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INTRODUCTION



This book has been a long time in the making. For many years it has been my dream to write a book about the use of relaxation techniques with young children. This dream emerged from the recognition of the need for children to learn to integrate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual parts of themselves.

I have always felt the need to spend time alone, where I can think, dream, reflect, and ponder. In my early life, I suppose this was my meditation time—what I like to call my “heart and soul” time. In this meditative and quiet space, I could bring myself back to a place of balance, replenish my energy, and bring a feeling of calm back into my life. My time alone helped me to stay in touch with my intuition, think through my problems, and find respite from the bustle of my family life and school demands—this time helped me to feel good about who I was. At no time in my school life were any opportunities for relaxation, meditation, or reflection time offered. The closest technique I can recall is a primary school teacher who used to allow us to wash our faces after lunch and put our heads down on the desk for five minutes—better than nothing, I suppose!

When, as a young teacher, I was introduced to tai chi, yoga, and meditation practices, I felt an immediate sense of enthusiasm. At last I had found some techniques where I could be part of a group, yet experience the benefits I had previously gained from my periods of time alone. Learning the techniques of breathing and moving meditation were a breakthrough in my life, as I was able to develop ways of being calm and centered in stress-

ful situations. Although tai chi, yoga, and meditation have always remained regular practices in my life, it is the practice of tai chi that has made the strongest impact on who I am and how I live.

In the 1970s, during my early years of teaching, I was inspired by the children and staff of a “special school.” (In Australia, “special schools” or “schools for specific purposes” served children with special needs, such as those with learning, physical, behavioral, and/or emotional disabilities. Today, special needs children are more frequently mainstreamed in regular primary or high schools, where they receive itinerant support from specialist teachers.) Noeleen O’Beirne, my dear friend and then principal of the school, had the vision and courage to incorporate relaxation classes into the school curriculum.

The young people attending this school (ages five to fifteen years) had suffered a range of abuse and neglect. These children were wards of the state and many had spent most or all of their lives in institutions, or moving from one unsuccessful foster placement to another. Many of the children were angry or violent; some had been expelled from the regular school system. All of the children at this school had emotional difficulties and severe learning disabilities. Traditional teaching methods did not work with these children, nor did the strict discipline practiced by previous school principals.

Noeleen had been my practice teaching adviser at this school some years earlier when I was completing my teacher training. I felt privileged to be a member of her teaching staff, and over the years we became great friends. Some of our colleagues at the school shared our enjoyment of tai chi, yoga, and meditation classes, so many of the staff joined classes after school together. It soon became an effective way to manage our stress levels as well as keep us all calmer and more balanced when dealing with the difficulties we faced in our very challenging workplace. Most of the teaching staff shared the same philosophies (about the importance of breathing, regular meditative practice, and so on) and we came to realize that tai chi, yoga, relaxation, visualization, and meditation practices would be worth introducing to the children attending our school.

We introduced the techniques gradually, based on careful planning and discussion at our weekly staff meetings. The teachers began introducing relaxation techniques (in one form or another) into their daily routine. For

example, some classes would begin their day with a short meditation to music while the children were sitting at their desks; some teachers introduced simple breathing exercises, stretching, and simple chi gong movements as a way of providing a lesson break or before a transition from one activity to another (for example, before going outside for lunch or playtime). Other teachers decided to provide a regular relaxation session after lunchtime. Afternoons were always problematic at this school, as the children became more tired and irritable as the day wore on and their ability to concentrate on their schoolwork lessened. These simple inclusions to the school day were introduced carefully and planned thoughtfully—just as any other experience or lesson for children needs to be planned.

At this stage, a relaxation session involved asking children to lie on the floor, slowly inhale and exhale, and then participate in a visualization exercise (for example, taking an imaginary journey as their teacher told a visualization script or story).

Within a few weeks, relaxation became a valued part of the curriculum for the children and the teachers. There were upsets and obstacles along the way, such as some children refusing to participate at first because it was “stupid” or “weird.” These children were simply asked to sit and watch until they were ready to join in. It was important to ensure that these children did not disrupt the other children who were enjoying their relaxation time. The “ripples” soon smoothed out and the children came to look forward to their relaxation sessions each day. Along the way, the children were learning some valuable life and relationship skills such as how to calm down using the breath; experiencing contentment and ease during and after gentle exercise and visualization; recognizing that other children and teachers had feelings and responses similar to their own; and the value of listening to other people and how this helps us to get to know and begin to understand others who might be very different from us.

Our principal, in consultation with her staff, the school authorities, and the house parents, decided to appoint one of the full-time staff as a “relaxation teacher.” This role was taken on by one of our newer teachers who was experienced in the techniques of tai chi, meditation, and yoga. Each class had the benefit of a relaxation session with the “relaxation teacher” daily, as well as the above described times with their own class teachers. The program improved the quality of school life for children and teachers alike.

Although we did not undertake formal research on the relaxation program, we all noticed the improvements in the children's behavior in and outside the classrooms. Concentration levels improved and some children were able to stay on task for longer periods; there was also less teasing, bickering, and fighting in the playground. We also noticed individual children taking up segments of the relaxation program to use when they were outside of school hours. For example, I was teaching the "senior" class at the time and some of my pupils asked me to make audiotapes of relaxation music for them. The students reported that they listened to this music on their Walkmans before going to sleep or if they felt upset or annoyed. In class, some children would ask me if they could sit in our "relaxation" corner for a short time and listen to their tapes if they could feel themselves becoming frustrated, annoyed, or upset.

It was clear to me that these strategies were preferable to dealing with tantrums, fights, and explosions every day. I wished that someone had taught *me* these techniques when I was a child. These children found some peace, serenity, and improved self-esteem in their lives through our relaxation program. I saw the general school system as a whole failing these children, and I wondered why education curricula did not provide "heart and soul learning"—relaxation and awareness sessions for children of all ages. I am still wondering why this is not happening in more schools and child care centers today.

Tai chi and relaxation techniques continued to form part of my teaching practice as I moved to different settings. After my years in the special school, I took up a position as a lecturer in a teacher's college in Sydney. I used tai chi exercises as a way of providing a short break in lectures and tutorials. I would often begin a tutorial with a five-minute progressive relaxation or visualization exercise to help the students focus their attention and relax by getting in touch with their breathing. These simple techniques became popular and I was asked by my students over the years to make them a regular part of our classes.

My career then took me back into regular schools for several years. I worked as a special education teacher, providing support and expertise to classroom teachers of children with learning, emotional, or behavioral disabilities. I continued to introduce relaxation sessions in these settings and always received positive responses—from the children, the other teachers,

administrators, and the parents. I was invited into regular classrooms to run relaxation sessions for the children and their teachers. These usually took the form of warm-ups, tai chi exercises, and relaxation and visualization exercises, although in some settings I introduced yoga movements as well. The teachers began to adopt these practices on a regular basis and commented that they noticed a positive difference in the behavior and the concentration levels of the children. Word began to spread and I was invited to other schools to present workshops on stress management for adults and relaxation for children.

I returned to university teaching and spent several more years teaching adults who were studying early childhood education. I continued my own studies and undertook several research projects that investigated stress in children and the benefits of relaxation in child care, preschool, and school settings. This ongoing research is part of my own university studies.

I continue to be invited as a guest speaker and consultant in the areas of stress management for staff and relaxation for children. I live in Sydney and in the Blue Mountains (an hour and a half drive west of Sydney), where I have my own studio and offer tai chi and relaxation classes for adults and children.

I have had enormous support for my tai chi lessons from early childhood, primary, and high school teachers; academics; school counselors; parents; medical and hospital staff; and especially from the children. Hundreds of people over many years have told me how much they have benefited from the relaxation practices I have shared with them.

We live in a dramatically changing world and our children are being placed under more and more stress, be it at home, school, or in early childhood settings. The importance of developing relaxation techniques for young children is clear. Teachers and parents are under ongoing stress in their daily lives and often fail to acknowledge that children feel the effects of adult stress and the pressures of childhood (such as being cared for by a number of different people during their week including grandparents, child care centers, or before and after school care). Teachers report to me that they are frustrated and at a loss as to how to bring calm and quiet into children's daily lives. It seems that the old adage, "If you do what you've

WHY TAI CHI?



always done, you'll get what you have always had" applies here! Helping teachers find a way to bring balance into children's days is becoming a priority in these busy and stressful times.

I was heartened and inspired many years ago when I read this quote:

It is our belief that a radical change in personal consciousness is necessary to change the course of humanity. We also believe that to open children to see these new ways of seeing the world is to make a loving and profound contribution to the betterment of our world. To expand awareness together with children is liberating, interesting and a great deal of fun. (Hendricks and Wills 1975, xvii)

Much research to date has focused on stress and stress management for adults. However, little has been done to study how we can teach holistic stress management skills to children at an early age, or to create programs for children that provide relaxation, self-awareness, and relief from stress. Many adults perceive a real gap in our education system. For example, Carol Jenkins (a writer and parent) says, "As a parent, I feel a great need for more information on mental and spiritual principles in a form easy to share with children" (Jenkins 1995, vii).

Tai chi exercises appeal to young children because they are simple and the movements they contain are flowing and enjoyable to perform. Children feel a sense of achievement and gain the benefits of "moving meditation" as they play with the movements. The body becomes relaxed as the breath and the movement become more coordinated. When the body learns to relax in this way, it is then possible for the children to participate in a progressive relaxation and visualization experience as they lie down on the floor. This provides much needed rest and replenishment in their day and appeals to their sense of delight and wonder as they share in the imagery and fantasy contained in the scripts and/or stories that the adult speaks aloud to them.



WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?

This book combines gentle exercises (Tai Chi Ch'uan) and progressive relaxation and visualization techniques that are suitable for all children. Tai chi promotes strength, flexibility, suppleness, coordination, and good posture. Relaxation and visualization techniques teach children the value of stillness

and how to enjoy being calm, quiet, and inwardly reflective. Visualization techniques enhance children's abilities in developing imaginative, creative, and artistic habits. Most important, relaxation and tai chi are noncompetitive, nurturing techniques that children of all ages can enjoy.

The movements presented in this book are modified versions of simple chi gong exercises, brocades, or silk exercises, from the tai chi tradition. When adults attend tai chi classes, they learn warm-up exercises and introductory stationary exercises (for example, chi gong), and then progress on to a tai chi form. A tai chi form is a sequence of tai chi movements performed in a set order, moving in different directions and then returning to the starting position. The practice of learning tai chi sequences requires dedication, concentration, and commitment. It took me about three years to learn the Yang Style short form sequence to my satisfaction.

Learning a tai chi form is inappropriate for young children. However, I have found from many years working in early childhood and elementary school settings that children can gain benefit from and enjoy the stationary exercises derived from tai chi traditions. The exercises presented in this book have been modified slightly to suit the needs of young learners. They are simple and easy to remember. The exercises appeal to the children's sense of fun and playfulness. Traditionally, tai chi texts emphasize that we "play" tai chi rather than "do" it or "perform" it.

This book takes a holistic and ecological approach to working with children and is based on the following principles:

- ◊ The value of quiet and solitude
- ◊ The value of meditation and reflection (quiet time, prayer, visualization)
- ◊ The value of taking care of our bodies
- ◊ The value of intuition, imagination, and creativity
- ◊ The awareness of our natural way of being (relaxed and at ease as opposed to tense and anxious)
- ◊ The value of ecological awareness and kindness to the earth, its creatures and to each other
- ◊ The value of honest, caring relationships where deep feelings and visions are shared
- ◊ The value of acknowledging a range of cultures, traditions, and rituals

This guide provides teachers with a starting point for developing their own gentle exercise and relaxation programs for children. In this way, we can support the natural and healthy development of mind, body, and spirit.



Creative Expression

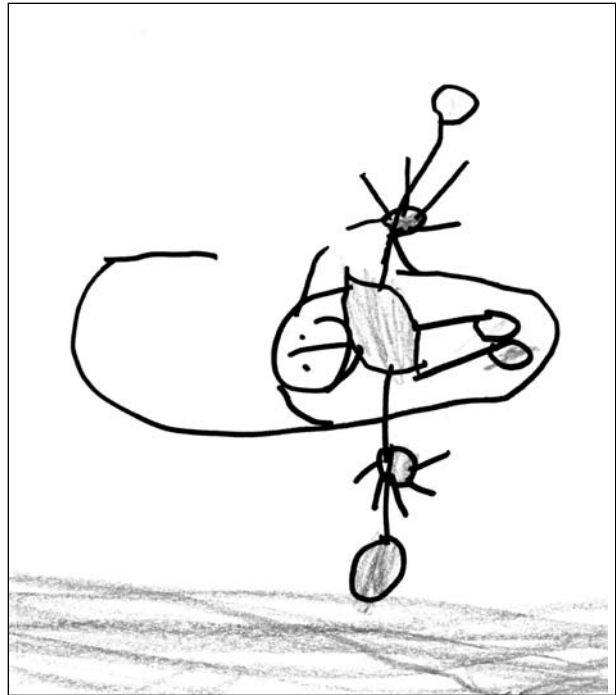
Relaxation exercises can form an effective part of movement experiences for young children. Alternating vigorous, fast-paced activities with quieter ones helps children remain calm and avoids “bouncing off the walls.” Relaxation helps children prepare for slow and sustained movement, which requires greater control than fast movement. There is a wealth of ways to bring the lessons of peace, quiet, and the reflections gained from relaxation into other areas of the curricula. Tai chi and relaxation sessions can be followed up with a range of creative and expressive experiences such as the following:

- ◇ Drawing
- ◇ Painting
- ◇ Patterning
- ◇ Modeling with clay or plasticine
- ◇ Story writing
- ◇ Dancing
- ◇ Drama activities
- ◇ Music

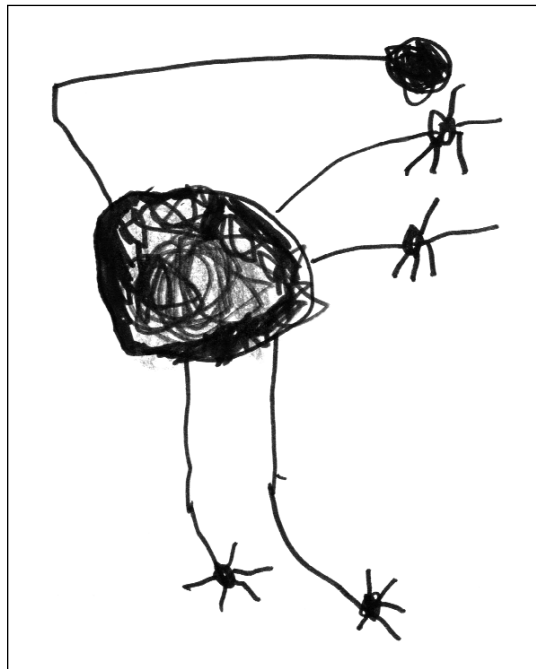
Possibilities for following up on relaxation sessions are only limited by the imaginations of the teacher or parent and the children. The following illustrations show some of the stories and drawings created by children after their relaxation sessions.



*"I'm floating on a cloud going to the hundred-acre wood where my birthday party is going to be. I feel very happy."
(Boy aged four years)*



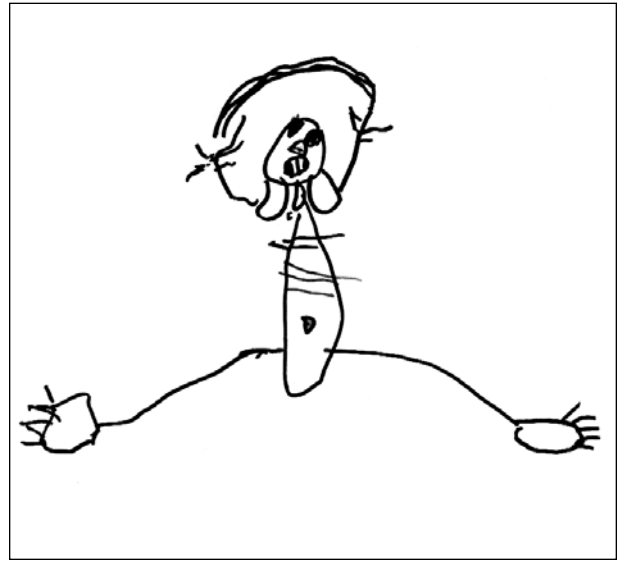
*"It's me rowing a boat. I'm just about to get out of the boat and put my feet in the water. This is my boat in relaxation."
(Girl aged three and a half years)*



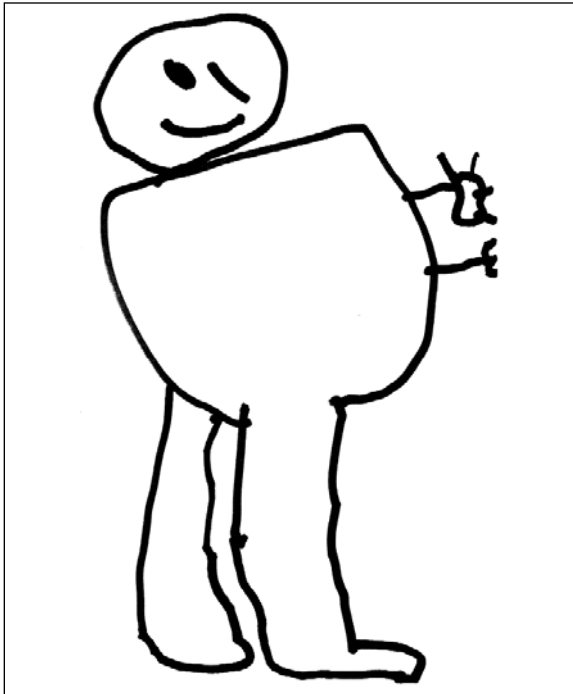
"My head is popping over to see if my hands are doing the right thing in tai chi." (Boy aged four years)



"My garden is on the mountain." (Boy aged six years)



"Me painting the rainbow." (Boy aged four years)



"I like tai chi because it's good." (Boy aged four years)



"Relaxed." (Boy aged five years)

Life learning Relaxation time can impart important social learning. The following ideas help children build connection, understanding, and respect for each other and their world:

- ◊ Listening (poems, stories, rhymes, songs)
- ◊ Sharing/waiting/respecting/kindness activities
- ◊ Valuing nature (outdoor relaxation activities)
- ◊ Just “being”

Creative expression Relaxation time can lead children to a wealth of opportunities to explore and develop through the creative and expressive arts. The following are some examples of ways children can represent their relaxation and tai chi experiences:

- ◊ Drawing
- ◊ Painting
- ◊ Patterning
- ◊ Modeling
- ◊ Collage
- ◊ Sculpture
- ◊ Drama
- ◊ Dancing
- ◊ Storytelling
- ◊ Poems and rhymes
- ◊ Constructing

Aromatherapy and simple massage can also be used if appropriate and if in accordance with policy and guidelines if in an education setting.



**GENERAL IDEAS
FOR BABIES,
TODDLERS, AND
OLDER CHILDREN**

This book follows a specific program of relaxation by starting with warm-up movements, tai chi, and gentle exercises. Progressive relaxation is then followed by visualization techniques and group discussion of the children’s responses. Creative expression activities are then suggested to explore and record the relaxation techniques further. However, there is a range of gen-

eral ideas that can be used with children that may help “set the scene” before you embark on the program. These ideas can also be used in addition to the relaxation sessions outlined in the book.

The following ideas may be used with babies. Experiment with these ideas and watch baby’s reactions. Include the following suggestions, along with more ideas of your own:

Babies

- ◊ Use relaxation music in their rooms (lullabies, nature sounds, quiet chants, and soft ambient music)
- ◊ Use aesthetics to enhance the environment (soft colors, attractive posters, mobiles, hangings, a relaxation mat with soft toys for soothing activities inside and outdoors)
- ◊ Make sure adults use relaxed, calm voices
- ◊ Try aromatherapy, such as oil burners, scented lights, and mist sprays—make sure you research this for contraindications before you use this technique
- ◊ Use massage at diaper-changing time, bath time, rest, or sleep time
- ◊ Read stories to babies as they sit on your lap
- ◊ Use chewing/soothing toys
- ◊ Use plenty of cuddles, swaying, and rocking

Use the above ideas suggested for babies as well as the following ones with toddlers. Play with these techniques and modify them according to your toddlers’ responses:

Toddlers

- ◊ Use music in their rooms (ambient, light classical, relaxation, nature sounds, chanting, lullabies, and multicultural)
- ◊ Use aesthetics (soft furnishings, quiet corners, posters, plants, mobiles, book areas, cushions, soft toys, draping fabrics, lamps for soft lighting, aromatherapy, float bowls, flowers, and plants)
- ◊ Use movement to create breaks in your day (for example, before or after toileting time, snack time, recess, moving to another

room or activity, lunch—try tai chi, bending and stretching, circle dancing, creative dancing, yoga)

- ◊ Use relaxing activities (a relaxation mat outside for quiet drawing or playing with soft toys, sand trays, water play, bubbles, private space and time, cubbies, using the garden, relaxation and spiritual books, and transition times)
- ◊ Use tactile experiences (sand, water, goop, slime, dough)
- ◊ Read stories to toddlers as they sit on your lap

Older Children The above ideas can be extended for use with older children. To the items in the infant and toddler lists above, you might add some of the ideas in the following list when developing relaxation ideas for preschool and school-aged children:

- ◊ Extended movement and exercise (breathing, warm-ups, tai chi, yoga)
- ◊ Progressive relaxation—learning to relax the body systematically with the breath, valuing sitting or lying still, and “just being”; quiet time for music appreciation
- ◊ Visualization—creating images in our minds to help us relax, making our own relaxation symbol, making up our own relaxation and visualization “scripts”
- ◊ Listening to extended or serial stories or chapter books
- ◊ Self-massage—learning to stroke hands and face, gentle circles at back of neck, head, and lower back
- ◊ Music and rhythm activities reflecting visualization themes using percussion instruments, soft drumming, or rhythm sticks
- ◊ Exploring textures and patterns in a range of materials—scarves, cushions, pieces of fabric that are soft and silky to touch; wool and silk for their comforting, soothing, and aesthetic qualities
- ◊ Developing human awareness and environmental awareness activities and exploring the interrelationship between the two—for example, relaxation activities outside such as lying down on the grass for a cloud visualization; making a “secret” garden at

school based on relaxation and meditation themes; texture touching activities outside; exploring environmental shapes, colors, and textures; tree hug; exploring sounds; pet rocks; observation games; environmental I-spy and bingo games—all of these increase knowledge and awareness of self and environment

Relaxation is a life skill that is just as important as all the other skills children learn in preschool and school, if not more important. The ideas contained within this book are designed as a resource and a springboard to further relaxation activities. Adults and children can develop these activities together. It is my belief that the earlier we incorporate “heart and soul” learning into our curricula—that is, learning how to relax, be calm, content, and at peace with oneself—the better life will be for the children in our care.

Learning to relax does not come easily for many adults, so we cannot expect children to learn these skills immediately. It takes time and effort to learn to relax our minds, bodies, and spirits through the tai chi and relaxation techniques offered in this book.

Life is fast paced and stressful for many children. The ideas in this book will help children and adults manage their stresses in positive and gentle ways. However, this book is not meant to be a “fix it” type of manual. It is my hope that we can teach children how to relax, be calm, breathe easily, visualize wondrous images, and accept themselves and others at an early age. In this way children can be, in some ways, prepared for stress and upset when it inevitably occurs. Many conflicts, worries, illnesses, and times of grief unexpectedly appear in all our lives. Many adults struggle to find ways to help them through these uninvited and often unthinkable times. We are often left grasping for reassurance, comfort, peace, and inner strength on these occasions. This book will help our children learn to “act” in positive ways rather than “react” to their environment and those around them. I see the learning of these skills as creating an armory that we can use when we are challenged or find ourselves off balance in life.

As well as calling on relaxation skills in troubled times, children can learn positive habits early in their lives and experience the richness and

CONCLUSION



creativity of a fluid, graceful body and an imaginative, active mind. I hope these skills will one day replace some of the mind-numbing and violent activity children witness on television and in video games. If we wish for our children to have hope, optimism, and fulfilment in their lives, we surely must help them by paving the way with ideas and practices that enhance these values. The alternative is a life of intellectual and personal mediocrity and impoverishment.

If we care enough about the health, happiness, and well-being of our children, we will make a commitment to incorporate some of the ideas in this book into the daily lives of our children.

For the cause of
worldwide peace and harmony
May it begin in the
Hearts of children
And spread.

(Fields and Boesser 1994, iv)