

***Qigong* to Empower Our Youth**

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"The more we witness our emotional reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain." - Pema Chödrön

Qigong is an ancient form of exercise and meditation used to promote longevity and health. This practice has traditionally been used by adults to balance the body through mindfulness, focused breathing and gentle movements. We can teach these basic principles of *Qigong* to our youth, to enhance their confidence and self-esteem, reducing aggressive behavior and diminishing violence in our schools.

When teaching *Qigong* to adults, simple movements are quickly learned. As a result the mind calms, the body settles and the adult becomes more aware of his/her emotional state. These calming benefits are both immediate and long term as regular *Qigong* exercise will have a cumulative beneficial effect.

These same basic exercises can be adapted for children easily and the result is an awakened and empowered emotional state. Through this awareness, the child becomes more confident and able to balance his/her own emotions when feeling triggered and agitated. Throughout the normal course of growth and development children face daily emotional challenges. It is through *Qigong* education a child is given a chance to choose, in moments of agitation, how they wish to respond. This is empowering for our youth and has provided a chance to diminish aggression and ultimately an alternative to violence and aggression as a path of expression.

Qigong when taught to children serves several goals:

- A mind calming exercise. *Qigong* movements allow a child to come to a slower, quieter place through the child's own efforts. This promotes a sense of independence and fosters confidence.
- Stress reduction. Simple mindfulness exercises such as rubbing one's hands together until heat is felt, then placing those activated hands on the lower belly, helps settle an agitated child, creating an overall improved sense of well-being.
- Redirect aggressive hostile energy and "acting out." *Qigong* exercises are a method the child can return to over and over again - whenever they feel triggered or "out of control." Initially this will require adult instruction and, guidance and through intervention. By encouraging a frustrated child to pause, come back to a sensation inside his/her own body, and only then attempt to express his/her emotions, the result will be clearer more effective communication. Eventually the child will have the capacity ability to turn to these centering exercises when they feel distressed without adult reminders.

It is important to encourage *Qigong* mindfulness exercises at an early age to give our children an opportunity to feel the strong emotions that are part of the natural maturing process, while offering a pathway to channel their emotions in a positive way. At a time when anti-bullying strategies are being emphasized in our schools, *Qigong* is a strategy that will guide children toward new pathways and

coping skills to navigate their environment, reducing hostility and diminishing violence in our schools.

In "*Qigong* for Schoolchildren: A Pilot Study," the feasibility of integrating *Qigong* in school lessons was highlighted. Improvements in social behavior and grades were recorded as inappropriate behavior decreased, compared to the control group.

In presenting the basic principles of *Qigong* to children, the practitioner must be willing to be creative and imagine him/herself as the age of the child being instructed.

Grounding exercises using visualization and imagery can be used in both adults and children to awaken Kidney 1 (*Yongquan*), "The Bubbling Spring." For example for adults, "You are on a beautiful white sandy beach, on a warm clear day. The waves crash in and retreat as your feet sink deeper into the wet sand. You can feel the cool wet sand between each of your toes as the calmness you feel is drawn in with a gentle inhale. On the next exhale your feet sink deeper into the cozy safeness of the sand."

This exercise can easily be reframed for children, "You are now a strong and brave super hero or princess. Imagine your special powers are in the sticky glue of your feet. Pretend your foot cannot lift off is suctioned to the ground. Imagine yourself walking up the castle walls with your sticky foot power to save the day!" Both the adult and the child have an opportunity to slow down and feel awareness near Kidney 1 (*Yongquan*), as the mind settles, rooting the spirit, and building a strong foundation of awareness.

Another exercise that is easily experienced by both adults and children is the activation of *Qi* in the palms of the hands through the awareness of sensation. "Rub your hands together until you feel heat. Now move your hands slowly apart and then you will feel buzzing." Children find this exploration into body sensations, very funny and entertaining, as they can quickly "get it" and then bathe their own bodies with the "buzzing hands."

Simple *Qigong* exercises can boost self-esteem, confidence and independence in our youth. Through this type of education, we will give our children the strategies necessary to promote lifelong self-awareness and vitality while reducing aggression and violence in our schools.

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