

# Mind Body Skills: Activities for Emotional Regulation

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**General Disclaimer:**

Various activities in this book may be activating for certain children.

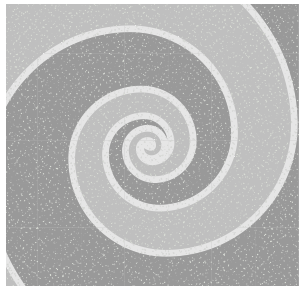
Know the background history of the child you are working with  
before using these interventions.

## About the Author

**Caelan Soma, PsyD, LMSW, ACTP**, Chief Clinical Officer, provides oversight for all clinical operations and research at Starr Commonwealth. Dr. Soma provides trauma assessment and trauma informed, resilience focused intervention for youth utilizing evidence-based practices, including Starr's SITCAP® model programs.

She has been involved in helping with the aftermath of disasters such as Sandy Hook, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and others. She is has authored several books, the most recent, *10 Steps to Create a Trauma Informed School* and *Healing the Experience of Trauma: A Path to Resilience*.

She is an internationally acclaimed speaker and trainer, and is the instructor for many Starr courses, including Children of Trauma and Structured Sensory Interventions. She received her doctorate in clinical psychology at California Southern University, where she received the 2013 CalSouthern President's Award.



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## Introduction

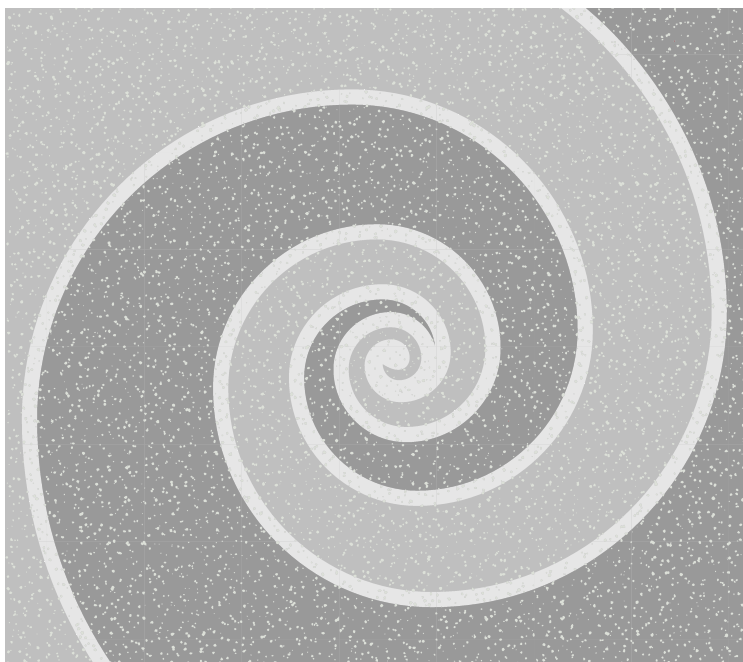
My dissertation included a research project that evaluated a mind body skills program to determine its effects on the improvement of impaired emotional-regulation, a common symptom in youth with posttraumatic stress symptoms and reactions. The 10-session program consisted of mind-body interventions aimed to address the adverse impact posttraumatic stress has on the physiologic responses in the body. Activities included drawing and expressive art, guided imagery, mindfulness meditation, deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Results of this program suggest that mind-body interventions decrease posttraumatic stress symptoms and increase emotional regulation in children and youth. Based upon these results, I have created this resource for practitioners to use with children and adolescents ages 3-17 years old using a collection of the activities used in the research project as well as additional activities to support each mind-body skill.

### About this Book

This resource contains five main sections for each category of mind-body skill activities: breath work and movement, mindfulness, guided imagery, expressive art activities, songs/finger plays (3-5 year olds) and writing/journaling activities (6-12 and 13-17 year olds). In each section there are several mind body skill activities divided into three age ranges; early childhood (3-5 year olds), school age (6-12 year olds) and adolescents (13-17 year olds). Each activity includes directions, required materials and most include worksheets or coloring pages to support the activity.

As with all our activities, please use the activities that are developmentally appropriate for the child. For example, if you are working with a ten-year old child, but developmentally they are closer to a five-year old, you may want to select activities from the younger age category. You may also find that some activities in more than one age range are appropriate. It is okay to use any activity that you feel is developmentally appropriate and to overlap between the sections. Several of the adolescent activities are appropriate and beneficial to use with adults. The activities in this resource can be used alone or they may be incorporated into any of Starr's trauma intervention programs for individuals or groups. All of the activities are excellent ways to start and end sessions or can be completed in 15-20 minutes when time is limited. Feel free to repeat activities that are of particular interest or benefit to a child. Practice and repetition are encouraged. If you have any questions please email me anytime at [somac@starr.org](mailto:somac@starr.org).

*Caelan Soma*



## Breathing and Movement

*“Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky.  
Conscious breathing is my anchor.”*

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk

*“The body says what words cannot.”*

Martha Graham, American Modern Dancer and Choreographer

## **Breathing and Movement**

Breathwork refers to many forms of conscious alteration of breathing, such as connecting in-breath with out-breath, or intentionally changing the pace or deepness of breath. Breathwork is something that children of all ages can learn and practice. For younger children, it is fun to use props like pinwheels and bubbles to support breathwork activities. Adolescents will enjoy learning that they can practice breathing activities without any props and without anyone knowing they are practicing! The following breathwork activities will help you teach children how they can use their breath to calm themselves and to notice various body sensations.

Movement is an act of changing physical location or position. Engaging children in movement activities helps them to become more aware of their bodies and the sensations within their bodies. This awareness is the first step to mastering emotional regulation.

Start by teaching breathwork and movement activities to children and then practice them on a regular basis. Encourage them to practice the activities on their own or with the help of their parent/caregiver. The goal is for them to easily engage in breathing or movement changes when they need help regulating their emotions or behaviors. The more they practice, the easier it will become for them to call upon these resources during uncomfortable or overwhelming situations.

For each breathwork and movement activity, ask children to notice how their bodies feel before and after the activities. Compare the similarities and differences.

## Breathing Activity for Ages 3-5

## Deep Breathing and Awareness of Breath

### Directions:

For this activity, the child can sit on the floor or in a chair. If the child is sitting in a chair, invite them to sit comfortably and to put their hands in their lap. If the child is sitting on the floor, ask them to cross their legs in the crisscross applesauce position and put their hands in their laps.



Demonstrate for them how to take one deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Encourage them to watch your shoulders and chest rise when you breathe in and fall when you breathe out. After you demonstrate this 2 or 3 times, invite them to try. *Breathe in the air through your nose 1-2-3 and then blow out the air from your mouth 1-2-3.* Repeat this 3 times.



Now, invite the child to go back to normal breathing. Encourage the child to pay attention to the little rises in their shoulders and chests when they breathe in and the gentle fall of their shoulders and chest when they breathe out.



## Breathing and Movement Activity for Ages 3-5

**Bunny Breath****Directions:**

The child can sit or stand for this breathing activity.



*We are going to pretend like we are little bunnies. Can you wiggle your nose like a bunny? Show the child how you wiggle your nose like a bunny. Great job! Now, I am going to teach you how to breathe like a bunny.*



*Demonstrate for the child by taking three quick sniffs in through your nose and then breathe out one long breath from your nose. Now you take three quick sniffs in through your nose and then breathe out one long breath from your nose. Very good!*



*Invite the child to practice sniffing like a bunny for various things in your environment (select a few favorite toys, books or plush animals). Now let's sniff like bunny rabbits for some of our toys and books.*

Invite the child to color in the image of the bunny.

Breathing and Movement



**Breathing and Movement Activity for Ages 6-12****Breath Awareness****Directions:**

Read the following excerpt from Thich Nhat Hanh (2008):



*"With each in-breath, we can notice we are breathing in. With each out-breath, we can notice we are breathing out. When we breathe like this, our body and our mind come together. When our body and mind are together, we are capable of living more fully. We are able to enjoy what is going on in and around us in each moment."*



*Notice your in-breath and notice your out-breath. Just notice the pace of your own breathing. Do this for a few breaths. Now, allow your in-breath to come down all the way into your belly. Then exhale your out-breath completely. Continue to breathe slowly, aware of each in-breath and out-breath.*

**Breathing and Movement Activity for Ages 6-12****Smell the Flowers Breath****Directions:**

The child can sit during this activity. A nice addition is to have soft music playing in the background as you guide the activity and the child colors.



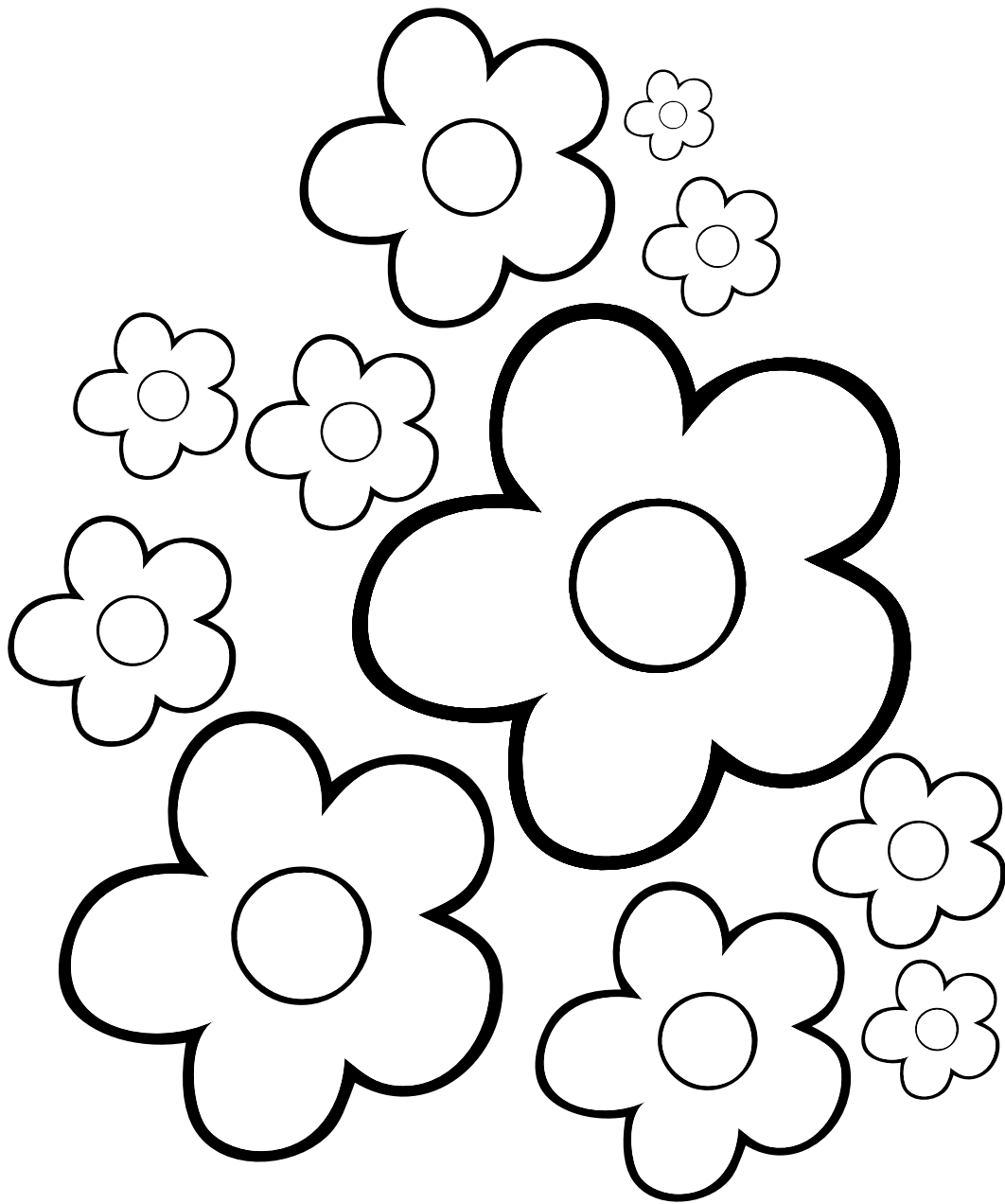
*Imagine that you smell a beautiful flower. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.*

Repeat 3 times.



*Very good, now take your time and color in these flowers. As you color pay attention to your breathing.*

Breathing and Movement



**Breathing and Movement Activity for Ages 13-17****Deep Breathing****Directions:**

Invite the teen to close his/her eyes and focus solely on breathing.



*Breathe calmly through your nose. Place one hand on your stomach and focus on the rising and falling of your stomach with each breath. As you take a breath and your stomach fills with air, your stomach should expand. As you release a breath, your stomach will fall. Focus on the rising and falling of your stomach. If your chest is rising and falling, you are not yet engaged in deep breathing and need to focus on inhaling air all the way into your stomach.*



*Let's "count up" while breathing in 1-2-3-4-5-6 and "count down" while breathing out 6-5-4-3-2-1. Very good! Let's practice this a few more times.*

Repeat 3-5 times.

## Breathing and Movement Activity for Ages 13-17

**Stretching (Head, Neck, Shoulders and Hands)****Directions:**

*In this stretch activity we will try to release tension and stretch our muscles. Take a deep breath in 1-2-3-4 and breathe out 4-3-2-1 releasing tension. Continue to breathe in for a count of four and out for a count of four throughout the stretching exercises.*



*Let's start by stretching and relaxing your neck and shoulders. Turn your head to the right, gently looking over your right shoulder. Breathe in 1-2-3-4 and out 4-3-2-1. Now move your head so you are looking forward. Okay, good! Now, turn your head to the left while gently looking over your left shoulder. Breathe in as you look over your left shoulder 1-2-3-4 and out 4-3-2-1 as you move your head back to the facing forward position. Turn again to the right, and now look forward and turn to the left and back to facing forward. Take a deep breath in 1-2-3-4*



*Facing straight ahead, exhale as you look down 4-3-2-1. Bring your chin toward your chest and look down slowly. Allow the muscles on the back of your neck to lengthen as you move your chin closer to your chest. Allow your head to hang forward, gently stretching the muscles. Breathe slowly in 1-2-3-4 and out 4-3-2-1. Now raise your chin and look straight ahead again. Very good! Breathe in as you look up and raise your chin up as you gaze toward the ceiling. As you exhale, feel the muscles along the front of your neck lengthen. Relax your head backward and continue to look toward the sky. Breathe in 1-2-3-4 and out 4-3-2-1. Very*

*good! Now return your head the facing forward position. Breathe in 1-2-3-4*



*Now, look down one more time. Exhale as you allow the weight of your head to gently stretch the muscles of your neck as you relax your head forward. Don't force this position, just relax into this position of looking down with your chin toward your chest and continue breathing as you feel your neck muscles relaxing further. Now return your head the facing forward position. And now inhale 1-2-3-4 as you look up again and relax your head back while you feel the length of your neck, stretching out your muscles gently. Breathe out 4-3-2-1. Now return your head the facing forward position.*



*Take another deep breath in 1-2-3-4 and bring your shoulders up toward your ears. Raise them up and then lower your shoulders as you exhale 4-3-2-1. Raise your shoulders again and lower them, allowing the muscles down the sides of your neck and the top of your shoulders to lengthen. Roll your shoulders in forward circles. Rotate them forward 1-2-3-4 times. Good. Now, change directions and rotate your shoulders backwards 1-2-3-4 times. Rest your shoulders now. Feel how much more relaxed your shoulders feel.*



*Now breathe in through your mouth as you stretch your jaw by opening your mouth wide and feel the muscles stretching 1-2-3-4. Now breathe out 4-3-2-1 and close your mouth but let your jaw drop slightly so your teeth are not touching allowing your jaw to be loose and relaxed.*



*The last area we are going to stretch and relax to relieve tension is your hands. Clench your hands into tight fists... hold.... and relax. Let your hands be limp. Now open your hands very wide, stretching your fingers out wide and bring your arms forward and out to the sides, raising them above your head. Breathe in 1-2-3-4 and now breathe out 4-3-2-1 as you relax your arms and hands, releasing the tension and letting them go limp.*



*Shake out the tension as you gently shake both arms. Very good! You have stretched your shoulders, neck, face and hands!*

You can stop here or you can continue to stretch the rest of your body by following the next stretching activity.

**Purchase the full resource at**  
**[starr.org/mbsa](http://starr.org/mbsa)**