

Emotional Healing & Self-Esteem

*Inner-life skills of relaxation, visualisation and
meditation for children and adolescents*



Mark Pearson

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and meditation for children and adolescents*

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Using this book

Presenters should always refer to Chapter Three, 'A Practical Guide for Presenters' before embarking on the exercises.

The ideal way to prepare to use this work is for presenters to gather with a few friends or colleagues and explore the exercises together. The exchange of insights, interpretations, results and difficulties offers the best opportunity of expanded understanding. This provides more clarity on how to introduce the inner-life skills and program their progression for particular groups.

A few exercises have been adapted from material in *Emotional Release for Children* by Mark Pearson and Patricia Nolan (ACER 1995).

The author

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He is the author of the first Australian book on Transpersonal Breathwork: *From Healing to Awakening* (1991) and has co-authored *Emotional First-Aid for Children* (1991) and *Emotional Release for Children* (1995). His book *The Healing Journey* (1997) outlines the frameworks and modalities of ERC for adults.

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Preface

This book is partly a response to those parents, teachers and counsellors who have enthusiastically taken up the challenge of bringing elements of Emotional Release Counselling (ERC) into their daily contact with children, and have asked for more. It is also an expression of the energy, creativity and commitment of the members of the Australian Emotional Release Counsellors Association who have contributed to much of this material.

While working with teachers, counsellors, pastoral care workers and parents in ERC training courses around Australia I have been constantly impressed by the readiness for and interest in personal development in professional settings. The majority of those who come to courses and workshops express a dual interest in professional and personal development, and place the emphasis on their personal growth. 'I know that whatever I get from this for myself will really help the children I work with. So, I'm here for myself' they often say.

It is as if to become effectively altruistic we first need to understand and take care of ourselves. Self-awareness is the first step in caring for ourselves. Personal development is the ongoing work of self-awareness, emotional healing and the expression of new creativity. The exercises in this book are designed to meet this growing hunger for a deeper dimension in the inner life.

Many have found that as their own efforts towards self-development have come alive there has been a corresponding interest in self-discovery expressed by the children and adolescents they work with. There is then a need for more resources, more direction and more creativity. This book aims to support that creativity, and possibly lead you to its source.

Teaching children and adolescents inner-life skills for personal development is a major step in caring for the growth of their personality. These exercises and meditations will enable them to deal more skilfully with the emotional and psychological challenges of living in the world today.

The ideas and exercises here are drawn from several traditions as well as from the personal experiences of the contributors, who are all experienced and qualified in the areas of education, counselling or spiritual direction. The ideas and exercises have the common aim of supporting interest in self-knowledge and personal growth. No one approach has been the source. It has been our experience that a creative or spiritual component exists in all children and adolescents and that—given nourishing conditions—it emerges naturally from within.

Many of us feel that, in the light of the emotional conflicts, agitation and general lack of direction of the youth in our care, approaches that may have previously been considered luxuries are now essential for personal and academic growth.

Mark Pearson
Brisbane

Introduction

Our book, *Emotional Release for Children*, introduced the methods of ERC. It was warmly welcomed by counsellors, psychologists, child-care workers, educators and parents. It was intended to support deep emotional healing in children and adolescents through the release of blocked feelings and clear ‘unfinished business’ from the past. *Emotional Release* focused on the emotional release processes that can tap into the unconscious and bring profound positive changes in a client’s psychology.

ERC has continued to become more widely studied and applied around Australia. It is now regulated by professional ERC associations and is the subject of several academic research projects.

This new book focuses on the inner-life skills component of ERC. These are intrapersonal skills that could be available to all children and adolescents as part of their basic education. Inner-life skills allow greater self-understanding, self-awareness, self-expression and self-help in the area of the inner world. This leads to a more balanced emotional outlook, a sense of self-worth and an improved ability to focus on learning tasks and developing positive relationships. The intent behind the book is to make these valuable methods more widely available.

Inner-life skills are often taught—directly and indirectly—by counsellors, and there is a rapidly growing interest from classroom teachers to include them in the school curriculum. The exercises in this book are suitable for personal development work in the classroom, during youth retreats, for families to play with, and for spiritual directors to implement as part of religious education. The exercises support emotional healing and lead to enhanced self-esteem.

CHAPTER ONE

A new view of the landscape

These forms of knowledge (the intrapersonal and the interpersonal intelligences) are of tremendous importance in many, if not all, societies in the world—forms that have, however, tended to be ignored or minimised by nearly all students of cognition.

Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind*

Introducing inner-life skills

An 8-year-old girl reported after a visualisation exercise: 'In the middle of my island was a hut. This was the home of the unicorn. The unicorn was very brave. When I pretended to be the unicorn I felt brave too. Now when my brother comes into my room to annoy me I tell him to get out, and I pretend to be the unicorn again'.

The young girl now had a new way to access a brave part of herself. She reported that sometimes her older brother did do what she asked. This was a big change. For her, the image of the unicorn—along with the dramatic unicorn poster her mother bought for her as a reminder—allowed her to shift from victim mode. Having the imagery, the language and the experience of feeling brave gave her new self-esteem and helped her create the outcome she really wanted.

There is a wide range of sources for this approach to personal development. ERC, as developed in Australia since 1987, is based on the fact that our imagination and motivation have their source in the unconscious. This inner world has a major role to play in the emotional healing and self-esteem development of the individual.

There are three main strands of ERC:

- emotional release work—usually the domain of counsellors (see *Emotional Release for Children*)
- inner-life skills—the domain of teachers, counsellors and parents
- family communication games (see Chapter 10, pages 139 to 146).

These three strands can be used together to provide a child with the best possible support for emotional healing and self-esteem development.

The main inner-life skills explored in this book are relaxation, visualisation, meditation and active imagination. They support the development of what Harvard education writer and intelligence analyst Howard Gardner calls the intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1984). They also make use of a range of activities that involve the child's mind, body, feelings and spiritual self.

Inner-life skills help children recognise their feelings and 'listen' to their inner world. These skills include becoming aware of imagery offered by the individual imagination. They help children express on the outside what is happening inside. There are seven main categories of inner-life skills that support emotional healing and personal development. They are:

- 1 self-awareness and self-knowledge includes:
- 2 learning to focus on the body
- 3 becoming more aware of the emotions
- 4 increasing awareness of beliefs about self, both positive and negative
- 5 increasing awareness of energy—flow and stasis
- 6 using relaxation, meditation, imagery, including symbol work.
- 7 understanding motivation and direction in life

- 1 Self-awareness and self-knowledge includes:
 - learning to focus on the body
 - becoming more aware of the emotions
 - increasing awareness of beliefs about self, both positive and negative
 - increasing awareness of energy—flow and stasis
 - using relaxation, meditation, imagery, including symbol work.
- 2 Understanding the unconscious includes:
 - dreamwork, working with fantasies
 - using guided reflection to review behaviour and beliefs
 - developing personal mythology from the imagination
 - awareness and reviewing of influence of cultural mythology
 - finding inner wisdom—intuition, inner guidance
 - acknowledging rites of passage.
- 3 Self-expression and communication includes using:
 - symbols as a source of creativity and self-understanding
 - line and colour
 - the written word
 - the spoken word
 - the body as a means of expression.
- 4 Managed emotional and physical release can take place:
 - solo
 - in pairs
 - in groups.
- 5 Relating to others includes:
 - recognising dynamics of group/classroom/family
 - dealing with negative reactions—projections
 - dealing with attractions
 - visualising and considering others' needs.
- 6 Supporting others includes:
 - practising active listening—partner work

- developing group awareness
- exchanging message.

7 Understanding self-direction and motivation includes:

- learning self-evaluation
- working with visualisation
- reflecting
- finding inner wisdom
- using energy creatively
- identifying hopes and directions for the future.

For decades analysts, therapists, counsellors and spiritual directors have used the symbols of our dreams, fantasies and imagination to encourage emotional health and spiritual growth. They have found that there is a logic in the way imagination chooses and presents its images, even if this logic is not immediately clear to us. Inner-life skills offer many ways to connect with the inner world and listen for guidance. They are useful for children, adolescents and adults who are looking for a resource of creativity and self-confidence. These methods can often bypass the limits of the strictly rational way of thinking.

In some cultures there are general self-discovery methods woven into community life that are available to all. There are also esoteric methods reserved for pupils who have fully utilised the communal ways and gained a hunger for further development.

In our present age where instant gratification is the norm, there is often little willingness to put considerable time and effort into learning the steps to finding the inner world. However, any effort that can slow our incessant, automatic mind and calm jangled emotions can bring benefit. An awareness that there is a range of states of centredness, or calmness, may be the first step in activating the hunger for more. It may also activate an inbuilt interest in exploring the full potential of the inner world.

In communication with the author, some religious educators have reported turning more and more to the teaching of these inner-life skills. They find that the experiential work leads to a reverence for the self and others, as well as creating conditions for more subtle experience beyond the ordinary rational level of awareness.

There can be no doubt about the present need for more awareness, more sensitivity and more knowledge about our outer world. The only place this sensitivity can come from is the inner world.

This book presumes that parents, teachers, counsellors and youth workers will be willing to try out the exercises, perhaps with a group of colleagues

or via an inservice course, before presenting them to children or adolescents. Inner-life skills exercises and personal development techniques, such as meditation, must at least be trial-run by presenters, if not thoroughly explored.

Emotional healing and self-esteem development

A 14-year-old girl, working on the last day of a three-day personal development retreat in New Zealand, found in her visualisation not a lovely animal nor a beautiful symbol, but a three-storey concrete car park! In the role-play stage of the exercise she ‘became’ the car park. It was empty, old, tired and beginning to crumble. Because her car park was on a small island it was not needed. As she played out the crumbling of the concrete pillars tears came to her eyes. ‘I haven’t been able to cry since I was a child,’ she said. ‘I was so sad yesterday in that group exercise, but a little voice inside said “stay strong!” I’m tired of being the strong one.’ She quietly allowed her tears to flow and soon explained how onerous her load of chores—as the eldest of six—was at home. When she looked again at the car park, it had, in her mind’s eye, changed to a playing field!

The imagery that comes from within the psyche during visualisation exercises always has relevance for a child’s healing and growth. Sometimes it leads to direct feelings of empowerment and self-esteem. Sometimes it shows what feelings need to be dealt with or what issues are standing in the way of being fully alive. Inner-life skills programs should always use the self-discovery approach. There should be caution about presenters interpreting symbols or imagery that arise from the exercises.

These inner-life skills exercises are ideal for classroom use and many can relate directly to school curriculum aims of developing ‘the whole child’. They support counsellors in assisting children and adolescents to find self-worth and trust in their own psyche. This trust is a prerequisite for the deeper emotional release work that many children benefit from. The relaxation and meditation approaches presented here greatly assist integration of emotional release work.

Many of the exercises in this book work well as family communication games (see pages 139 to 146 for details). Two, three or four family members gather together when and where they will not be interrupted. They make an agreement that they will respect the dignity of each family member, that they will not interpret or tell each other what to do or think or feel. During family communication games it is important for all members to receive equal time to speak and share their experience.

The exercises always work best when presenters have experienced them and personally felt their value. In so doing you bring an enthusiasm that helps children break through a possible first embarrassment stage.

Inner focus in action

A school classroom is quiet, with gentle flowing music. Twenty-six 8- and 9-year-olds are sitting cross-legged with their eyes closed. A few wriggle a little, peek around and then settle again. The teacher is describing a simple walk along the beach on a beautiful day. The words are calming, relaxing and comforting. She leads them in their minds to a quiet end of the beach where no one else comes. In their visualisation they sit and watch the waves. It is definitely time out from maths and reading. The part of their attention that is usually struggling to learn is now relaxing. The agitation, pushing, complaining and distraction of the morning has passed. There is a definite feeling of calm in the air. The children who find it most difficult to be still are sitting beside the teacher and she gently assures them with a light touch on the head.

After 15 minutes she invites them to bring their awareness back into the room, to stretch and wriggle. They then go quietly to their desks and draw. Some draw the scene they saw in their mind. Some draw shapes and colours and lines that represent the calm feeling inside them. A few write some words about how it felt to be still and quiet. Some are humming quietly to themselves. There is an atmosphere of settled focus. A debriefing follows. Each child's contribution is respected and encouraged. The others listen attentively. Soon they glide into the next lesson, using the words from the week's spelling list in sentences that go with their inner experience. This is a true story.

Creating relaxation, clarity and emotional stability

Emotional healing work, visualisation and meditation are not limited techniques. They are not just contemplating or introspection—thinking about things. They are not just mentally concentrating or limiting the range of awareness, or requesting something from a source outside. These activities are connected with active imagination, the Jungian method of following the flow of images that arise within. It can bring a new energy and lead to insights and an inner connection.

These exercises are not designed to fulfil needs of the ego. The ego, in this context, is the part of our psyche that thinks it knows everything, that protects and cuts us off from emotional and kinesthetic knowledge. The ego is always interested in doing something which is difficult because then there is a challenge. If you can battle a difficulty your ego will feel fulfilled. Surrender—a major step in all types of meditation—means a big shift for the ego.

All the exercises in this book can support children in this expansion beyond the limits of the ego. The controlling aspects of the ego work through

our set thought patterns, limited and negative beliefs about ourselves and our rigid bodies that are kept braced against both the outer and inner worlds.

Children who have not developed emotionally will find it difficult to surrender. They have to hold on to the image of who they are. With practice, however, the experience these exercises bring will help them develop and feel better about themselves. Focusing within through creative imagination and meditation is like being a witness—practising the art of detached observation. Some call it a choiceless awareness that helps us come into stillness, into a poised, neutral state and move our attention away from the inner chattering. For many this awareness of inner chatter and hidden emotions, which may drive the chattering, is painful. The time of this awareness is often a time when the ego may wish to stop further exploration and discovery. Many children may actually need to spend some time with ERC methods before they see meditation, relaxation and self-esteem work as worthwhile.

Along with this poised state there is some action: that of letting go tension, expectation, analysis, ego direction and, most importantly, letting go of a tendency to force. Forcing, striving for awareness, struggling for stillness: all these are contradictions in terms.

The state of focused creative imagination can be recognised by a sense of watchfulness. We begin with watching and connecting with body sensation, then feeling our mood and its gradual changes towards the positive. The thinking state needs to be watched, that is, the movement of revolving, automatic thoughts as they begin to slow, quieten or redouble their efforts to distract us. And under all this is the finer vibration of inner energy, the pulsing of lifeforce. All of this awareness depends on the balance between action and non-action, remaining with, or in, the moment.

All this may seem too complicated for children and adolescents, but they do quickly appreciate each little step that helps them feel more secure, confident, creative and happy. When they see that teachers or carers value these methods, interest is awakened.

It seems that a harmonious inner state is only touched on briefly by us in our busy lives. We have not been educated to give a high priority to seeking this balance. Self-awareness exercises that begin to show us our lack of inner balance are an essential step in strengthening our motivation to pursue personal development.

Many who have pursued these types of inner-life skills, and felt the advantages of physical relaxation, intellectual clarity and emotional stability, have expressed a strong wish to pass these experiences on. All around Australia educators and child-care workers are incorporating these valuable methods into their programs and interactions with children and adolescents. They are finding new areas of the curriculum that can be enhanced by using relaxation, visualisation, symbol work and meditation as a teaching tool. Together we can add a new dimension to education, a dimension needed to face the daily challenges in our hectic world.

Code of respect

It is important that you adopt an appropriate attitude when introducing inner-life skills to children and adolescents. You need to:

- Uphold children's dignity.
- Understand and respond to acting-out as a symptom of the drive towards release and wholeness. The symptom may need the right time, place and support to complete its action in a therapeutic setting.
- Honour children's timing for trusting and their willingness to participate in inner-life skills. Each psyche has its own timing and logical reasons for that timing.
- Recognise that children's resistance, apprehension, procrastination and defences against the presenter, the methods, or their own inner world have logical causes—even if these are not immediately apparent to either the child or the presenter.
- Understand that children's need to feel safe may temporarily limit the choice of exercises, depth of work or duration of exercises and cooperate with this.
- Remember that nothing in this work should add to a child's lack of self-esteem. Lack of readiness in children to proceed can be seen as a challenge for the presenter to find the approach that will create trust, *not* as an inadequacy in a child.
- Respect the spiritual autonomy of children. It should be assumed that children are spiritual beings who may not yet have language to express their inner worlds.

CHAPTER TWO

Acknowledging the silent ground

Quiet times in the classroom not only benefit learning, but also serve to acknowledge the silent ground from which language and cognition emerge.

S. I. Shapiro, *Quiet in the Classroom*

Using inner-life skills for personal development

Self-study leads to self-awareness, and self-awareness leads to self-knowledge. Self-knowledge can lead to choice, change and self-responsibility. Learning, through working with inner-life skills, some of the subtleties of how the body and mind function supports maturity. Being reconnected with the body through quiet inner focus exercises helps children become more aware of the needs of their bodies and how to take better care of themselves. Self-responsibility is a key factor in personal development. Why should young people wait until middle age to begin? Being more connected to the inner life helps us find direction for our outer life. Knowing motivation, finding calmness and understanding how we work create a stable inner base from which to make decisions.

Many children and adults let their attention wander, directed by whatever is the loudest stimulus, ignoring inner resources of creativity. Many children display short attention spans at school. There are a range of emotional and environmental factors that contribute to this. The right guidance and inner-life skills work can lead to an increased attention span.

An increase in the ability to concentrate leads to intellectual clarity and an increased readiness to learn. The author and contributors to this book have seen, and received many reports on, academic improvement over time in children who practise some form of inward focus and emotional healing. A development in inward focus leads to a more harmonious functioning of the mind, body and feelings and a general feeling of well-being. A relaxed body is part of this well-being which in turn brings improved concentration. There is also growing evidence that relaxation contributes to physical health.

Emotional stability can be another benefit of regular inner-life skills work. Children who are severely emotionally disturbed may not be able to work with stillness and quiet at first and would probably benefit greatly from some ERC (see *Emotional Release For Children*). However, finding the quiet place within, knowing it is there and even being able to return to it at times, brings a sense of hope and stability.

Bonding and group cohesion are supported when the results of self-awareness efforts are discussed and inner experiences shared. Personal development is greatly enhanced through group work.

Increased general creativity is a regular benefit of inner-life skills development. This work is also experienced and described as 'recharging your batteries'. The energy found in this work often flows naturally into expression such as singing a song, completing homework in record time, making up a story or finding new solutions to problems in life. A teacher of Year 10 students reported that the girls in her class had begun to write their own visualisation meditations. The exercises have been a boost to creative writing and to the recognition and expression of the real needs of the students.

Some cross-cultural sources

As there is no one basic source, the work here represents a growing synthesis of the offerings of Western personal growth pioneers, Eastern traditional practices and the Christian tradition of spiritual direction. (For further details see page 151.)

These inner-life skills methods come from a wide variety of sources. There is an urgent need to bring experiences of peace, calmness, balance and well-being to emotionally disturbed and agitated children and adolescents. This need has driven many of us to adapt our own experiences of both traditional and contemporary methods.

The author and the contributors have drawn on the methods of many cultures in their own personal development. Some come from the fields of spiritual direction, but present no dogma. Some come from the field of psychological and emotional healing, although they do not imply illness. Much of this work has been drawn from Jungian, Gestalt, humanistic, transpersonal and sacred psychology. This adaption and experimentation continues.

Some of the contributors to this book have found that the inner-life skills can be used with very positive benefit with children from non-Western cultures. The individual unconscious will yield insights and images that are culturally relevant for them.

Types of inner-life exercises

In a program that aims to teach personal development skills there should usually be a progression of work from simple to complex, concrete to abstract, just as there would be in an academic curriculum.

We recommend beginning instruction with simple self-awareness and relaxation (see Chapter 4). This will awaken the intrinsic interest in self-discovery and clarify motivation for further work. Self-awareness means awareness of the physical sensations of the body—for example, heat, coldness, tension, discomfort; the emotional mood—for example, depressed, sad, happy; and the inclination of energies—for example, restlessness, excitement, a feeling of deadness. The relaxation work allows the crossover from outer focus to inner focus, from doing to simply ‘being’.

Only use the relaxation methods if they appear to be creating a positive result on a child’s activity level or emotional state. If children are very agitated, need to run or jump, or are expressing destructively because of anger, they may become more agitated if required to remain still. In this case it would be more beneficial to use the active meditations, especially the bioenergetics, to release agitation (see Chapter 5). When using active meditations, as with all approaches, remember to move through the steps of: