

FEATURE

GEMINI: Giving Children Skills Instead of Pills

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This article describes a creative learning program that can be used in schools or in clinical settings to encourage children to use their imaginations to help themselves, to learn things they never knew they knew, and to control things they never knew they could. It provides the child the opportunity to learn relaxation techniques, gentle imagery, and self-regulatory strategies. Once mastered, these techniques become an invaluable resource that the child can adapt and use to face challenges throughout his or her lifetime.

GEMINI (Gentle Relaxation Exercises and Mental Imagery) is a creative learning experience that gives children skills instead of pills. It offers them the opportunity to use their imaginations creatively, to learn techniques to manage anxiety and pain, and to enhance self-mastery and self-control. Through practicing GEMINI, children can gain confidence that they have the inner strength to contribute to the solution of their problems.

Stories, tales, parables, and metaphors have been used as a method of teaching throughout the ages, around the world, and in all cultures. Important religious and societal lessons have been passed down through generations by storytelling. GEMINI combines metaphors written for children with relaxation and mental imagery exercises to promote well-being and mental health. The program is designed to help children be more confident as they handle problems of anxiety, worry, discomfort, impulsivity and self-control. GEMINI teaches children about the mind-body connection and how their thoughts can affect their bodies and their health.

Stories ignite children's creative imaginations. A story may present a problem that is happening to a character and then offer a solution. The story allows children to view a problem that may be very similar to their own from a new perspective and at a distance. When children are able to view a problem as happening to someone else, new possibilities for solutions evolve. Children may make an unconscious connection with the personal relevance of the story.

Each of the metaphors included in this creative learning experience take place in the Ashland Zoo. In these

stories, children are introduced to different animal characters, each with a physical or emotional problem. The animal learns about using relaxation exercises and mental imagery to help itself. Some of the techniques presented in the stories can then be adapted to use in the exercise portion of the session. The children should be encouraged to practice the exercise utilizing mental imagery and relaxation at home.

The GEMINI program includes seven sessions, each approximately 20 minutes in length. Each session includes an introduction, a story, and an exercise utilizing relaxation and imagery. The program has units for three developmental levels: 5- to 7-year-olds, 8- to 12-year-olds, and teenagers. The following is a description of one of the sessions in the GEMINI program for 5- to 7-year-olds.

GEMINI Session 2: Mind-Body Connection for 5- to 7-Year-Olds

Learning Objective

The objective is to increase the child's awareness of the mind-body connection. This session will help the children learn that their thoughts and feelings affect how they feel physically and that the reverse is also true. The story in this session is about a koala bear who is anxious about leaving her mother's pouch and as a result experiences stomach aches. She learns that changing what she is thinking about changes her muscles. As a calming and relaxing technique the little koala learns diaphragmatic breathing and some gentle mental imagery.

The session begins with a brief discussion with the children about how their brains and bodies are all connected. The teacher then reads the story of Claire Koala. This is followed by a relaxation exercise incorporating both diaphragmatic breathing and mental imagery.

Introductory Discussion With Children (5 Minutes)

The purpose of this brief discussion is to get the children thinking about how their emotions affect their physical health. The following questions serve as a guideline for the teacher to use.

Today we are going to talk about how our brains and bodies are all connected. All day long our brains and our bodies send messages back and forth, talking to each other even at night when we are asleep. When you are in bed on a cold night, if you kick off the covers, your body might get cold, shiver, or get goose bumps. That sends the message to your brain that you are cold. Your brain sends the message back to your body to pull up the covers.

What if you were walking and stepped on something sharp? Your body would send a very fast message to your brain.

How does it work the other way—from your brain to your body? If you are sad or mad about something or very worried, what kind of message would your brain send out to your body and what would your body do?

Does your body feel differently when your brain is really sad or worried?

The story I am going to read to you is about a koala who gets a tummy ache when she gets worried. She learns how just by breathing in a certain way she can calm herself down. Then she learns to use her imagination to make herself feel better.

The Claire Koala Story (5 minutes)

Koalas come from Australia. Like kangaroos and pandas, they are marsupials. That means that they have pouches on their tummies so they can carry their babies.

When Claire Koala was born at the Ashland Zoo, she was very tiny, not much longer than your finger. She was born blind, and she had no hair. She crawled into her mother's pouch where she could get food and stay safe and warm. For six months, Claire snuggled in her mother's pouch with her forehead resting on her mother's tummy. Claire grew bigger and stronger day by day. Finally, she scrambled out of her mother's pouch.

During the day, the little koala clung to her mother's back while the big koala climbed high in the air, to the very tops of the eucalyptus trees. There Claire and her mother spent the day eating the tender eucalyptus leaves. At night Claire climbed back into her mother's pouch to sleep.

When Claire was fully grown she would be a little over two feet tall. She would be too big to fit inside her mother's pouch. It was cozy in that pouch, snuggled against her mother. Claire wasn't sure that she would like it when she got too big to crawl back in at night.

Claire's parents argued a lot and that made her sad. The little koala worried about everything. "What if I can't find Mommy in the eucalyptus leaves?" she whis-

pered to herself. "What if all the eucalyptus trees burn down in a fire and I have nothing to eat?" (Koalas eat only eucalyptus leaves.) "What if I'm climbing on a eucalyptus tree all by myself and I slip and fall down out of the tree?"

All of these feelings and worries made Claire feel frightened and scared.

Some of the other koalas picked on Claire because she liked to stay close to her mother. "Scaredy cat! Baby!" they would call when they saw Claire clinging to her mother's back. When the other koalas made fun of her, Claire would get a bad tummy ache.

"You're just faking it," one of Claire's older brothers told her. "You don't really have a stomachache; you just want to stay in Mommy's pouch!"

Claire began to cry. She knew that she wasn't making it up. Her tummy really did hurt.

"I'm going to call Dr. Dan," Claire's mother said. Dr. Dan was the zoo's veterinarian.

When they got to Dr. Dan's office, the veterinarian said to Claire, "Tell me all about those tummy aches."

Claire told Dr. Dan about how her tummy would hurt whenever she got worried. Dr. Dan talked to Claire for a long time about her tummy aches. Afterward, he checked her over very carefully.

"Your mind and body are all connected," said Dr. Dan. "They talk to each other all the time. When your stomach growls, that is your tummy talking to your brain. It is saying, 'I'm hungry, please feed me.' When you get goose bumps, that's your body telling your brain that you are cold. It works in the other direction too. Your brain talks to your body all day long. Would you like me to show you how it works?"

Claire nodded, and Dr. Dan lifted her into a eucalyptus tree.

"Hang onto a branch, Claire," he said. Gently he pushed the branch back and forth. "Close your eyes and think about something sad or scary."

As Claire thought about some of the things that worried her, Dr. Dan once again began to move the branch. Claire almost fell off. Her strength seemed to have disappeared.

"Now close your eyes and think about something wonderful," said Dr. Dan.

Claire imagined that she was playing with the other koalas. Everyone was laughing and having fun. Nobody was making fun of her.

"Think about what a good koala you are," said Dr. Dan. "Think about how you are smart and strong."

Claire immediately felt stronger. When Dr. Dan swung the branch even harder, Claire hung on with new strength and vigor.

"Hmmm," said Dr. Dan. "You were able to change the strength in your muscles just by changing what you were thinking about. When you are thinking about your worries and problems, I wonder what that does to the muscles in your tummy? Hmmm. How wonderful it will be for you when you can make your tummy feel better all by yourself, when you use the special powers and abilities of your own mind to help yourself, enjoying that sense of control you have over your body."

"We can begin right now," Dr. Dan continued. "I'll show you how to do belly breathing."

"Belly breathing! What's that?" asked Claire.

"It's a way of taking very deep breaths," answered Dr. Dan. "Those deep breaths can help to make your tummy feel more relaxed. The first thing you do is put your hand right in the middle of your tummy where your belly button would be if you had one."

Claire giggled and followed Dr. Dan's directions.

"Next," said Dr. Dan, "take in a deep breath, and instead of lifting your shoulders, use that breath to lift your tummy up."

Claire's tummy rose up just like a balloon inflating.

"When you let all your breath out," said Dr. Dan, "notice how you can *let go* of a little tension. Breathe in *comfort* and breathe out stress. Breathe in *relaxation* and breathe out tension. Let every breath take you *deeper* and *deeper*, even *more* relaxed, even *more* comfortable; just breathing will do that."

Claire noticed how all her muscles felt even more *relaxed* and *comfortable* with every breath she took. It made her whole body feel good.

"Breathe in *self-confidence* and breathe out your worries," said Dr. Dan. "Breathe in *strength* and breathe out fear."

In and out, in and out, breathed Claire. She drew in self-confidence and breathed out uncertainty. She breathed in self-esteem and breathed out self-doubt.

In and out came the breath into Claire's belly. Her tummy rose up and down with every breath. Claire continued to practice her belly breathing, letting go of her tension and worries. She breathed in self-confidence.

"Imagine that you are in a boat on a very large lake," said Dr. Dan. "At first, the water is rough. It is rocking the boat. Gradually, the boat rocks *less* and *less* as the water in the lake gets *smoother* and *smoother*, and even more *calm*, where nothing needs to bother or disturb you."

Claire noticed with interest how her tummy no longer bothered her. That night, she was able to drift off to sleep outside of her mother's pouch, and she dreamed of eucalyptus trees.

Exercise (5–7 minutes)

If working with a small group, all the children can participate. If the group is large, ask for one or two volunteers. With the children standing, have them extend their arms out to the side at shoulder height. Tell them that you are going to gently push down on their arms but to be strong and resist your push. Then while they continue to hold their arms out to the side ask them to think about something sad or something that worries them. After a few moments gently push down on their arms. Then ask them to think about something happy and about how strong they are and what a great kid they are. Again after a short time gently push down on their arms. The difference is generally quite remarkable. Take a moment to help them comprehend what happened.

So when you were thinking happy thoughts, what did that do to your muscles without you even realizing it? And what happened when you were thinking worried or sad thoughts? Your brain was talking to your body without you even realizing it. You were able to change your muscles just by changing what you were thinking about.

The next part of the exercise can be done with all of the children sitting in their chairs or on the floor, lying on the floor, or with their heads on their desk. There is no one way or one position that they need to be in as long as they are comfortable. Read the script of the exercise slowly, frequently pausing to allow the children to go deeply into their imaginations.

We are going to do some belly breathing. Instead of breathing up in our shoulders, we are going to breathe way down deep in our bellies. Put one or both hands on top of your belly button. Take a slow deep breath in and feel your belly rise just like it was a balloon getting slowly bigger. That's right—nice and slow—and now let it out very slowly. Again take a deep breath in slowly and feel your belly gently rise, and now just as slowly let the air out as you feel your belly go down.... Breathing in comfort and letting go of tightness.... Slow and deep.... As I count to 3, breathe in 1-2-3, hold it; and as I count down slowly breath out 3-2-1. In 1-2-3, and out 3-2-1.

That's right, very good. Perhaps you are beginning to notice that each time you breathe out you let go of tightness in your muscles.... You let go of worries.... Breathe in happy thoughts and let go of worries. [The teacher

should time her words to the child's breathing. If the child is breathing too fast, talk slower to pace the child's breathing to your voice.]

Now pretend that you are gently rocking. I am not sure if in your imagination you will be rocking in a hammock or in a swing. Maybe you are pretending you are in a boat or on a raft gently rocking with the waves. Maybe you are curled up comfy and safe in a rocking chair all by yourself or with somebody special—your mom or dad or maybe grandma or grandpa. Good, that's right: Feel how good, how comfortable, how soothing that gentle rocking is. Wrap yourself in that calm, comfort. It is a place in your imagination where you can pretend that nothing needs to bother or disturb you. Breathe in comfort...and breathe out worries...gently rocking in your imagination.

I wonder how wonderful it will be for you to discover how many different ways you can use your belly breathing to calm and comfort yourself. Anytime you would like to make your body and your brain feel better—feel calm and more comfortable—all you need to do is put your hand on your belly button and start to take slow, deep breaths, feeling the gentle rise and fall of your breathing. Each time you breathe out you will notice that it takes you deeper and deeper into a relaxed feeling, even more comfortable and calm. Just breathing will do that.

Then pretend that you are rocking gently someplace that is wonderful, some place safe and comfortable. Then remember to feel very proud that you were able to give your body and your brain so much comfort and relaxation.

Summary (3–5 minutes)

What happened to Claire when she got nervous and worried?

Was Claire's tummy ache real? Yes, but it wasn't because anything bad was wrong with her tummy. It was because her worried thoughts made it feel yucky. Has that ever happened to you?

Today when you were belly breathing, how did the feelings in your body change?

How can you use your belly breathing in the future to help yourself?

How comfortable did it feel when you were pretending to be rocking? It felt good, didn't it?

I wonder when will be the best time for you to practice doing GEMINI—your belly breathing and pretending?

Conclusion

The metaphors in the GEMINI program are taken from *Harry the Hypnototamus: Metaphorical Tales for the Treatment of Children* by Linda Thomson (2005). Copies of all GEMINI materials are freely available from robertboland@wanadoo.fr. Testing of the program, feedback, and new ideas are welcomed and appreciated.

References

Thomson, L. (2005). *Harry the Hypnototamus: Metaphorical tales for the treatment of children*. Norwalk, CT: Crown House.



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