



Relaxation Technique: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

We often hold our muscles tense when we are stressed or anxious. By being aware of the difference between "tense" and "relaxed" we can recognize early signs of muscle tension. This awareness can help us not only relieve tension in the muscles, but can bring mental calmness as well.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a very old relaxation technique. Lots of people use it for themselves, and it is a good technique for children as well as adults.

There are 3 basic steps:

1. Isolate a muscle, inhale, and tense it.
2. Hold the muscle tense for 5-10 seconds. Hold the muscle tight--tight enough to cause shaking is just fine, but you can tell your child that if it hurts they should let go a bit.
3. Exhale, and slowly relax the tense muscle. The relaxation phase is at least as long as the tensing phase, possibly longer.

First: Decide if you are going UP or DOWN.

The progressive tense-hold-relax sequence moves up or down through the body. Sometimes you may want to move from lower extremities (toes, feet) **up** to the face. Sometimes PMR starts at the head and moves **down**. It doesn't really matter, but you should follow the one direction that you start with.

Here is a simple Beach Scenario to help you teach your child PMR.

The short version:

For very young children, like in this example, you will do a shortened version in which you tense whole muscle groups instead of individual body parts, and hold only for a short time.

What to say to your child: You can say..

"Sometimes when our minds are stressed, our bodies get tense. If we can learn to relax our tense bodies, then our minds may relax too. But we need to practice what it feels like to have tense and relaxed muscles."

Now, step by step:

- Have your child lie down on their back.
- Have your child bend their legs at the knees so their feet are flat on the ground.
- Say, "close your eyes and pretend you are at the beach, lying on the sand."
- Ask your child to pretend they hear the water lapping against the shore.
- Ask your child to imagine that it's a beautiful, sunny day. The sun feels warm against their skin. The sand is warm underneath their body.
- Have your child take a few deep breaths as they "watch the waves go in and out".
- Now ask your child to squeeze the sand between their toes--squeeze hard!
Inhale, hold (count 5 seconds), exhale, relax.

- Now squeeze both feet! Feel how tight that muscle is. Inhale, hold, exhale, relax.
- Say, "Do you feel the difference when you are relaxed?"
- Now ask them to tighten their legs. Inhale, hold, exhale and relax.
- Now their "middle"--their bottom, tummy, and chest. Inhale, hold, exhale and relax.
- Now their hands and arms. Remind them to "squeeze sand in-between their fingers."
- Then their shoulders and neck. Inhale, hold, exhale, relax.
- And then the face. Sometimes children don't know how to tense up their face. You may need to say something like: "Squeeze your eyes and mouth tight!" Inhale, hold, exhale, relax. Finally, have your child squeeze their whole body--hold--exhale--and relax.
- Ask them to take a few more deep breaths.
- Remind them to feel the warm sun and sand. Hear the water lap against the shore.
- Ask your child to open their eyes.
- When you are done, you can re-emphasize that when we notice our body is tense, we can "squeeze and relax" to help our body and mind relax.

As with any relaxation technique, do not attempt to teach this to your child during an episode of stress. Doing this could make things worse! Teach and practice relaxation techniques when you can both be calm and quiet together.

For more tips, or if you need more information or would like to talk to someone:

In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

Outside of Washington State: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at www.circleofparents.org