

## SPECIAL ISSUE

# Hipponosis: Introducing Hypnosis to Children

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*As a group, children are more responsive to hypnosis than adults are. Children are hypnotically talented because of their unique behavioral and developmental characteristics. Hypnosis cultivates imagination, and imaginative play is the work of childhood. In an emergency situation, very little explanation of hypnosis is needed. Creating a positive expectancy and the careful use of language is important. The article describes how the clinician, as the imagination coach, can introduce the concept of hypnosis to children. Young children may learn how a hippopotamus named Harry learned to use hypnosis to help himself with shots, a toothache, and anxiety and became a Hypno-potamus. For older children, hypnosis can be reframed as brain power exercises. A technique to engage cooperation and demonstrate the power of imagination to children is explained. The article also describes how to demonstrate experientially the mind-body connection: how thoughts and feelings can influence physiology. Teaching a child diaphragmatic breathing is an important first step in self-regulation. Harry Hypno-potamus imagination cards can be used to stimulate mental imagery, to teach breathing techniques and muscle relaxation, and most importantly, for ego-strengthening. Introducing hypnosis to children appeals to their quest for self-mastery, and teaching them hypnotic skills is a gift that lasts a lifetime.*

### Children, Play, and the Imagination

Play is the work of childhood. Play invites imagination, which engages curiosity, novelty seeking, autonomy, and self-efficacy and mastery. It is through their imaginations that children create adventure and possibilities; set goals for their future; cope with pain, anxiety, or fears; and review and rehearse skills. Children are behaviorally and developmentally uniquely suited to hypnosis because hypnosis cultivates imagination, and children live in the world of imagination. Children can become totally focused and immersed in an activity. They become absorbed in the present moment. Children process information literally and concretely and don't tend to test reality. They can hear the reindeer's hoof-steps on the roof. They believe that a man

in a red suit and beard can fit down their chimney with a bicycle, a kitchen set, and a new blue wagon. Children can easily and quickly shift between reality and fantasy. They delight in new ideas and experiences. If trance is a special state of consciousness in which individuals become less rational, more imaginative, and more suggestible, then children spend most of their lives in trance.

### Using the Natural Hypnotic Ability of Children

Clinicians have the unique opportunity to use the natural hypnotic talent and ability of their pediatric patients/clients. Hypnotherapeutic work enhances and strengthens the child's natural inclinations toward fantasy and creativity, exploration, and forming social relationships. Children strive to achieve self-efficacy and self-mastery, and they are generally receptive to hypnotic tools that will help them experience success.

However, children, not unlike their parents, may have misinformation and misperceptions concerning hypnosis that may impede their hypnotic responsiveness. Unfortunately, the child's source of information concerning this powerful clinical skill is often misrepresented in movies and on television. Often a character in hypnosis is depicted as being under an evil spell, put to sleep, or brainwashed. The child may be influenced by the media to believe that hypnosis is hocus pocus or witchcraft.

### Addressing Misconceptions About Hypnosis

After a presentation, Rabbi Kirschner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was approached by someone from the audience. The gentleman said, "I don't believe in God," to which Rabbi Kirschner replied, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in because I probably don't believe in that God either." Someone could respond similarly to someone saying, "I don't believe in hypnosis."

Clarifying misconceptions and dispelling any myths is an important first step and should precede the first hypnotic experience. In an emergency situation, this may not be

necessary as the child may already be in a spontaneous trance, a state of focused attention on the injury or pain, and highly motivated to reduce the symptom. They can be narrowly focused on the reason for the emergency and at the same time be hypervigilant about certain aspects of their environment. The child's fear and anxiety can turn an innocuous comment into a negative suggestion and a staff member's attitude into a negative experience. Using hypnotic language, hypnotic suggestions, and positive expectancy should begin automatically and immediately in an emergency situation. Demystifying the surroundings, the equipment, the terminology, and the procedure is also important.

Empathically meeting children where they are emotionally and hypnotically leading them by inviting a therapeutic direction for change does not require a lengthy explanation or discussion. The emergency clinician might say, "I imagine it would be more fun for you to be someplace else other than here. I wonder how quickly you could go there in your imagination while I stay here and help with this." This interaction invites dissociation and distraction while acknowledging the child's inner resources and strengths for helping himself or herself.

Negative attitudes and misinformation about hypnosis are prevalent among both children and adults, the lay public, and health professionals. Education is an ongoing process. A child's success in using hypnosis may be sabotaged by a parent, relative, or health professional who is misinformed. Hypnosis is explained in everyday simple terms and how it can be uniquely suited for this child's specific problem. Hypnosis can be described as a state of mind: when an individual's attention is so focused on something that other undesired thoughts or feelings drift out of awareness. Clever parents will realize that they are already using hypnotic-like techniques with their children.

### **Introducing Hypnosis to Children: Using Story and Imagery**

The parent observes as hypnosis is explained to the child in a developmentally appropriate manner. For younger children, I tell them the story of Harry the Hypnotamus. Harry was a hippopotamus who learned how he could pretend to blow bubbles so that his injection wouldn't bother him. Then when he had a toothache, he imagined being in Africa, and it helped him feel better. The hippo used hypnosis to control what he never knew he could. Hypnosis is about learning what you never knew you knew, daydreaming on purpose, thinking to help yourself, learning how to work to control your mind. Then Harry used hypnosis to help himself with his anxiety about

moving to a new place in the zoo. Harry was so good at using hypnosis to help himself that he was given the new name of Hypno-potamus.

I explain to children that their imagination is like a magic carpet that can take them anywhere they want to go or back to somewhere they have already been. They can zoom in close to examine things carefully or stay a safe distance away. Their magic carpet can take them someplace familiar and safe or to someplace they have never seen and only imagined. They are in the driver's seat and can fly by themselves on the magic carpet of their imagination or bring along their friends or family. Children can then be invited to create a magic carpet in their imagination and tell you about it. What color is it? Does it have a steering wheel or a control panel? Or do you just hop on and tell it where to take you? Sometimes magic carpets can be there in a flash, or sometimes we can just enjoy the ride, noticing everything from a different perspective.

With older children and teens, I might place an imaginary key in their palm. I suggest as they go through the doorway of their imagination that on the other side are a number of different kinds of vehicles. The key in their palm will start the engine of one of them. It might be the first one they try, or they may have to put the key in the ignition of several before they hear the roar of the engine. The vehicle can take them somewhere special, or they may just decide to enjoy the power, the control, and the ride.

### **Hypnosis as a Tool for Self-Regulation**

When presenting hypnosis to children for self-regulation, it can be reframed as learning brain power exercises: using the power of their imagination to overcome worries and fears, control habits, and manage discomfort. I describe myself as an imagination coach, just like their soccer coach, who can tell them what he would like them to do on the soccer field but can't do it for them. I explain that I am going to suggest things for them to think about or ways to feel. Whether or not they chose to do that is their decision and under their control, not mine.

Children can easily remember a time when they had a tummy ache and then when a favorite show came on television and they were able to forget about their discomfort. They may have experienced a time when they pretended to have super powers and actually felt stronger as a result. Imagining being a fairy princess or being at Hogwarts with Harry Potter can lessen worries or pain.

I ask them if they would like to experience the power of their imagination. Holding their hands together with fingers intertwined, they are asked to extend their index fingers. I tell them that in a moment I am going to ask them

to separate their index fingers and that I am going to put some imaginary screws on their fingers and crank them shut. After the child opens his or her index fingers, I begin a turning motion with my fingers, as if tightening a screw on the outside of the extended, separated index fingers. When the fingers have moved together, I comment that the movement is the result of the power of their imagination. This can also be done by suggesting that they have powerful magnets at the tip of each index finger pulling their fingers together.

While the child is still in amazement at what they just experienced, I suggest that perhaps they would like to learn something else about their amazing imagination. Extending both arms in front of them, one palm up and one palm face down, I explain that on the palm facing up, they can imagine that I am going to place a very heavy book, and on the other imagine that I am tying a string attached to a beautiful balloon filled with helium that just wants to pull that arm up. Perhaps they might like to pay attention to the difference in the sensation in their arms: one very heavy and the other feeling light. As they experience the two opposite feelings, I comment that part of their brain knows that there was no book and no balloon there. Yet in another part of their brain, the imagining part, they could imagine it and actually change the sensation in their arms. I exclaim that is the power of their imagination. That is what I am going to help them tap into to help them help themselves with their problem.

### **Hypnosis for Children with Somatic Complaints**

For children with somatic complaints, I demonstrate the brain-body connection. I suggest that they already know how their body sends messages to their brain. For example, when their tummy growls, it is sending the message to their brain that they are hungry. All day long, their brain sends messages to their body without them even realizing it, and I suggest that they might be interested to discover how that works. I ask them to extend an arm straight out from their side at shoulder height. I tell them that I am going to try to push their arm down but that they should be strong and not let me. Then, while their arm is still extended out to the side, I suggest that they think about something sad or something that bothers them. After I have ascertained that they are thinking about something negative, I apply the same amount of downward pressure on their arm. The exercise is repeated while they focus on positive thoughts and strengths. We then discuss what happened and how the thoughts in their head can affect their body without them even realizing that it is happening.

That is why some people when stressed get tummy aches, some people break out in a rash, and others may feel shaky. The brain and the body are all connected, and they talk together all the time. I suggest that they can learn brain power exercises so that their brain can send better messages to their body.

A dear and wise friend, Becky Kajander, told me that if there is only one thing that she can teach a child, it is diaphragmatic breathing. I have taken her invaluable, expert advice. When I see children back years after working with them hypnotically and ask them what techniques they continue to use or found the most valuable, they invariably say “the breathing.” When someone is stressed, the very first thing to change physiologically is breathing. Learning slow diaphragmatic breathing, taking longer on the exhalation than the inhalation, stimulates the calming parasympathetic nervous system. There are many fun ways to teach children diaphragmatic breathing. The child can imagine a balloon beneath their navel, and as they breathe in, they inflate the balloon with good feelings, and when they let go of their breath (along with their stress, worries, etc.), the balloon goes down. They can place a small stuffed animal on their belly and watch it go up and down with each breath. They can climb on a swing in their imagination and time their breathing with the swing or pretend they are at the beach and match their breathing with the waves coming in and going out. If the child enjoys slides, they can breathe in as they go up the slide and exhale as they go down, making the slide a little longer each time.

Harry Hypno-potamus imagination cards are an extension of the *Harry the Hypno-potamus Metaphorical Tales for Children* books, which are collections of tales about animals in the Ashland zoo (Thomson, 2005, 2009, 2012). Each animal learns hypnotic skills to help alleviate a physical, emotional, or behavioral problem. The cards can be used to play a variety of games, or the child can just pick a card at random and perform the activity indicated on the card. Each card introduces an element of self-regulation and imaginative involvement. Some cards are directed at ego strengthening, and others teach the child a breathing technique. Muscle relaxation techniques may be the focus of some of the cards, and others encourage mental and sensory imagery.

### **Conclusion**

Hypnosis takes the power of belief, and expectation melds it with imagination to create an amazing and incredible force for health, healing, and well-being. Helping children help themselves with hypnosis is powerful and effective. The fresh, creative, exciting ideas of children make it fun for

both the clinician and the child. When clinicians use hypnosis to teach children self-regulation, they are giving children a gift that they can use throughout their lifetime.

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