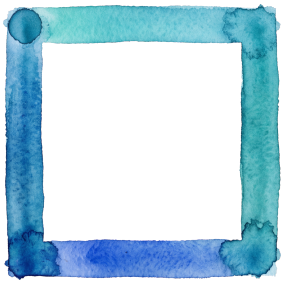
Helping Children Practice Calm Breathing



A practical companion to the activity sheet **Square Breathing: Let's Find Our Rhythm**, for parents, caregivers, educators, and clinicians.

What is the idea?

Paced breathing means deliberately slowing the breath and giving it a steady, comfortable rhythm, kept by a count, a sound, or, here, a finger moving around a square.

Paying attention to breathing gives a child something simple and concrete to do with their body, and a routine they can come back to. The square is a way to remember the rhythm. It is not the skill itself, and the exact shape matters less than slow, easy breathing.

How to introduce it

Keep it light, and show before you ask. For example:

> "I found a way to go around a square with my breathing. Want to see? I'll do it first. You can try it with me, or just watch."

> "Let's breathe in along the top, and out along the bottom. It doesn't have to be perfect."

When to practice

Start when things are relatively calm: after a story, before a meal, at the end of the day. Something a child already knows is easier to reach for later.

A child who is very upset is unlikely to want to learn something new in that moment. Comfort and connection come first; the square can wait for another time. A minute or two is plenty, and short, frequent practice is easier to keep up than long sessions.

Ways to make it easier

- Trace the square on the activity sheet, or draw one on any paper.
- Watch an adult go around first, as many times as they like.
- Move a finger around any square shape nearby: a book, a window, a tabletop.
- Skip the pauses and keep moving.
- Follow a comfortable personal rhythm instead of a count.
- Trace without breathing along at first. The breathing can come later, or not at all.

If a child doesn't want to join in

That is fine. Watching is a way of practicing, and so is changing the activity or saying no. Offer to do it yourself while they watch, try a different shape, or leave it for another day. Pressure can turn a calming activity into one more demand.

Common mistakes to avoid

- **Asking for deep or forceful breaths.** Slow and easy is the aim; big breaths can feel uncomfortable.
- **Requiring a breath hold.** The pause is optional. A child can keep moving around the square.
- **Turning it into a performance.** There is nothing to get right, and no need to correct technique.
- **Expecting it to work the same way for every child,** or every time. Some children prefer other ways to settle.
- **Carrying on when a child feels dizzy, lightheaded, or uncomfortable.** Stop, and let them breathe normally.

In different settings

AT HOME

Tie it to a routine that already exists, such as the end of a bedtime story, and let the child choose whether to trace, watch, or suggest something else.

IN A CLASSROOM OR GROUP

Offer it as an optional transition, for example after recess. Everyone traces at their own pace, no one needs to match anyone else's breathing, and watching is welcome.

IN A CLINICAL SETTING

It can be demonstrated as an optional, supportive activity during a visit. It is not a way to assess or manage breathing symptoms, and it does not replace evaluation of breathing difficulty or distress.

Evidence and limitations

Slow, deep, diaphragmatic, and paced breathing have been studied in children and adolescents. Some small studies report encouraging results, such as lower self-reported anxiety, but effects are not universal.

The square, often called box breathing, is one equal-count pattern of paced breathing. It has not been shown to be uniquely beneficial for children. We use it because equal sides make a rhythm easy to remember.

This guide and its activity sheet are an educational adaptation of paced-breathing ideas. They have not themselves been tested as a treatment. A summary of the research, with its sources, is on the Evidence page of the Building Blocks Books website, under Paced breathing.