of their brains. As a result, the development of higher brain regions, which are responsible for social, emotional and cognitive functioning, run the risk of being severely compromised.

In other words, forcing a developing child to focus on surviving instead of on loving, playing, and exploring has devastating long-term effects on their health and development.

**Fear Destroys Playfulness**

Psychologist and neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp conducted a very interesting research project examining how fear impacts playfulness in young, developing mammals. During his research, he discovered that playful engagement was instrumental in the brain development of young rats. To determine this, he looked at the brain development of rats that were raised in two different types of living environments. The first environment, which he called an “enriched environment,” consisted of several rats living together with lots of toys to explore (balls, tunnels, running wheels, etc). The second environment, which he called an “unenriched environment,” housed only a sole rat in an empty cage, with no toys. Over the course of several experiments, Panksepp found that rats living together in enriched environments had far greater dendrite development (neurological connections that are representative of brain development
and learning) than rats living alone in unenriched environments. He even learned that rats laugh during play. (But that's a story for another time. Go to YouTube and search for “laughing rats” if you don’t believe me.)

Once Panksepp proved that rat pups did indeed play and learn, he decided to measure the impact that fear would have on play and learning. To do this, he measured the level of play activity of a group of rat pups (Figure 2) in an enriched environment. Once he determined their baseline level of play activity, he put a cat hair into their cage. As one might have guessed, upon smelling the cat hair, the rats became frightened and immediately stopped playing (Figure 3). Panksepp then removed the cat hair from the cage to see if the rats would return to their previous level of playfulness. Much to his surprise, the rats never returned to their previous level of play activity even after the “threat” (the cat hair) was removed (Figure 4). Sadly, it was concluded that exposure to severe threat, at a vulnerable young age, forever changed the development and behavior of these playful little mammals.
Obviously, human beings are not the same as rats. Although our autonomic responses to threat are actually quite similar to those of other mammals (including rats), our brains are far more evolved. We can think more complexly, feel more deeply, express a wider range of emotions, and have the potential to employ far more coping behaviors. In children, overwhelming fear can cause them to withdraw from once joyful activities, like playing (It’s difficult to pay attention to the toy blocks if your focus needs to be on basic survival.) Overwhelming fear can also cause difficulties forming trusting relationships, as well as induce feelings of powerlessness and despair.

**Playfulness - the single most important trait of childhood**

We often ask professionals who dedicate their lives to helping the most wounded and vulnerable of our nation’s children one simple question - “If you had the power to nurture just one trait in a child that would best help that child overcome any and all adversity that they face in their lifetime, what would that trait be?” In other words, what trait best helps a child develop resiliency? We have had the honor of asking this question to thousands of outstanding teachers, social workers, coaches, psychologists, psychiatrists, parents, and others, and have heard some great answers - answers like trust, confidence, self-esteem, discipline, and creativity to name a few. One answer that we almost never hear, and the one that we believe to be most important to children, is the trait of playfulness. **Playfulness is the motivation to freely and joyfully engage with, connect with, and explore the surrounding world.** What could be more important than that? Playfulness is an approach to life – an attitude. It is a spirit with which one can approach every (and we mean every) aspect of life – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**Play v. Playfulness**

When most people think of play, they usually think of it in terms of a type of activity – let’s say playing baseball, swinging on a swing, and/or making sand castles in a sandbox. However, our belief is that an activity alone can’t be considered play unless it is engaged playfully (Figure 5 is a pretty good example).
We would suggest that on any given Saturday afternoon, at ball fields across America, there are lots of children who are “playing” baseball without any sense of joy, passion, connection, or empowerment. For those children, “working” baseball would be a far more accurate description of their activity.

On the other end of the spectrum, activities that we generally think of as work - such as doing math homework, raking leaves, cooking dinner, and/or cleaning one’s bedroom - can be better described as “play” if they are approached in a playful manner. According to British historian Arnold Toynbee, “The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.” At Life is good Playmakers, we couldn’t agree more.
Barriers to Playfulness

For children who have been deeply impacted by trauma, engaging the world playfully is difficult. As Panksepp’s research with rat pups suggests, it is likely that exposure to overwhelming threat during a child’s formative years can alter their potentially “playful brain” – one that is open to exploration and connection – and turn it into more of a “surviving brain” that is forced to primarily focus on avoiding threat (See Figure 6).

In other words, when basic survival is a child’s primary goal, it is impossible for them to engage the world playfully. What does it take for a child to engage the world playfully? It takes the cultivation of vital social, emotional, and cognitive traits such as confidence, trust, joy, creativity, passion, and love. We believe that this collection of internal traits, as well as others, can be organized into four domains of playfulness.
The Domains of Playfulness

Project Joy has classified the four domains of playfulness as Joyfulness, Social Connection, Internal Control, and Active Engagement. In order for a child to reach their full potential of playfulness, they must excel in each of these four vital areas (See Figure 7).

Joyfulness

Joyfulness is defined as the child’s sense of love, fulfillment, and hope that is expressed with displays of pleasure and exuberance. It differs from happiness in that it is more stable and far less influenced by external factors. For example, as a die-hard Red Sox fan, I can’t say that I am happy when they lose. However, my joyfulness allows me to still love the team and remain hopeful and optimistic about what tomorrow’s game may bring. Joy is not the absence of sadness. It is the spirit of love and hope that remains deep inside you that gives you the strength and courage to
persevere despite the sadness. I am reminded of one of my favorite jokes in which a seven-year-old boy is joyfully singing and dancing in the outfield during a Little League baseball game. His dad arrives at the game a little late, sees his son having the time of his life and proceeds to ask him the score. Overjoyed, the little boy shouts that the score is 27 to nothing! Excited, the dad shouts back, “Wow! You guys are winning 27 to nothing?” The little boy replies, “Heck no dad, we’re losing 27 to nothing!” Surprised, the dad asks, “Then what are you so happy about?” To which the boys proudly replies, “We haven’t even been up yet!”

This joyful little boy could have responded in many different ways to his dad’s question. He could have said that he was happy to be playing baseball; happy to feel the warm sun on his face; happy to have a dad who cares enough to watch his baseball game, or a whole host of other little “blessings.” Joy is not dependant on the score but rather on our “love of the game.” It is our loving and hopeful spirit that gives us the strength to never to give up.

**Social Connection**

*Social Connection is defined as the child’s cooperative interactions with others and the surrounding world.* Dean Martin once sang, “You’re nobody ’til somebody loves you,” and Barbara Streisand once sang, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” Who knew that this once famous crooner and this still kind-of-famous diva were such experts on attachment? People – especially children – need adults to love and care for them. It’s as simple as that. It is this love and caring that enables children to develop secure attachments that ultimately give them the confidence to explore the world around them. This confidence is essential to helping children reach their playful potential.

Humans are herd animals. We travel in packs (called families / communities) and don’t do well in isolation. This does not mean that we don’t enjoy being alone at times. People – especially those who have the option of returning to loving networks of social
supports – also enjoy moments (even hours and days) of solitude. Yet the universal act of laughter gives us good reason to believe we need connection with others. It has been said that laughter has no foreign accent. Think about it. It’s true. All over the world, human beings “choose” to laugh (did you know that most laughter is not an involuntary response to humor but a conscious choice) in order to signal to other people that they are safe to connect with. Perhaps it’s true that the shortest distance between two people is a laugh.

Internal Control

*Internal Control is defined as the child’s sense of safety, worth, and competence that allows them to engage with the surrounding world.* All people, especially children, need to feel some level of safety and competence in order to effectively explore the world around them. After all, the world is a terrifying place for someone who views him or herself as powerless and incompetent. Children deserve to feel as if they are safe, special, and of great value. From this foundation of safety and competence, we develop a psychosocial “base camp” from where we can embark on life’s adventures and return to when these adventures prove too difficult or when we need to rest and “restock our supplies.” One of my favorite Internal Control stories is about a five-year-old girl who is drawing a picture in her art class. The teacher, seeing her hard at work, asks her what she is drawing. The little girls inform her that she is drawing a picture of God. Surprised, the teacher says to the little girl, “But nobody knows what God looks like.” To which the little girl replies firmly, “They will when I’m done!” It is this kind of confidence and healthy “self-centeredness” that allow for us to continue to go out into the world and explore despite all of our vulnerabilities.

Active Engagement

*Active engagement is defined as the child’s enthusiastic and complete immersion in an activity.* In other words, Active Engagement is not only about being completely in the moment, but really enjoying that moment too. Children who have
experienced severe trauma have difficulty being in the moment. They are often so preoccupied by their past experiences and so anxious about what they can expect (or not expect) in the future, that as a result, traumatized children often find it exceedingly difficult to be present. Without the ability to be in the moment, healing can’t occur. Experiences of safety, joy, wonder, and love can only be felt in the moment. Even when we reflect on past joys, it is the moment of reflection, not the past experience, where joy is felt. With this in mind, we need to create environments where children can experience moments of wonder, passion, imagination, and joy—moments that are powerful enough to help soothe past fears and sorrows, and prepare a space in which joy can take root.

**Action Steps**

Now it’s time to put all this theory into action! One thing to keep in mind is that the best way to bring joy and playfulness to your children is to have it yourself! You need to be a living example of joy, love, creativity, and peace in order to nurture these same qualities in your children. With this in mind, we strongly encourage you to actively and playfully participate in the following activities with your children. This way, *all of you* can lead healthier, more joyful lives. Turn the page for some fun activities that we recommend. We have no doubt you’ll be creating many more of your own in the days ahead!

Breathe deeply, smile, and enjoy…
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Let the Games Begin...

All of the following games and activities are for you to use in your work with children in the best way you see fit. Some activities are described for use in a group setting, others are described for one-to-one use with children, but almost all of them can be creatively “sculpted” to work in any setting — whether it’s a bedside, in a playroom, in a treatment room, during a sibling group, in rooms/units with precautions, and even with parents — any of the countless environments and situations you find yourself in your work. Please feel free to adapt, adjust, and/or build on them, so they are as joyful, connecting, empowering, and engaging as possible for the children you work with.
Getting to Know Games

Activities to engage with, connect with, and explore the interests of children through creative stories and conversations.

KIDS BOOK OF QUESTIONS / IF QUESTIONS FOR TEENS

These books help start conversations and give opportunities to learn about children’s thoughts and opinions, while giving them chances to express themselves openly! You can be creative in how the questions get selected, but here are some ideas:

The Kids Book of Questions is numbered 1 – 268. I like to offer “PICK” or “FLIP” as options for children to select a question. If they choose PICK, I ask them to pick a number between 1 and 268 and then ask that question. If they choose FLIP, I flip the pages with my thumb and ask them to call out “Stop!” I then offer the numbers from that page for them to pick from.

Note: It is important to read the question to yourself before asking the children—you may know that a particular question is inappropriate, triggering, or would be too challenging or uncomfortable for that child. Use your best judgment in either asking a different question from the page or slightly changing the question to be better in that situation.

The book “If…Questions for Teens,” by Evelyn McFarlane & James Saywell is an excellent resource for older children—and is no longer easily available in print. But an e-version of the book is available for your use!

JENGA…WITH A TWIST

You start with the regular game of Jenga (or some less expensive “tumbling block” set), and play with the regular directions: Build the tower with rows of three blocks, alternating in direction until all the blocks are used. Players then take turns removing one block at a time from somewhere in the tower and replacing it on the top row of the tower, all the while trying to keep the tower standing. The game/round is over when the tower tumbles down…but you can always build it and play again!

The twist comes in by changing the blocks, by writing a different question on each one. When a block gets pulled out, that person gets to answer the question before placing it on the top of the tower. You can write using a Sharpie (permanent) marker, and try to think of simple questions that will be fun, that allow players to get to know each other better, that might give children a chance to express themselves.

Just a few age-appropriate examples for younger children (ages 5-9): “Vanilla or Chocolate?” “What is your favorite outdoor activity?” “Favorite indoor activity?” “What is the best pet you can imagine, and why?” “Do you like fruits or vegetables better?” “Favorite TV character, and why?” “Velcro shoes or lace up shoes?”

Some “older kid” (ages 10+) questions could be: “What is something that makes you really happy?” “What is something you’re afraid of?” “Do you have a favorite musician or type of music? If so, what are they?” “What superhero would you want to be?”
You may want to have an “older children” set and a “younger children” set—but one very creative person we know realized that the kids loved the game so much they learned all the questions! She got a new set and just numbered the blocks, then had the children help write down questions on paper that corresponded to the numbers. When the questions got “old,” they just made up new ones!

**QUESTION BINGO**

This activity is very similar to Bingo, but with a social twist! Rather than marking a spot on their Bingo sheet when “B-12” is called, children are looking for other people who can write their name in a spot that applies to them. For example if the spot says, “Someone who likes to read” then the child seeks out anyone they come into contact with throughout the day who likes to read. When they find a match, they get a signature, and continue trying to reach BINGO by filling five spots in a row (up/down, sideways, or diagonal). This can be played in a group or even with children in separate rooms, and you can use a template (provided in your playkit) or make up your own questions with the blank template! It’s also a good idea to have some fun prizes on hand when children complete and declare, “BINGO!!”

**GOOD/NOT SO GOOD**

All players are given a pair of cards, one “good” and one “not so good” (these should be distinguishable with the word, different colors for the cards, and images such as smiley and frowning faces). Initially, the adult offers topics/words/actions that the child can respond to just by holding up “good” or “not so good.” The adult can be serious, silly, and generally creative with suggestions (i.e., pizza, the color blue, hip hop music, getting a haircut, hospital food, dogs, being sick, etc.) and when the child is ready to offer suggestions they can take over or you can take turns. This works very well in groups too—just be sure everyone has their own cards. This is a simple way to begin to get to know children (and for them to get to know you), and to start discussions about interests, feelings, commonalities, even the difficulty in making choices sometimes! If children have a hard time deciding between good or not so good, it can help to talk about when and why that thing might good or not so good.

You can create a more challenging activity by having each player start with a set number of each card (5 of each card). Players take turns naming things that the other responds to by laying down either their “good” or “not so good” card. Each player is trying to get the other one to lay down ALL of one type of card before they lay down all of one type of their own cards.

**EITHER/OR**

This is a simple activity, which is great when you have just a couple minutes with a child and sparks everyone’s creativity! It’s as easy as naming two things (anything!) and having the children choose one. For example: Red or Blue, Dogs or Cats, Mittens or Gloves, Breakfast or Lunch, Pepsi or Coke, Superman or Spiderman…and on and on! Thinking up either/or choices almost becomes contagious and you may find yourself going back and forth with children forever!! Keep in mind that you don’t have to instruct them to pick their favorite; just offering them the choice lets them decide why they pick one or the other.
STORYBOARD STORYTELLING

Start this activity by working with a child to create a few characters (draw, cut out from magazines...) and tape them around the room. The child can tell the story, or you can tell it collaboratively, by describing where the characters go and what they do. Draw and create as you go (mountains, castles, rocket ships, stars, trees, etc.). The story can be put on pause until the next visit or until the next person comes along who wants to jump into the activity.

ALL-DAY-MAD-LIBS

Mad-Libs can be great fun for children of all ages, as long as they know which kinds of words to fill in the blanks. You can do some together and make sure they know the basic words used in Mad-Libs. (These “definitions” are useful scripts to help children understand and come up with words to fill in.)

Noun: a person, place, or thing. Anything you can see is a noun.
Verb: an action word. Anything you can do is a verb.
Adjective: a describing word. It describes how anything looks, sounds, feels, tastes or smells.
Adverb: describes HOW you do something, and usually ends in –ly. (definitely give some examples: quickly, slowly, strangely, happily, etc.)

Then, All-Day-Mad-Libs allow the children to acquire the words to fill in their Mad-Lib by asking anyone who comes into their room or even some folks who pass by in the hallway. This can be a great way for children to feel more connected—especially if Nurses, Doctors, Child Life Specialists, Social Workers, etc. help them collect words from other children in the unit!

CAMPFIRE

The campfire is a traditional time for telling stories, but it’s often hard (and probably dangerous) to light a campfire in a hospital. So, using a flashlight and some orange, yellow, and red tissue paper, you can actually construct a pretty good replica of a campfire. Close the shades on the window and turn off the lights, and you might just be able to hear the sounds of the great outdoors! Then you and the children can actually tell stories that you know, or help make up some new ones—maybe even tell the story of the outdoor adventure you have begun to create!

FORTUNATELY/UNFORTUNATELY

This is a fun storytelling activity, in which one person starts the story by saying “Fortunately…” and completing a sentence. The next person adds to the story by starting his/her sentence with “Unfortunately…” and so on, alternating between “Fortunately” and “Unfortunately.” If there are just two of you, or if there are ever an even number of players, you can add a third sentence-starter word (i.e., “interestingly…” “strangely…” “meanwhile…” ) so players get to add different types of sentences to the story.
**CHARADES STORIES**

This is another simple, and potentially very fun and silly storytelling activity. The child tells a story and you do your best to act out the story, like charades, as it is being told. The more dramatic and expressive you are in your acting, the more entertaining it will be for the children. As the child is able to do the charades/acting, you might switch roles and you tell the story!

**“UH, STORY”**

The facilitator tells a story with frequent pauses, which are filled in by the sound “…Uh,” and which the child/partner fills in the blank with their own idea. The facilitator repeats the new additions and continues the story.

**STORY FRAME**

The text below is written so that all participants can see it. Each person gets one line to say and starts it with the listed phrase. With two participants, you can just take turns down the list of statements.

- Once upon a time…
- Every day…
- But one day…
- Because of that… (this line can be used as many times as needed with larger groups)
- Until one day…
- Ever since then…
- The moral of the story is…

**ADD ON STORY**

This story-telling activity can be done with any number of participants. Each person adds to a story by contributing a select number of words. For example, “3-word Add On Story” might start with one person saying, “Once upon a…” and the next person says, “time there was…” and the next person says, “a boy who…” and the next person says, “had purple ears.” And the story would proceed with each person adding the next three words. The story may naturally find an end or you can suggest a final round around the circle if you need to end it.

A fun variation of this game is to play “1-word Add On Story,” which is usually very entertaining, fast-paced, and creative!
NAME THAT SONG

Using your own music library/iPod, have the child select a song and begin playing it. Ahead of time you can pick a time limit in which you will try to name the song. You can even create a scoring system such as 3pts for naming it in less than 10 seconds, 2pts for naming it between 10-20 seconds, and 1pt for naming it between 20-30 seconds, and no points for more than 30 seconds. Maybe you can earn a bonus point if you can name the artist. If the child has his or her own iPod, you can reverse the challenge! (It is very helpful to have an iPod speaker so both of you can listen at the same time)

COLLABORATIVE BUILDING

Create an area in the playroom where children can contribute to a large, themed building project (themes put forth by the children; ex. rainforest, cityscape, a medieval kingdom, etc.). The collaborative project can be made of Legos, blocks, Lincoln logs, play dough, K’nex, etc. When a child enters the playroom, they can contribute to the project (i.e. make a building, build a tree, arrange people/animals around the project, etc.). If they can’t go to the playroom, you can bring appropriate materials to their room and, if they are interested, ask them to assemble their contribution, which you transport safely back to add it to the larger project. Maybe take a picture too so you can show the child his/her contribution as part of the larger project. The same thing can be done with a paper quilt, or a wall collage.

ORIGAMI PAPER BOXES

These are fun and simple projects, which can actually be used to store small things! You can use ANY paper, as long as you make it square to start. This can be a really great multi-step activity – step 1: decorate the paper by gluing on tissue paper pieces, drawing a picture with oil pastels, paint, or any other way. You can even use old calendar pictures or take pictures and print them out! Step 2: After your paper is dry (if necessary) you can then follow the instructions to create the boxes.

The link below offers clear instructions, with pictures, for these boxes.


Step 3: You can then decide what to do with the boxes. They could be a place to put wishes, fears, plastic bugs…anything!

LIFE IS GOOD TEE-SHIRT DESIGN

Children might know Life is good tee shirts, and they might have some very good ideas for a new tee shirt design. Feel free to use the blank tee shirt template in your play kit to make copies and have children design away!
Games to Grow

Creative sports and games that ALL children win together.

HAND SOCCER

This game can be played on a bed, on the floor, in a playroom, even on a table. All you need is a ball and at least two players—and designate opposite sides of the playing area (walls, table, etc.) as the goals. If a child is in a bed, their end of the bed becomes their goal, which they guard using their hands. They can roll and push the ball (but not pick it up) while trying to score on your end of the bed. Just like soccer players only kick and dribble with their feet, this game only uses the hands to hit and dribble the ball.

MAGIC BALL BASKETBALL

The adult holds a brown paper bag, or a plastic shopping bag out in front of them, using both hands. The child is “given” an imaginary magic basketball to hold and then asked to shoot in the basket. In this game of pretending, the adult follows the throw of the ball with their eyes, right into the bag, and as the ball would “land” in the bag, they snap their fingers, which makes the bag jump as if the ball really landed in the bag. This makes for endless entertainment and a little bit of imaginative magic!

BODY BASKETBALL

Using a real ball, preferably a soft one, the adult acts as the basketball hoop and the child shoots the ball at the hoop—the body being the backboard. The exciting part of a human basketball hoop is that the child can choose where the hoop stands for each shot and how much assistance the hoop should provide—Lots, where the hoop can move his/her feet and arms to help the ball make it in; a little bit, where the hoop can move his/her arms but not their feet to help the ball go in; or none, where the hoop stands perfectly still during the shot, even if it’s going to miss!

EGGS ON THE TABLE

This game can be played on a bed or table and with as few or as many players as you have. The game starts with one ball, an “egg,” which the players bat around, pushing and rolling, sort of like the flipper hands of a pinball arcade game! As the game goes on, you add more and more balls to the table, trying to keep all of them on and moving around. If one falls off, no big deal, just retrieve it and try to keep playing. This could be a fun activity to try to set a record by the number of balls on the table or for a period of time.
**Newsball**

In this game, the players sit facing each other (in a circle if there is a group) and use a ball (any soft ball will do) to share news about themselves with the everyone else. Everyone in the game will “share” news, even if they do not tell news, simply because they’re in the activity. Everyone shares news either by telling or listening! The news may be about something they did, something they like, something that happened to them, a favorite TV show or movie, what they had for breakfast, anything! It’s also important to specifically say that their news can be *any* kind of news (and give some examples of kinds of news: happy news, sad news, serious news, silly news, difficult news, funny news, etc.) Really, *ANY* kind of news! When a child is holding the ball, they can first say how they would like others to respond to their news, and then they can share their news. Some children may want to get a standing ovation after their news, others might like a silent appreciation as listeners put their hand to their heart, and still other children may want to make up their own unique response. The rest of the players listen to the news and respond as the “teller” asked, and then raise their hand or ask for the ball when they would like a turn to tell news.

**Shake it Up**

Stand (or sit!) in a circle holding onto the handles of the parachute. The adult instructs the child or group of children to begin shaking the parachute. While they are shaking, the adult leads in chanting, "shake-shake, shake-shake, shake-shake, stoooooop (a hand motion accompanies the stop command)!” Adults and children can explore their creativity by thinking of all kinds of different shakes to do, making sure every child who wants to pick/make up a shake gets a turn. If a new shake gets invented, just ask the inventor to demonstrate it, so everyone else can do it too!

If you don’t have a group or a parachute—you could use a bed sheet or pillowcase and shake it up one-on-one with a child!!

**Wrecking ball**

Using paper drinking cups or any other non-breakable cups, the children are asked to build a structure. They are told ahead of time that once the structure is complete, they will be given a chance to knock it down with (soft) wrecking balls, until it is completely knocked down. Once all the building is done, the children can throw the wrecking balls, and you can help retrieve them, until the structure is knocked down. Wanna play again? Just build ‘em up again, and knock ‘em down again too!

**One through five**

The adult thinks of five different actions and gives each action a number. For example, one is jump up and down, two is run around in a circle, three is do a jumping jack, four is give somebody in the group a high five, and five is moo like a cow. The group then spreads out and the adult calls out numbers. The group then responds to the numbers with the appropriate actions. The faster the numbers change – the more wild the game gets. Children can be
given opportunities to think of actions and/or call out numbers. If five actions are too many for your children to remember, try three. This is a lot of fun with some great music playing while you call out numbers!

I SPY

A twist on a classic game, which can be played in a hospital room by having a child close his or her eyes and then hiding small balls in almost hidden but still slightly visible spots around the room. The child can then carefully inspect the room to find the location of the balls. (This is much like a live-action “hidden picture” activity.) To make it more challenging, you could give a time limit and see how many of the balls can be found OR you could make the balls completely hidden and give them guesses to find the balls (like hide-n-seek)!

DOWN, UP & UNDER

Standing in a circle holding onto the edges of the parachute, the children lower and raise the parachute slowly as low and high as they can, while the facilitator chants/sings, “Down, up, down, up, down, up, up…”. When the adult says, “UNDER!” (always following the third “Up”) the group lifts up the parachute together and goes under. If time permits, children can have a turn being the leader and guiding the “Down, up, down, up, down, up, UNDER!” chant. Once under the parachute, the adult can take the children on an imaginary trip (i.e., under the sea on a scuba trip, in a cave to explore, through a forest, etc.) to see all the make-believe things they can think of! Again, this is great fun to do one-to-one with children, using any cloth, sheet, or blanket that will softly fly.
Imagimotion
Exuberant movement games that nurture imagination, creativity, and community.

APPLE PICKING JUMPS

Standing in a circle, the children are guided through a fantasy where they are standing under a great big apple tree (any fruit tree will do) and that way up high are a bunch of delicious pieces of ripe fruit just waiting to be picked. Then children are guided to reach up, then jump up several times in order to pick some fresh apples or other tree fruit (children can also choose to bend down and pick berries or climb trees to pick coconuts). After all of the imaginary fruit is gathered and placed on the parachute, the children can grab and shake the parachute in order to make a huge fruit salad.

BICYCLES

Children lie on their backs, bringing their knees to their chests and pointing their feet in the air. They are then invited to pretend that they are riding imaginary bicycles and guided to move their legs in a peddling motion. They are also invited to hold their arms out and pretend that they are holding onto their bicycle’s handlebars. Children are then asked where they would like to go on their bicycles. One at a time, each child chooses a destination and the children all peddle there (through turns, up hills, down hills, and even ringing their bells). You can help guide the rhythm of the activity by saying “peddling, peddling, peddling and stoooop.” Once the children “stop” and reach their destination, the adult can indulge the fantasy even more by having the children imagine they are exploring their chosen place.

BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLIES

Children sit on their bottoms in a circle with the soles of their feet together. Children are directed to hold onto their ankles and bring them in closer to the bodies. They can then “flutter their wings” by bouncing their knees softly up and down. The facilitator can give each child a chance to share with the group where they would like to fly. While flying the group can chant, “fluttering, fluttering, fluttering, laaaaaannnnnnnd”.

BALLOON JOURNEY

The balloon journey combines playful breathing and imagimotion! Ask the children where they want to go on their hot air balloon ride. It can be anywhere in the universe! Similar to “Beautiful Butterflies”, one at a time, each child chooses a destination that they want to go to and the children (and adults!) all get to fly there with their balloon breathing. Interlacing their fingers on top of their heads, children breathe in as they raise their hands above their heads to inflate their balloon. As they breathe out, they push their hands down toward their heads as if they are emptying all the air out of the balloon. Create a consistent rhythm for breathing, guiding children to take four breaths before landing. “Breathing in raise your hands to fill your balloon,
and breathing out hands down to your head... breathing in fill the balloon, breathing out empty the balloon... innnnn fill it up, ouuuuuu empty it... and one more time breathing innnnn, and ouuuuuut... and laaaaaand. Once they “land” (after the 4th exhale), children can imagine exploring their chosen place.

**FLYING BIRDS**

Similar to “Balloon Journey”, this activity uses breath and imagination to ground and inspire creativity in children. Begin by asking the children where they want to fly to (anywhere in the world!). While the children are either sitting or standing, with enough room between them that they can raise their arms to the side without bumping other, they are invited to imagine they are birds with beautiful, strong wings. Starting with their hands down by their sides, they are guided to breathe in deeply as they raise their arms to above their shoulders, and then slowly breathe out as they swoop their wings down to their sides. Arms rise again as they inhale and arms push down through the air at their sides as they exhale. Create a consistent rhythm for breathing, guiding children to take four breaths before landing. “Breathing in raise your hands above your head, and breathing out push your wings down to your sides... breathing in raising your wings, breathing out releasing them down... innnnnn raise those wings, ouuuuuuu let them down... and one more time breathing innnnn, and ouuuuuuut... and laaaaaaand. Once they “land” (after the 4th exhale), children can imagine exploring their chosen place.

**MAGIC BALL**

This is a great game to build imagination and creativity. Sitting in a circle we begin by passing the magic ball around to each member of the group. Once the ball has made it to everybody and is back to its starting point, we magically (this entails saying a magic word or two) give the ball various “properties.” For example we can create the Hot Ball, or the Cold Ball, or the Heavy Ball, or the Sticky Ball, or the Giggle Ball, or the Shaky Ball. Each of these balls then can be passed around the circle as the children imagine, pretend, and adjust while passing each different type of Magic Ball (for example, the hot ball could be passed quickly, the cold ball could make the children shiver, the sticky ball might be difficult to let go of, the giggle ball might make each child laugh, etc.).

**FREEZE DANCE**

All you need for this activity is some music and some people who want to dance in any way they would like. You put the music on and everyone dances...but when the music stops, everyone FREEZES!! When the music comes back on, everyone dances again. Continue with the dancing and freezing—doing the best to stay frozen in whatever silly dance pose you’re in while the music is off, until you’re ready to end the activity.
MIRROR - MIRROR

Children spread out in the play space and are invited to pretend that they are mirrors. The group leader stands in the front of the room and asks the children to be her or his reflection by copying his or her slow movements. The group leader moves slowly and simply at first so that children can easily follow along. They can increase the speed and complexity of their movements when and if the group is eager for an additional challenge. If time permits, the leader can provide opportunities for children to lead the whole group or pair them off and let them take turns mirroring each other.
Games For Groups

Joyful & exuberant activities, which are ideal for playing with groups of children.

NAMEBALL

Children sit pretzel-legs in a circle. The adult introduces the name ball to the group (any soft ball will do) and passes it around the circle. When each child has the name ball in their possession, they are asked to say their name anyway they would like (for example, if they are feeling happy, they may choose to say their name in an upbeat and happy way, if they are feeling shy they may choose to say their name quietly, if they are tired they may choose to say their name with a big yawn, if they are feeling strong they may choose to shout out their name…etc.). Once the child says their name, the rest of the group echoes back that child’s name just as he or she originally said it. If a child chooses not to say their name, the adult can ask if that child would like for the group to help them say their name. If the child still declines, the adult should thank the child for telling the group what they want and let the child know how happy they are that the child is part of the group.

TEAM JUGGLE

- The children are asked to sit or stand in a circle and one member is given a fleece ball or any other fairly small, soft ball.
- He or she starts the game by tossing the ball to someone in the group, who in turn tosses the ball to another group member (before tossing the ball to somebody, the tosser should make kind eye contact and then say the person’s name to make sure that they are ready to catch).
- This continues until each member of the group has touched the ball once & the ball is returned to the person who started the game.
- The group continues passing the ball throughout the circle following this same pattern. As the group gets comfortable, they can move the ball more quickly. If the group decides that they would like to really increase the level of challenge, additional balls can be added.
- There are no penalties for dropped balls. Just pick them up and keep them flying.
- When you are ready to bring the game to an end, have the person who added the balls gradually begin taking them out, rather than passing the balls around the circle again. This allows for a “cooling-down” and calming feeling at the end of the game.

Variations:

After using names to signal a pass, use different topics to learn about teammates. Go around the circle and have the children ask the question first, (i.e., What’s your favorite movie), then play the game again but refer to the person you pass to by their movie, instead of their name. Other ideas for rounds of the game could be favorite sports, compliments, or famous people you’d like to meet. The team can also come up with ideas for new rounds.
**THE COOL BREEZE BLOWS 1.0**

Chairs are arranged in a circle with one chair for each person. The facilitator starts the game by saying, “The cool breeze blows for everyone who…” and then completes the sentence by saying something that some of the children may have in common. For example, the facilitator might say, “The cool breeze blows for everyone who loves ice cream” or “The cool breeze blows for anyone wearing a red shirt” or “The cool breeze blows for anyone who has a baby sister,” etc. Anyone seated in the circle for which the statement rings true, simply has to get up and move to a different seat in the circle (switching seats with other classmates with whom they have something in common). If only one child gets up, leaving them unable to switch seats, they can simply take a bow and sit back down in their original seat. It is important to give children permission to choose how much they want to share with the group. All children can elect to stay seated even if “the cool breeze blows for them.” When the facilitator has offered enough “cool breeze blows for…” questions for the children to be engaged and understand the game, you can then ask children for ideas. They can simply volunteer for a turn, and when you pick them, they say what the “cool breeze blows for” to start the round.

**Example questions**
The cool breeze blows for anyone who:
- Has a brother or sister
- Has a pet at home
- Likes to play outside
- Likes to dance
- Likes to draw pictures
- Likes to use their imagination
- Likes to eat pizza
- Likes to read stories

**A fun variation of the Cool Breeze Blows:** Instead of saying “The cool breeze blows for anyone who…” you can start the game by saying “The big bunny hops for anyone who…” and that lets everyone know to move to a new seat by hopping. You can make up a new phrase for lots of different movements – hopping, skipping, galloping, shuffling, crawling, slithering and many more!

**TAPS 1.0**

Sitting in a circle (with one adult and as few children as possible in each circle), make sure each circle has a beach ball. It’s helpful to make the circles close enough so there aren’t big holes between children, but still enough space to roll the ball around in the middle. You can put on some relaxed, fun music to let the children know when to start simply rolling the beach ball around the circle by tapping it. (Jack Johnson’s “Better Together” is one recommendation for beach ball tapping.) When the music stops, you can stop tapping the beach ball.

**TAPS 2.0**

This game is recommended once children have learned and enjoy Taps 1.0. The adult can introduce the new game by demonstrating how to tap with a partner. Simply face each child, one at a time and ask if they would like to tap the ball back to you. If they want to play, tap the
ball to them and have them tap it back. The entire group can cheer for each child as they take
turns. When the group is read to pair up, the facilitator makes sure each pair has space to
play and their own beach ball. Balloons are a nice alternative if you don’t have lots of beach
balls or you want the ball to move a little more slowly. Again, the adult can put on some
relaxed, fun music to let the children know when to start tapping the beach ball back and forth.
When the music stops, everyone stops tapping the beach ball.

**TAPS 3.0**

This game is usually super fun for adults, and is most successful with young children when
they have learned and mastered Taps 1.0 and 2.0 FIRST. This level of Taps offers children a
chance to work in small groups of 3-4 to tap the beach ball (or balloon) to each other while
listening to some enjoyable, calm music.

**SMOOSHIE RIDES**

The parachute is spread out on the floor and one child is invited to sit in the middle. All of the
other children and adult stand around the parachute, grab the edges of the parachute (not the
handles as they break easily) and move in a circle giving the child in the middle a nice merry-
go-round ride. While they are moving the group is singing the following song…

“One little Smooshie on the parachute.
One little Smooshie on the parachute.
Going round & round & round & round & round,
And round & round & round & round & round,
Going round & round & round & round & round,
And round & round - let’s go the other way…”

(Change directions and repeat verse, but very last line is sung:)

“And round & round - and now... we’re... slowing... down.”

Change directions and repeat song until you start to feel dizzy and then stop. Seriously, as
long as each child has the opportunity to get a ride, you can make each ride as long or as
short as you’d like.

**PARACHUTE SURPRISE**

The children all stand around the parachute holding onto its edges. The children are asked to
close their eyes and slowly shake the parachute. While the children’s eyes are closed, the
adult walks around the circle and taps one child on the shoulder. The child who is tapped
goes under the parachute and gets down low to the ground (they can lie down if they want).
When the adult calls, “surprise, open your eyes!” – the children bring the parachute down to a
comfortable level and look around the circle. Their job is to try to figure out which of the other
children is under the parachute.
**THE LITTLE ENGINE**

The parachute (the train) is spread on the floor and one child (the conductor) sits pretzel-legged on one end of it. Once the child is seated, the other children hand him or her fleece balls (toy, treats and/or other cargo) that need to be delivered across town. Once the cargo is loaded on, the other children hold onto the opposite end of the parachute (facing forwards with the parachute behind them) and begin chanting, “We think we can. We think we can.” The children then pull the parachute and give the seated child and cargo a ride across the play space. This game is played until all of the children have a chance to be the conductor. Sometimes, if the group is really strong, more than one conductor can be given a ride at a time (kids love it when adults take their turn to be the conductor too).

**Caution:** To protect the conductor from falling back when the ride begins, an adult should stand behind the child (not on the parachute) and spot them until they are safe and stable. The seated children can also hold onto the parachute behind them, lift it around their waist and make a little back brace to help stabilize them.

**PARACHUTE EXPLORATION**

Simply bringing out the parachute and inviting the team to share ideas about “what we could try” with the parachute is a wonderful open-ended way to engage a group. The team then has to work together to hear ideas, to problem-solve ways to “get to yes” while keeping everyone safe, and to truly explore and create the activity together. The guiding principles of this activity are to be curious and to include everyone in figuring out how to carry out ideas joyfully, safely, creatively, and as a connected team.
**YO’PLAY**

**Movement and breath activities designed to help children strengthen and calm their minds and bodies – giving them wings to fly and roots to keep them safe and grounded.**

**Energizing Yo’Play Activities**

**BODY SHAKES**

Children are each asked which part of their bodies they would like to shake and wake. If you have a group of children, have them stand circle. If a child suggests hands, everyone shakes their hands while chanting, "hands shake, hands shake, hands shake, STOP!" If the next child (or you) suggests shoulders, everyone shakes their shoulders while chanting, "shoulder shakes, shoulder shakes, shoulder shakes, STOP!" The game continues until each child or person playing has had a turn (or a few) to suggest a type of "body shake." After each turn, we thank each child for his or her great suggestion.

**BLAST OFF**

The children start standing with hands up over their head palms facing each other, or whichever position they are able to perform that they feel resembles a rocket. They are asked to imagine that their bodies are powerful rocket ships. Each child is given an opportunity to choose a place that they would like the group to “blast off” to - it could be anywhere from Mars to Hawaii, or even to the local playground. When everyone is ready, start to countdown from 5 as they lower their bodies with each count. Have the children take little sips of breath as they lower. After the count of 1 the children blast off by jumping straight up or moving as high as they can. You can also perform the action of the rocket if the children are unable to. When the children land they can explore the fantasy of their new environment. What do they see? What do they hear? What do they do?

**MOO & MEOW**

The children start on all 4’s (hands and knees on the ground - hands under the shoulders and knees under the hips). As they breathe in have them arch their backs and raise their heads and make the noise “moooooooooooo” like a cow, then have them breathe out and round their backs and look at their belly button – in this pose have them “meeeeeeooowww” like a cat – encourage them to stretch like a cat does. The adult may want to ask, “What kind of cat are you and what kind of cow are you? Where do you live, are you wild or someone’s pet?”

Other animal movements that the adult can link to sounds include having children act like a dog, bird, a bee, a lion or a gorilla. Allow the children to create their own version of this animal. The adults may want to join in the fun too!
**ELEPHANT BREATHS**

The children stand with their feet wide apart. Tell them that they are now big, strong elephants. Holding their hands together with their arms dangling straight down in front of their body like an imaginary elephant trunk, inhale through the nose as they raise their arms/trunk high up over their head expanding their chest. Then exhale out the mouth while swinging the arms/trunk down and through the legs. Arms rise again on the inhale and on the exhale swing down and through. Repeat 3-4 times.

**GOOD MORNING SNAKES**

Children lie on their bellies in a circle on the parachute. With their faces down, the adult guides them through a fantasy that they are quiet, sleepy snakes slithering alone in a field. The adult and children chant, "slithering, slithering, slithering, hssssssssssss" when the snakes hiss, using their arms for leverage, they lift their heads and shoulders off the floor while trying to keep their lower bellies on the floor. Once they have risen, they can say, "Good morning snakes!"

**TARZAN TAPS**

If you have a group, the children start in a circle standing up. Making two fists the children will use their fists to pound and tap their chest, under their arms, and all over their bodies. While tapping their body parts invite them to howl, yowl and yodel. Children can gently tap their head as well, energizing the brain. Children can even pretend they are in a jungle moving around the room, imagining swinging through the trees.

**GORILLA WALKS**

Ask the children walk to one side of the room. Have them place their hands and feet on the floor. Then see if they can tuck their toes, straighten their legs and lift their bottom in the air making an upside down letter “V” with their body. From this “downward dog” position, invite the children to lift their head, look forward, and slowly walk on all fours like a gorilla to the other side of the room. For added joy, invite the children to make gorilla noises as they move.

**Transition Yo’Play Activities**

**HOT, HOT HANDS (Rubbing, Rubbing, Rubbing, Warm)**

The facilitator asks the child or the group (seated in a circle) if they are ready to get warmed-up! He or she guides the children to quickly rub the palms of their hands together. The faster they rub, the warmer their hands will become (rub, rub…rub-rub…rub-rub… waaarrmm). You can tell the children that the warmth that they feel in their hands is happy energy that they can share with other parts of their body through touch. Guide them to use their hot hands on different parts of their body to help them warm-up and get ready to play together.
**BODY POLISHING**

The adult invites each child to choose his or her own scarf or piece of cloth. The adult explains that the polish in the cloth is used to shine something up until it looks like new. The adult asks children to pretend that they are a fancy sports car (or anything that could use some polishing – including simply playful children) that needs a bright shine. Let them take turns naming different body parts that need to be polished. After the children are finished polishing, “ooohhhhh” and “ahhhhhhh” encouraging children to admire each other. The adult may want to play music during this exercise, inviting children to dance to their polishing.

**LION’S BREATH**

Ask the children to sit on their shins and heels with their palms resting on their thighs. The adult then invites children to pretend that they are big, powerful lions waiting to let out a roar. Have children place their fingers as claws on top of their thighs. At first they sit still and quiet. Then they take a deep breath in through the nose. As the child exhales he or she moves forward so that the chest puffs out and the legs straighten. The child roars with their mouth wide open. The facilitator can have them quietly “rrrrrooar” three times and then get louder and do three more ripping roars. Growls, grunts, yawns, and purrs are welcome too. Repeat!

**VOLCANO BREATH**

This is a great way to help children release anger, frustration or any other negative emotions. They begin standing with their feet together, elbows bent at shoulder level with their palms facing the ground, middle fingers touching. They jump their feet and hands apart, and then bring their palms together in front of their heart. Their bodies now resemble the shape of a volcano. As they breathe in, they can watch their hands raise over their head. This represents the lava rising up from inside the volcano. They breathe out forcefully as if the lava was spewing from their mouths and explode their arms out to the side and down until they meet in the middle and they return their palms together in front of their heart. They can erupt and release again and again before jumping their feet back together.

**UNTIE THE KNOTS [adapted from Marsha Wenig]**

If you have a group, it’s nice to stand in a circle. However this works great with individual children as well. You can take turns letting the children (and you) decide what part of their bodies they want to untie. You can begin by asking: Does your body ever feel like it’s been tied in knots? Let’s untie and loosen it up! Taking turns, children can decide what part of their bodies they want to untie. When you “untie,” imagine pulling either side of a ribbon as if you’re opening a present…and that present is you! Demonstrate first by “untying” your neck, taking your hands to each side as if you were untying an imaginary ribbon tied at your neck and pulling out any energy that’s stuck. Roll your head around. Untie your shoulders together or one at a time. Move them up, down, all around. Have the children choose other parts of their body to “untie.” When you’re done untying all the muscles and joints in your body, do a full body shake to shake it all out. End the game by inviting children to hang out in a forward fold, relax their neck and let the arms hang down in ragdoll.
WASHING MACHINE RINSE [adapted from ChildLight Yoga]

This is a movement series based on a Chi-Gong exercise that can help children “wash out” any feeling they don’t want or need in their body – whether it’s worry, fear, anger, etc. The adult can begin by asking the child what they would like to wash out and then help them imagine seeing those things being pushed away from your body and down into the ground. In this activity, the child should stand with their feet apart and knees relaxed. They then turn their upper body from side to side and swing their arms so that their back hand lightly taps their kidneys – all the while imagining washing out any negative thought down their body, their neck, their arms, their legs and finally releasing it out of their body and into the floor. When the wash cycle is over, it’s time to get in the dryer! Using both sets of fingertips, ask the children to gently tap their fingers on their head, all the way down the front of their body, up the backside of their body, down each arm and around their sides.

Calming Yo’Play Activities

BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLIES

Children sit on their bottoms in a circle with the soles of their feet together. Children are directed to hold onto their ankles and bring them in closer to the bodies. They can then “flutter their wings” by bouncing their knees softly up and down. The facilitator can give each child a chance to share with the group where they would like to fly. While flying the group can chant, “fluttering, fluttering, fluttering, laaaaaaannnnnnnd”.

BALLOON JOURNEY

The balloon journey combines playful breathing and imagimotion! Ask the children where they want to go on their hot air balloon ride. It can be anywhere in the universe! Similar to “Beautiful Butterflies”, one at a time, each child chooses a destination that they want to go to and the children (and adults!) all get to fly there with their balloon breathing. Interlacing their fingers on top of their heads, children breathe in as they raise their hands above their heads to inflate their balloon. As they breathe out, they push their hands down toward their heads as if they are emptying all the air out of the balloon. Create a consistent rhythm for breathing, guiding children to take four breaths before landing. “Breathing in raise your hands to fill your balloon, and breathing out hands down to your head… breathing in fill the balloon, breathing out empty the balloon… innnnnn fill it up, ouuuuuut empty it… and one more time breathing innnnn, and ouuuuuut… and laaaaaaand. Once they “land” (after the 4th exhale), children can imagine exploring their chosen place.

FLYING BIRDS

Similar to “Balloon Journey”, this activity uses breath and imagination to ground and inspire creativity in children. Begin by asking the children where they want to fly to (anywhere in the world!). While the children are either sitting or standing, with enough room between them that they can raise their arms to the side without bumping other, they are invited to imagine they
are birds with beautiful, strong wings. Starting with their hands down by their sides, they are guided to breathe in deeply as they raise their arms to above their shoulders, and then slowly breathe out as they swoop their wings down to their sides. Arms rise again as they inhale and arms push down through the air at their sides as they exhale. Create a consistent rhythm for breathing, guiding children to take four breaths before landing. “Breathing in raise your hands raise your wings above your head, and breathing out push your wings down to your sides… breathing in raising your wings, breathing out releasing them down… innnnnn raise those wings, ouuuuuut let them down… and one more time breathing innnnn, and ouuuuuut… and laaaaaand. Once they “land” (after the 4th exhale), children can imagine exploring their chosen place.

**FLOPPY SPAGHETTI BODIES**

Everyone spreads out in the space and rests comfortably on the floor or on a bed. It is best if children can lie on their backs. The adult encourages the group to pretend to be like spaghetti - floppy, soft, and bendy. The adult reminds them that spaghetti does not think, move or talk. The adult then walks around the room and asks permission to each child to test the floppy spaghetti bodies. He or she tests the spaghetti by lifting up a foot or a hand. The player’s limbs should be limp and offer no resistance. If a child is stiff, or helps the adult by lifting up a foot or a hand on his or her own, the adult gently coaches the child not to help but to let go like a limp piece of spaghetti. The adult may want to lower the lights and play soothing instrumental music. To rouse the group, the adult can slowly direct them to gently wiggle fingers and toes first, then rub their hands together and finally stretch in whatever way feels good while letting out a big yawn. Then, the adult asks them to roll back up to sitting, fresh, and alert.

**HIDING MOUSE**

The adult asks children to sit on their heels, and open their knees a little (so that the belly relaxes between the thighs). Bending at the hips, the child folds forward, letting their shoulders drop down. Arms lie back along the sides of the legs with open palms facing upward. Forehead comes to the floor. The adult encourages the children to breathe and maybe even snore. To have some more fun with this pose, the adult can have the children pretend that they are mice – resting and then awakening (peek-a-boo style). The adult can let them play around as mice together, crawling around on the floor, sniffing for cheese, and perhaps even running from a cat!
Cool-Down & Relaxation Activities

Cool down activities are simple, basic ways to help children regulate their bodies (slow down their heart rate and breath) and transition from more active, high-energy games.

FLOWER AND BUBBLE WAND BREATHING

Children are instructed to pick an imaginary flower from the ground and hold it on one hand. They are also asked to pick up a bubble wand—that they might blow soap bubbles with—with their other hand. They are guided to smell the flower in their hand as they breathe in deeply through their noses and then blow out bubbles through the wand as they breathe out slowly and deeply through their mouths. Repeat this breath several times until the children’s breathing has slowed and their bodies are more relaxed.

BIRD BREATHING

While the children are either sitting or standing, with enough space between them that they can raise their arms to the side without bumping others, they are invited to imagine they are birds with beautiful, strong wings. Starting with hands down by their sides, they are guided to breathe in deeply as they raise their arms above their heads, and then slowly breathe out as they swoop their wings down to their sides (or to the ground if they are seated). Arms rise again as they inhale and arms push down through the air at their sides as they exhale. Repeat 3-4 times until the children are breathing more calmly and regularly.

BALLOON BREATHING (DERIVED FROM BECKY BAILEY’S CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE)

Children are asked to place both hands on top of their heads and as they breathe in, to raise their hands in the shape of a filled balloon above their heads. As they breathe out, they push their hands down toward their heads as if they are emptying the balloon. Repeat this movement and breath several times.

BELLY BREATHING (OPTION TO HAVE A “BREATHING BUDDY!”)

The children sit in a comfortable seated position with their hands laid gently on their belly. They can imagine that there belly is just like a balloon. As they inhale, they can watch the balloon fill up with air. As they exhale, they deflate their balloon by letting all the air out. Repeat 4-6 times. Children can also try belly breathing laying down with a “breathing buddy” on their bellies (beanie baby animals work well!). The weight of the breathing buddy brings awareness of their breath. As they breathe in, they can watch and feel their breathing buddy rise on their belly (& go for a ride!). As they breathe out, their breathing buddy returns to its original spot.
**BUTTERFLY BREATHING**

While sitting in a circle, the children are instructed to place both of their hands in front of their faces, palms facing and as close as they can be, without actually touching palms together. They are guided to breath in deeply through their noses and then breath out deeply through their mouths. During the in breath, children are instructed to open their arms wide to their sides like butterfly wings and during the out breath, children are instructed to gradually bring their hands close together but not touching.

**FAUCET BREATHING**  *(from Becky Bailey’s Conscious Discipline)*

Children are invited to extend arms out in front of them and pretending their arms are faucets. They are instructed to tighten arm, shoulder, and face muscles and hold them tightly for a moment. Children are asked to exhale slowly making a “ssssshhh” sound and release all their muscles, draining out the stress.

**TAKE FIVE BREATHING**  *(from ChildLight Yoga)*

Sitting in a comfortable position, children hold up one hand and lift one finger at a time counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 as they inhale. Pause. As they exhale, they can count down backwards pulling one finger back in at a time – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Repeat 3-4 times.

**BIRTHDAY CANDLE BREATHING**

Children are invited to hold up one hand with all five fingers extended, pretending their fingers are Birthday candles. Everyone takes a deep breath in, and slowly exhales to blow out one of the candles. They put down each finger as it “goes out.” Five deep breaths in and five slow blowing exhales will result with all five candles out!

**WARRIOR BREATHING**

While sitting in a circle, the children are instructed to place both of their hands in front of their faces, palms facing and as close as they can be, without actually touching palms together. They are guided to breath in deeply through their noses and breath out deeply through their mouths. During the in breath, children are instructed to spread their arms wide. During the out breath, children are instructed to gradually bring their hands close together but not touching.

**FOG UP THE GLASS BREATHING**

Children are instructed to imagine they are in front of a window or a mirror and to inhale a deep breath, then to open their mouths wide and breathe out like they are fogging up the glass. Do this again to increase the fog on the glass—inhale deeply and slowly breathe out with a wide-open mouth. Repeat for a total of 3-4 breaths and then children can be invited to write or draw something on their foggy spot they have created!
**OCEAN BREATHING**

This breath is similar to “Fog Up The Glass” breathing described above. It is particularly helpful to start one round of breath “fogging up” an imaginary mirror or glass. Ask the children to notice the ocean sound they make when they fog up the glass (contracting the back of their throats both with the inhalation and exhalation). They are then asked to keep this same feeling in their throat/breath but try to close their mouth, breathing through their nose while still making the ocean sound in their throat. Breathe in and imagine the waves of the ocean coming up to shore. Breathe out and imagine the waves returning to the sea. Children can also try cupping their hands over their ears to hear the sound even louder if they choose. Ocean breath is focusing and grounding. This breath is also a great introduction to Ocean Meditation in the next section.

**LEMON SQUEEZE (from YogaKids)**

*Important note:* Also, if you have children who will not be able to use certain parts of their bodies, be sure to make adjustments to the script so they can use those parts in ways they are capable of, or to just imagine tensing and relaxing those parts.

This short relaxation activity can serve as a great transition into guided meditations or visualizations (see next section). Invite children to lie down on their back (or in whatever position feels comfortable to them). Children are guided to drink up very sour lemonade with all different parts of their bodies in a progressive sequence, starting with their toes and moving up their body. To start, they can imagine their toes are straws, sipping up the sour lemonade as They inhale. It’s so sour, they hold their breath as they tightly squeeze or “pucker up” their toes for a count of 3 to 5. They breathe out and relax their toes. Following the same sequence of breathing in, squeezing/puckering/holding breath and then relaxing, children are guided to take sips up through their legs, their belly, their back, their chest, their arms and finally their face. This is a brief relaxation activity, great for children who do not have the time or attention span for a full progressive muscle relaxation like the one at the end of this manual.

**CAN YOU DISCOVER OTHER WAYS TO BREATHE & REGULATE...?**
**Guided Meditations & Visualizations:**

*Because Guided Meditations use imagination and abstract thinking, it is a good idea to use them with children you know will be able to engage comfortably in imaginative breathing exercises. The Progressive Muscle Relaxation (following) is a more literal/non-imaginative relaxation tool, good for grounding and centering for children without using abstract thinking.*

*As you read Guided Meditations, feel free to speak at a pace and with a rhythm that feels comfortable to you and engaging for the listener. It often helps to have read it out loud several times on your own as “practice” before using it with children.*

Invite children to close their eyes if that’s comfortable for them. If they do not want to close their eyes, as with any other game, they can of course choose to keep them open and rest their gaze on something of their choice (the idea is that the eyes are just relaxed and not really focused on anything)

I find it helpful to invite children to place their hands on their bellies so they can feel their bellies and chests rise and fall with their breath—this tends to be grounding and helps them connect to their breath, their bodies, and the impact one has on the other.

**THE STAR**

Imagine in your mind what a star looks like. Can you make your body like a big star? If you’d like to try, you can lie down on your back and stretch your arms out to your sides at shoulder height. Stretch your legs straight out in a way that feels comfortable to you. And then, try to straighten and make your neck tall, as if one point of the star was coming straight from the top of your head like a pointy hat. Five points: your head, your two hands, and your two feet. One thing I know about stars is that they are SUPER bright. And they don’t always have to be yellow. They can be any color you want! If you’d like to try, we can do a few star breaths. You can actually start with your hands on your belly. As you take a deep breath in and feel your belly rise, imagine a colored light at the center of your body...just below your hands. It can be ANY color you want. As you slowly exhale, extend your star arms out at shoulder height and imagine the color filling all five points of your star body - the light shining all the way down to your fingertips and toes, and all the way up to the crown of your head. Inhale... and imagine that light filling the center of your body, exhale and send that light out from your belly, through your legs... arms... neck... out to your toes... fingers... and the top of your head. Exhaling all the way through your body. Inhale again, filling with light...aaaaand exhaling out to the points of your star until you are shining SUPER bright in the sky. Keep filling with light as you inhale... and sending the light to all parts of your body as you exhale. Notice how that light feels in the different parts of your body. Notice if you feel any different than before you took these breaths. Any time you feel like you need a little light and energy from your star, you can do these star breaths.
**THE OCEAN** *(from ChildLight Yoga)*

You can start by guiding the child through Ocean Breath or another grounding breathing exercise. If you would like to, you can play music that includes the sounds of crashing waves, etc. in the background and then begin:

Imagine you are lying on the beach. It is the most beautiful, sunny day. The sand is very warm and cozy and you feel your body sink into it as you lay there in the sun. You feel the warmth of the sand soothing your neck...your shoulders...your arms...your chest...your belly...your back...your legs...your feet. There is a little breeze, but you feel nice and warm because the sun is shining down on your body, warming you up. The sun on your face relaxes you...You hear the sounds of waves rolling in and flowing out, rolling in and flowing out. Seagulls are chirping in the distance. You feel happy, calm and peaceful.

When you are ready, take a nice deep breath and stretch your body in any way that feels comfortable, waking up your body slowly and gently.

**LIGHT BULB BRAIN** *(from ChildLight Yoga)*

You can start by guiding the child through one of the cool down/transition breath activities like belly breathing. Help the child breathe even more deeply by inviting them to release everything with a ‘haaaaaaa’ through their mouths on each exhale 3-4 times. Invite them to allow their bodies to relax into the floor or bed a little more with each ‘haaaa’. Then begin:

Imagine your brain is just like a light bulb. Your light bulb brain is very hard at work all day, every day. It shines very brightly, filled with energy, thoughts, ideas and creativity. Sometimes, it can get very, very tired. Think of a time when your light bulb brain can get tired...maybe it's right now, or after a long day. Maybe it gets tired when you've been waiting or thinking or concentrating for a long time...

Imagine now that your light bulb brain has a dimmer switch. Ever so gently, you can turn the dimmer switch down so that the light from the bulb begins to dim. Feel your light bulb brain begin to relax and settle down. Oh, that feels good! Take a nice deep breath in – when you exhale, imagine your are turning the dimmer down even more until your light bulb brain is barely shining at all. You can feel all your muscles slow down...your thoughts slow down...your ideas go to rest. Breathe in deeply now, and on the exhale, imagine turning your dimmer all the way to “Off”. The light is turned off now and your light bulb brain is now completely at rest. Take a moment now and let you light bulb brain recharge and restore itself...

When you are ready, find your way back to the dimmer switch and imagine turning your light bulb brain back on. Slowly, slowly, slowly turn the dimmer so that the light in the bulb becomes a little brighter and brighter. When you are ready, take a nice deep breath and stretch your body in any way that feels comfortable, bringing light and energy back into your body. Remember that you can use the dimmer switch on your light bulb brain anytime your brain needs a rest.
**A DAY AT THE BEACH (from IMAGINATIONS – see references)**

You can begin with a grounding breath activity like Ocean Breath and then use the following script as you see fit for the child you are working with:

Imagine you are walking on the beach.
Feel the sand between your toes. Is it wet or dry?
When you find your perfect spot, spread out your towel and lie down in the sand.
Feel the warm sun on your skin and a cool, refreshing breeze.
Listen to the waves crashing on the shore...
Children playing...
Seagulls singing...
People laughing.
Listen to the sound of the waves.
A wave comes into shore, and then the wave moves back into the ocean.
Now, put your hand on your belly.
Feel it rise up when you take in a breath, and feel it fall down when you let out a breath.
Up and down, in and out. Just like the waves in the ocean...
Enjoy lying here feeling your body relaxed at the beach.

**A HOT AIR BALLOON TRIP (from IMAGINATIONS)**

Like other guided meditations and visualizations, this activity is good for those times that children need to be quiet and still. This is a particularly great activity to do with a child who you have gone on a “Balloon Journey” with. You may even try personalizing the meditation to include a place you know the child finds safe and inviting. You can begin this activity with 3-4 rounds of balloon breathing or belly breathing.

Imagine you climb into a great big hot air balloon.
What color is your balloon?
Your favorite color? All the colors of the rainbow? Polka dotted?
Take in a big breath, and then blow out, filling up your hot air balloon.
Feel your hot air balloon lift up off the ground and float into the sky.
Do you see any birds, planes or clouds?
Look down – I think you are flying over us!
Now choose where you are going to fly, anywhere you want to go.
The beach...the mountains...the North Pole...the desert...the jungle...
Once you get there, feel your balloon land gently.
Imagine you climb out of your balloon to explore.
What do you see? What do you smell?
What do you hear? What do you feel?
Do you taste anything?
Now climb back into your balloon.
Wave goodbye to any friends you have made.
Take in a big breath and then blow, filling up your hot air balloon again.
Feel it lift up off the ground and float back here.
Land your hot air balloon on the ground, safe and sound.
PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

The following is a script, which you can use just by reading to the children. Try reading it aloud a couple times before you use it with your children so that you are comfortable with what it says. You can read this word for word if you'd like, just not the titles like, “introduction” and “feet and toes” for instance. Be mindful of your pacing and tone of voice. To prevent rushing and keeping a steady voice, be sure to breathe comfortably so that you feel calm in your own body as you speak.

**Important note:** Also, if you have children who will not be able to use certain parts of their bodies, be sure to make adjustments to the script so they can use those parts in ways they are capable of, or to just imagine tensing and relaxing those parts.

**(INTRODUCTION)**

Did you know that our bodies are designed to heal themselves? This exercise can help us to tap into this healing system, and notice when we are holding tension so that we can start learning how to let it go. So today I'd like to invite you to try this exercise called muscle relaxation. Think of it as a little gift to yourself today. What's great about this exercise is that you can take it with you wherever you go and use it whenever you want without anyone really noticing. These exercises will work best if you try to stay focused on my voice and do what I say even if it seems kind of silly.

Ready to try?

Okay, first get as comfortable as you can by either lying down or sitting in your chair. If it helps you relax, feel free to close your eyes. You can also leave them open if you prefer. Remember to follow my instructions as much as you can and pay attention to the experience of your body throughout.

**(FEET AND TOES)**

Bring your attention to your right foot. Now squish all of your toes together, make them really tight....even tighter if you can....hold it for 1...2..3...aaannd relax. Bring your attention to your left foot now...squish all of your toes together...curl them in really, really tight...even tighter...now hold it for 1...2...3...aaannd relax. Notice if your feet feel any different than before.

**(LEGS)**

Bring your attention to your legs...squeeze the muscles in your upper legs...even more...lift your knee caps, tighten your calf muscles, even tighten your butt muscles...even tighter if you can...now hold that tension for 1....2...3...aannd relax. Notice if your legs feel any different than before.

*(You have the option of doing one leg at a time)*
(BELLY AND CHEST)

Now let’s take a slow, deep breath into the chest as we pull our bellies in at the same time...even more...now let your chest start to puff out like a pigeon...that's right...a little more if you can...now hold it in for 1...2...3...then open your mouth and let the breath gush out aaaahhhhh...and let your belly relax back to normal and your chest too. Now repeat this again...taking in another deep breath but this time try to breathe into your belly. That's it, keep expanding your belly like a big Buddha belly...hold it for 1...2...3...and let it out aahhhhh. Now let your breathing return back to a natural rhythm. And notice any difference.

(Arms and hands)

Bring your attention to your left hand...imagine that you are holding a lemon and squeezing it tightly...really try to squeeze all of the juice out of the lemon...a little bit more so that your arm gets tight too...now hold that for 1...2...3...now drop the lemon and relax. Take another lemon in your right hand now. Try to squeeze this one even harder than the first one. That's right, a little harder if you can...hold it now for 1...2...3...now drop the lemon and relax. Let your arms and hands and fingers completely rest now.

(SHOULDERS)

Now take your shoulders and start lifting them up to your ears...a little higher...try to touch your shoulders to your ears...now squeeze them a little tighter and hold for 1...2...3...and relax. Let go of any tension now. (You have the option of doing one shoulder at a time)

(FACE)

Bring your attention now to your mouth...lips...nose...and eyes...now squeeze everything as tight as you can...that's it, even tighter like you are trying to make a little, tiny prune face...good, now hold that for 1...2...3...and let it go. Allow your eyes to rest softly in their sockets now, and your face to soften and let go of any tension.

Let your entire body now rest and relax from your feet and toes, up through your legs, into your belly and chest, out to your arms and hands and shoulders, and all the muscles of your face completely free of tension. Rest now in the flow of your breath...comfortably and ease fully.

There are times when our bodies will be tense. It’s nice to know that there are things we can do relax our bodies when our bodies need some relaxing. You are the boss of your body. You can help make your body feel strong, relaxed and comfortable.
Interested in reading more about the publications specifically mentioned in the manual?


Other references that have helped educate us:


Notes...
LIFE CAN HURT. PLAY CAN HEAL.

www.ligplaymakers.org