

Thriving Series by **Michael Grose**

# UNWINDING

## 10 RELAXATION IDEAS

FOR KIDS AND TEENS TO REDUCE ANXIETY  
AND MAINTAIN GOOD MENTAL HEALTH



# FIRST A FEW THOUGHTS

Modern kids are busy kids. Regardless of age, their days are filled with activities. Under fives do a range of adult-initiated learning activities designed to give them the best start to their learning lives.

School-aged kids have a huge range of leisure and after-school activities to choose from. It's not uncommon for kids to have four and five extra-curricular activities a week. Nothing wrong with kids being busy as long as they have plenty of chances to relax and unwind.

**Relaxation is a key to good mental health and well-being. It is an important life skill for kids to learn.**

It's not just busy kids who need to learn how to relax. As you are aware, adolescence is a stressful period of life. Most teens need to have their wits about them just going to school. Peers can be cruel, subjects difficult and relationships tricky. The need for teens to relax and unwind has never been greater.

Many of today's kids also live with pressure. Pressure to do well at school, pressure to study at home and pressure to do their best at sport or whatever leisure activities they take up. Pressure has its upsides. It helps kids to perform and do well. However excessive pressure is stressful, and leads to anxiety and even depression. Pressure needs to be released every so often, otherwise it continues to build up and becomes harmful. Relaxation is a great release for pressure. It makes the pressures of living more manageable. Relaxation is energizing. It's like a car, filling up the tank, ready for its next journey.

One way to ensure busy kids unwind is to make sure they get bored every so often. There is a temptation to fill kids' days with activities so that no time is wasted. "I'm bored!" is the last thing most parents want to hear their kids say. Many parents feel compelled to do something to alleviate a child's boredom.

There is nothing wrong with a little boredom now and then. Boredom can be good for kids' mental health and well-being, giving them the chance to muck around and take it easy for a time.

We all relax in different ways. Kids are no different. You will find that an activity may relax one child, yet the same activity may wind their sibling up. So it's a matter of finding the right activities to suit your child or young person.

Following are ten ideas to stimulate your thinking about how to help your kids relax and unwind.

*Michael Grose*



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# HAVE TWO ROUTINES AT HOME

**Most households are pretty highly-scheduled these days.**

There are routines for getting up, coming home, eating meals and going to bed. These structures are necessary when we get busy. They take the guesswork out of life. These routines can keep families wound up, as they move from one activity to another. It's these tight weekday routines that make weekends so precious. Come Saturday, families are able to get off the activity round-about. There's still plenty to do on weekends but the pace is slower.

This second type of routine that families get into on weekends helps kids relax and unwind. It's a layback routine that allows for some mucking around time. Kids can get up later, go to bed a little later and have time for doing what they want to do, at their own pace. This second, more laid-back routine helps kids stay on track, but it also ensures they have a chance to unwind. It's important to have this release valve if families are flat out busy during the week.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?



## EVERYONE NEEDS A HOBBY

### Encourage your kids to develop a hobby or leisure activity outside of school.

Having a hobby helps kids relax and get away from the routines of school, which is good for their mental health. Anxiety seems to be quite an issue these days with many kids, so the opportunity to lose themselves in an enjoyable activity away from the pressures of school has become even more important.

Every child needs to be good at something. Young people from the age of thirteen tend to define themselves in terms of an area they excel in. It's important then, that they find a niche. If they don't experience success at school then hobbies and outside interests become even more important.

Of course, kids can have too many interests and be too busy. I have known children who have a different after-school activity for every day of the week, which leaves little time for schoolwork, family time and quiet reflective time. Like everything in life, achieving a balance is important.

Many Australian kids opt for a sport as their outlet, but not every child or teenager enjoys or excels at sport. As a parent it's important to help your child develop a hobby or an interest and it doesn't matter if it's not part of the mainstream. It may be necessary to encourage your child to try different hobbies as it takes some experimentation to find out what they like and what they are good at.

### HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



### WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?





## LET'S GET PHYSICAL

**Physical exercise is a great way to relieve stress and anxiety at any age.**

Exercise releases endorphins, which is the feel-good chemical in the brain, enhancing their moods almost immediately. Kids these days aren't as active as children even ten years ago. A recent Australian study found that the older children become the less vigorous the activity they engage in. Five-six year olds spend around 4 hours a day in vigorous activity, which halves to around 2 hours a day for ten year olds.

So encourage kids to get active. Whether they get their exercise through organised sport or through play, it doesn't matter. It is important that kids experience the health and well-being benefits that come from physical activity.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?



# GET PLENTY OF SLEEP

## Many kids today are sleep-deprived.

Teenagers, in particular, don't get enough sleep. Their sleep-wake is delayed by up to two hours. That is, they are sleepy later and awake later than when they were children.

Most teens secrete melatonin, which makes them sleepy, around 1100pm, which makes the time before then a sleepless zone. Children secrete melatonin far earlier than this. Cortisol, the chemical that wakes them up, is secreted at 815am for many teens. It seems the teen brain wants to be asleep just when most have woken up. One US study found that 20% of teens were asleep in class in the morning, which had catastrophic effects on learning. As a result many high schools have delayed the start of school time to accommodate the teen sleep-wake cycle. This enabled teens not only to get more sleep but to be at their best (or at least awake) when they are at school.

The results were startling and immediate including: better learning, better behaviour, less fights and less kids dropping out of school. It seems that sleep is one thing that we can all become educated about. We take it for granted and often view poor sleepers through a behavioural lens. Better knowledge of the biology of sleep and also sleep patterns will go a long way to helping kids and teens get a good night's sleep.

### These good sleep habits may help kids get a good, relaxing night's sleep

- 1 **Keep regular bed-times** Kids may fight this, but be regular and let kids stay up a little later on weekends.
- 2 **Have a wind-down** time of up to 45 minutes prior to bed. This includes, removing TV and other stimuli, calming children down, and limiting food intake (and caffeine for teens).
- 3 **Have a bed-time routine** such as story, teeth-cleaning that signals psychologically that it is time for sleep.
- 4 **Keep bedrooms for sleep** and not for TV. Bedrooms that resemble caves seem to be recommended.
- 5 **Maximise the 3 sleep cues of** darkness (cave-like bedroom), lowering body temperature (baths can be good for this) and melatonin (work within their cycle).

### HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



### WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?

# WHAT'S THEIR PASSION?

**Everyone needs something in their lives that kindles a fire within, and ignites some passion.**

It doesn't have to be related to work or school, although it can be. For kids it maybe sport, music, or performance of some sort. You know when a child or young person is doing something they are passionate about as they lose all track of time, when they are involved. In other words, they experience a state of 'flow'.

'Flow' is a state we get into when we are so engrossed in an activity that time disappears. Free play generally takes young children to 'flow' very quickly so opportunities for unstructured play are essential. But for teens, it's generally their interests and passions where they experience feelings of 'flow', which is the ultimate unwind.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



## WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?





## STARE INTO THE 'FIRE'

### Ever sat around a camp-fire and stared at the flames?

If so, you will know how calming it is. No exertion! No need to think! No need to talk to anyone! Just a chance to chill-out and relax.

The TV is the modern version of the camp-fire. Yep, TV used in this way is good for kids' mental health; just don't let them stare at it for too long. There are plenty of other ways kids can stare into the fire. Maybe it's just reading a book, day-dreaming or doodling. Sometimes parents can get a little uptight when kids are seemingly doing very little, but mucking around can be just about the best way to relax and rejuvenate that there is.

### HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



### WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?



## TEACH THEM TO MEDITATE

**Meditation is a great way for kids to relax.**

Children can learn to meditate, do progressive relaxation, or participate in creative visualisation. These activities can be incidental acts during the day or at a special time in the evening with you and your child. You can listen to soothing music together, look at the beauty in nature, or pray together.

Kids can find a mental place to go to through using visualisation when they become stressed. A great way to help children learn the skills of meditation or creative visualisation is by taking a program with them, so you learn the skills together. There are many meditation programs available locally so ask around, or ask your family doctor for a recommendation.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?



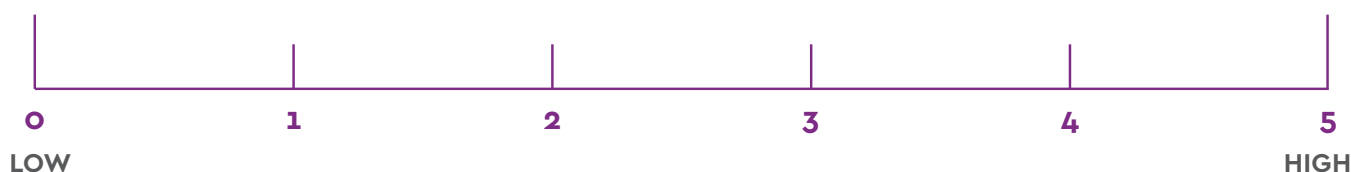
## GIVE THEM CREATIVE OUTLETS

**Involvement in creative or artistic activities can be a fantastic way to relax and unwind.**

Though children do arts and crafts projects everyday when they first enter school, these opportunities tend to dwindle as they advance through school. So you may need to provide extra opportunities for kids to be creative outside of school. These activities should be fun and not just other classes added to their already busy schedules.

There are many ways for a child to be creative. I know kids who express their creative sides through cooking, writing, singing, dancing, arts and crafts, and building cubbies. It is often while being creative kids experience a sense of 'flow' that I mentioned earlier. In these times, where academic success is paramount the importance of allowing kids a creative outlet to promote their well-being is more essential than ever.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?**



**WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?**





# A SPACE OF THEIR OWN

**When life gets stressful kids need to put some space between themselves and whatever is causing them stress.**

In short, they need some space to get away from things for a while. This space may be their bedroom, or just a special part of their house they can escape to.

Many kids choose their bedrooms as their own space, which gets a little tricky for parents, if they are messy, or kids spend too much time in them. Parents need to use their judgement here. Kids shouldn't spend so much time in their bedrooms that they drop out of family-life. And yes, bedrooms are attached to your home, so there needs to be some compromise about bedroom tidiness. But be mindful of children's need to have a space they can call their own, and where they have some feelings of control over. That means you may have to fight with kids a little less over the state of bedroom tidiness, particularly when they're at stages of life when they are feeling vulnerable.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



## WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?



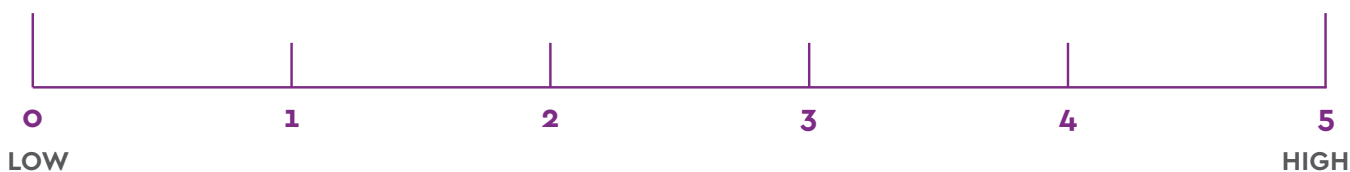
# YOU RUB MY BACK AND I'LL RUB YOURS

## Massage is a fabulous way of relaxing.

Many adults I know have included massage as part of their regular monthly routines. Kids too benefit from the relaxing effects of massage, but they don't have to go to a masseur to receive it. They can receive regular back rubs and neck rubs at home, from parents and even siblings. Better still, this can become a reciprocal arrangement where they rub your back and you rub their backs.

Rubbing kids' backs before bed is a fantastic way to calm them down and make them ready for sleep. And this type of back rub is not just for young children. Teenagers too can benefit from a relaxing back rub, before they go to sleep. These quiet moments also enable parents to connect with kids, at times when they are reticent to open up to adults.

### HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS FOR YOUR CHILD?



### WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?

