Hi, I'm Justine. I work as a sleep practitioner in Leeds

Hi, I'm Helen and I work as a sleep practitioner in London. I'm a mum of 4 with 3 children on the autistic spectrum.

This is the Sleep Right podcast. And in this episode, we're talking about bedtime relaxation exercises.

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It's great having this chat and I'd just really love you to share with me how you help parents and children to relax during the golden hour.

Well, I think first of all, it's important to say why we talk about relaxation and the golden hour. So, I think a lot of people think of relaxation as Yoda sitting cross-legged on top of the mountain going ‘Om’ and that’s not necessarily what we're talking about. I think it’s activities that will help calm down the brain and the body in preparation for sleep, because we all live quite fast-paced hectic lifestyles and that's true of our children as it is for adults. So, I think it is important that we take time to almost consciously wind down and relax to prepare ourselves for sleep.

Have you got a particular exercise that you find most effective?

Well, I think one of the things that I actually really love and it's probably because I'm a children's yoga teacher, I quite like doing a bit of yoga, stretches in the run-up to bedtime because they can help calm the body down first and then you start calming the brain down.

It's also just a lovely bonding activity to do together. It's not about getting it right; it’s about just doing some lovely stretches together. I think for some children, not for all, that can be a really nice thing to do.

What about yourself? What's one of your favourites?

I suppose I particularly feel that emotions are contagious. It's almost as important that mums or dads before they go into a situation that they might find difficult is to relax. So, I might start helping mum or dad to learn how to breathe deeply. That when you breathe deeply, the diaphragm, which is the muscle underneath the lungs, literally flattens and this sends back a message to the brain that all is well. So instead of getting high cortisol levels, which will make you feel like fright, fight, and flight, which you can be in sometimes when you're thinking you might be in a battle with a child, instead it's telling your brain that all is well. So just simply helping them to be able to breathe deeply, that's like tummy breathe, not with their shoulders going up and down, but breathing from their tummy so that they are in a relaxed state before they actually start the golden hour, because I think the child then picks up that mum is confident and relaxed.

Definitely. I think. if you're breathing deeply, actually often that co-regulates a child and they actually start automatically breathing deeply, but I really liked doing breathing exercises with children, too. So, one of the things I like for little ones is just getting them to lie down and you get their favourite teddy or soft toy or it might even be a Lego brick, it doesn't really matter and you put it on their tummy and get them to breathe from their tummy so that they're kind of rocking their toy to sleep. And that gets them really breathing down into their tummy, which is that deep breathing that we want to trigger as you say, that kind of relaxation feeling, so that's one of my favourites.

Yes, I must admit sometimes I find even just getting a child that is able to, to blow bubbles to control their breath, in blowing a bubble they actually start to breathe deeply. And that can be the beginning of them learning about the fact that they can control their breath. Alongside deep breathing I think it's really important that both parents and children are aware of how they need to relax their bodies. And I quite often work with a parent just on learning how to tighten an area of their muscle. That might be to start with their toes and then work up their body, tightening and then letting go, tightening their toes up and then letting them go as they're breathing. As they're breathing in, they're tightening. As they breathe out, blow through their mouth, they just let go. So, they're breathing in through their nose, I usually say hold for 2 and then let it go by blowing out through their mouth. And, if you can work from the toes up the legs, buttocks, all of us hold our tension in different places, don't we?

Absolutely. And, for me, it's shoulders. So usually after I've asked them to do that, I will then make them think about being in a scanner. I find teenagers can often take this on board. They may be more used to scanners, but the idea that then imagining a scanner going through your body and just recognizing, “Oh, my shoulders are still tense” or maybe “My bottom's a bit tense still.” And just again, pulling in, holding, and then breathing away in that part of the body, then just go again.

Yeah. I think that's really important. I think a lot of children don't actually know what it feels like for their body to be relaxed. So, you need to give their bodies that experience through doing that kind of muscle relaxation type of exercise.

I also find mindfulness, staying in the moment, not worrying about the past or the future. And, so to help a child relax, you ask mum or dad to pretend that they are an ice lollipop. So, they sit stiff and they get their child to sit very stiff with them, then gradually, “Oh, the sun is out. Oh, I'm melting. Oh, I'm melting.” And they just gradually relax back into the chair. It can be quite funny. You can roll off a sofa, end up like a blob of water on the floor and just that process helps the child go from being stiff to being relaxed. So, it's particularly useful.

I use that but I call it floppy spaghetti. There’re all sorts of different things, but yeah, rigid spaghetti, before it goes in the water and then you kind of become floppy spaghetti.

Yes, absolutely. Everybody is floppy. I think it's whatever the child knows about really. You kind of use the hook that will get your child to understand what it is you are asking for. I think mindfulness is a buzzword at the moment and people think it's a lot more complicated than it actually is, because as you say, it's actually just about being in the present. With older children and teenagers, I think a good one with mindfulness, which you just count your breaths, one as you breathe in, one as you breathe out and then two and two. And then, if your mind wanders off, which it inevitably does, you realize you come back and you start at one again. And over time you notice you can count to a much higher count because you're training your brain not to wander off and worry about tomorrow and what's going to happen at school. So, it can be really simple, I think.

Do you find with teenagers that they find it harder to relax than maybe little ones following their parents?

I think they can do, and I think with little ones you can cough and make it fun and they want to join in with you. It can be harder with teenagers and, although normally we are very anti-technology, just before sleep there are actually a lot of apps and YouTube videos and things that have mindfulness and guided revisualizations and all sorts of relaxation exercises and sometimes they can be useful to get a teenager to engage. I think with the relaxation the thing is not to make it complicated and just to give it a go and see. Some things you'll enjoy, and a child will enjoy, others might not work for you, but there are so many different ways out there. I think it's just give it a go.

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