



# Healing Therapies for Kids

Did you know that children can profit, even more than adults, from techniques like biofeedback and massage? Plus how to help your child cure *herself*. by Kathleen McAuliffe

**S**ixteen-year-old Breanna Lind, of Minneapolis, had been an athletic child with a passion for cross-country running. But the migraine headaches she'd been having for six years were growing fiercer and more frequent. Relief came only when she fell asleep, and it wasn't long before she started missing school and was forced to cut back on running.



Lind's pediatrician prescribed Midrin, a powerful painkiller. He also referred her to a neurologist, who gave her Imitrex, a drug that would dilate the constricted blood vessels causing her migraines. But it had serious side effects, including nausea and dizziness.

Concerned about the side effects and the fact that Lind was taking strong medications at such a young age, the neurologist recently referred her to

Jud Reaney, M.D., a behavioral pediatrician at the Alexander Center for Child Development and Behavior at Park Nicollet Clinic in Minneapolis. The center is one of the nation's leaders in mind-body medicine—using relaxation strategies to cope with chronic health problems—for children, a decades-old specialty that is growing in popularity.

At the clinic, Dr. Reaney told Lind they were going to play a “computer game for her body.” The technique, known as biofeedback, would teach her to control her migraines—which many experts believe are exacerbated by stress. It also involved hypnosis, another mind-body method, in which Lind would focus her attention on a soothing image to help her relax.

A heat sensor linked to a computer was placed on Lind's index finger. Dr. Reaney then asked her to think of a place at home or at school where she felt comfortable and happy. Lind picked a hammock at her family's cabin in the country, where she often swayed back and forth under the sun.

“Now imagine you're lying in the hammock, with the sunlight beating down on your hand. With each breath you take, your finger is getting warmer and warmer,” Lind remembers Dr. Reaney saying. With her eyes closed, Lind concentrated on his lulling voice. As her skin temperature rose, gentle chimes began playing on the computer. After a single session, she was able to increase the temperature in her finger by nearly ten degrees.

“Migraines are thought to be caused by constricting blood vessels in the brain,” explains Dr. Reaney. “When skin temperature rises, blood vessels dilate. So while the exact mechanism of how biofeedback helps migraines is unknown, it's theorized that dilating blood vessels in the hand may alter blood flow in the brain.”

Dr. Reaney gave Lind a plastic band containing liquid crystal that she could wrap around her finger to monitor her progress at home. Twice a day for about ten minutes, she imagines herself lying in the hammock with the sunlight on her hand. Less than two months after her first session with Dr. Reaney, Lind reports that her migraines have become less debilitating, and she is able to derail them by thinking “warm” thoughts.

Now that she can control her

## Is Mind-Body Medicine Right FOR YOUR CHILD?

First and foremost, talk with your pediatrician. "I think most doctors would work with parents to support this kind of medical approach—when appropriate," says Joe M. Sanders, Jr., M.D., executive director of the American Academy of Pediatrics. But he emphasizes that mind-body tools should be used in conjunction with, not as a replacement for, traditional medical treatments. Here, some situations in which you may want to ask your pediatrician about incorporating biofeedback, hypnosis, or massage into your child's health care:

- She has a chronic medical condition, such as migraine, asthma, or diabetes, that's causing pain and anxiety.
- She expresses her fear of shots on the way to the doctor's office for a routine checkup.
- She has colic or suffers from a sleep disturbance.
- She has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- She suffers from a behavioral disturbance, such as bed-wetting or tics.

headaches, Lind is looking forward to a more active life. "I wish they had biofeedback when I was a kid," says Lind's mother, who has suffered from migraines since childhood.

This is the cutting edge in children's health care. A growing number of hospitals around the country—and even some pediatricians in private practice—are using tools such as biofeedback, hypnosis, and massage to help kids cope with serious health conditions ranging from migraine to asthma to diabetes. "Children are naturals for mind-body methods because of their wonderful imaginations," says Karen Olness, M.D., professor of pediatrics at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland.

But a child doesn't have to be sick to benefit. Some of these relaxation techniques—with their emphasis on focusing attention—can help interrupt the anticipation of pain from a routine vaccine or injury; others can soothe babies with colic and calm hyperactive kids. Healthy youngsters who use such destressing strategies may, in fact, be less likely to succumb to illness.

"We've eliminated many life-threatening diseases, like polio, but now chronic illnesses, such as asthma, have moved to the forefront, and kids need the skills to cope," explains Laurence Sugarman, M.D., a pediatrician in Rochester, NY, who uses biofeedback and hypnosis in his practice and is speaking about them next month at the annual meeting of

the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

"The goal of mind-body medicine is to help children develop a sense of mastery," Dr. Sugarman continues. "Often, we diminish that in modern medicine. We say, 'Just sit still and we'll do this procedure.' The implicit message is, 'You can't do anything to improve your health.' By helping kids learn to control their pain, we're telling them they are not only a partner in their health care, but they also share a responsibility to help make themselves better."

"We want to teach kids what they can do for themselves, while using medication as needed," adds Dr. Reaney. "For some children, like Breanna, participation means having less frequent problems. Other kids develop complete control over their ailments."

Parents, who increasingly are encouraging pediatricians to seek alternatives to medication, appear to be welcoming this holistic approach to health care, says Dr. Reaney. So are insurance companies, which are often willing to pay for mind-body techniques when a doctor recommends them.

Unlike herbs, homeopathy, and other unproven "alternative" remedies, relaxation techniques are grounded in science. "Most pediatricians accept these as legitimate adjuncts to standard therapy," comments Joe M. Sanders, Jr., M.D., executive director of the AAP. Twenty years of research have shown that the power of mind-body medicine lies in its ability to reduce

stress. When we relax, our heart rate slows, breathing becomes deeper and more regular, our immune systems work better, digestion improves, and we sleep more soundly—all of which help us cope better with illness, especially the chronic type.

While you're most likely to encounter mind-body techniques at a large children's hospital, your pediatrician may already be using them without realizing it. Many doctors employ playful strategies to distract kids from pain during a shot. This sometimes resembles hypnosis, with the emphasis on focusing attention to achieve control of the body.

Dr. Sugarman keeps a basket filled with pinwheels, bubbles, a View-Master, pop-up books, puppets, and a Walkman in his office. When kids come in for a vaccination, he lets them choose something to blow on—either the bubbles or the pinwheel—to divert their attention from the needle. When they need stitches, he plays music (Pete Seeger songs for young children and Eric Clapton for adolescents). Afterward, he compliments patients on staying in control of their pain.

"Now you know how to keep things from hurting you," he tells them. "If you get a bad cut, or your brother says something that upsets you, you can always blow on an imaginary pinwheel, and that will help you feel better." That's the benefit of mind-body techniques, he adds. "Once kids learn them, they can put them to use on their own. They find out, 'I'm really the boss of my body.'"

But not all mind-body methods are do-it-yourself. Massage, for instance, is usually done *to* a child, so it's ideal for kids who are too young to learn hypnosis or biofeedback—or aren't capable of doing so. *(continued on page 182)*

### RESOURCES for Parents

**Hypnosis** For a referral to a specialist, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the Society of Clinical Hypnosis, 2200 East Devon Ave., Suite 291, Des Plaines, IL 60018; or the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, 3905 Vincennes Rd., Suite 304, Indianapolis, IN 46268.

**Biofeedback** For information and a referral to a certified practitioner, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the Association of Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback, 10200 West 44 Ave., Suite 304, Wheat Ridge, CO 80033-2840.

**Massage** To find a massage therapist in your area who's qualified to treat children, contact the American Massage Therapy Association, 820 Davis St., Suite 100, Evanston, IL 60201-4444; or call 847-864-0123.

Parents interested in learning how to massage their infant should contact the International Association of Infant Massage, 1720 Willow Creek Circle, Suite 516, Eugene, OR 97402; or call 800-248-5432.





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## THERAPIES

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One of the earliest studies—published a decade ago—showed that massage helped premature babies gain 47 percent more weight than those who didn't receive it. Now massage is proving useful in calming colicky babies, as well as those who are having trouble sleeping. When a group of mothers gave their fussy infants 15-minute massages every night before bed, it took less time for the children to fall asleep, and they stayed asleep longer.

Massage certainly seemed to work for Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D., a senior research associate at the Touch Research Institute, University of Miami School of Medicine in Florida. Two years ago, her daughter, now 4, suffered from night terrors. "Two or three times a week, she'd start screaming in the middle of the night, as if she were having a nightmare," recalls Hernandez-Reif. "This went on for forty-five minutes." Hernandez-Reif held her, but it didn't help. Finally, she started stroking the little girl's back, legs, and arms while she was in her arms. After five weeks, the episodes

decreased to a half hour, then eventually 15 minutes. Within 15 weeks, they disappeared entirely. "Now I give her a back rub every night," reports Hernandez-Reif. "It's a very relaxing ritual for both of us."

Other research has shown that massage, performed twice a week for 20 minutes, may help children cope with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in which sufferers have difficulty paying attention. In the study, kids who got massages were able to focus for longer periods, and they reported being happier than the children who weren't touched.

The future of mind-body medicine holds promise in fighting and preventing illness. Preliminary research is showing that both hypnosis and massage are effective in boosting immunity. A soon-to-be-published study found that children with chronic colds who were taught hypnosis were sick half as often as those who weren't.

When we relax, our bodies are freed to fend off threats to health. "So for kids, it's every bit as important to immunize them against stress as it is to immunize them against mumps, rubella, and measles," says Dr. Reaney. ★

## CLINGY KIDS

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kids something like, 'Oh, don't take it personally. My daughter is shy.' That only increases the child's anxiety and can create a self-fulfilling prophecy." Instead, Straus suggests that parents try to relax and not worry so much about what others are thinking. Acceptance, patience, and setting a good example are keys to helping your clingy child let go.

Jacobs set a good example by joining Rachel on the slide along with the other children. "Although I'd done this sort of thing when she was much younger and felt a little foolish at this stage, I wanted Rachel to see that sliding down with kids in front and behind her was safe and fun," she says.

"At first, she sat in my lap as we went down, but after a series of slides, she said, 'Let me do it alone. You sit there,' and she pointed to a nearby bench. That thrilled me.

"For a few weeks, we had to go through the same routine each time we came to the playground. But eventually, she felt confident enough to hook up with other kids as soon as we arrived. The one proviso was that I had to stay put on the same bench and watch...no newspaper reading allowed."