

Calming Activities



**10 Activities That Help Children
Relax Mind & Body & Develop
Self-Regulation Skills**

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Did you know that relaxation is a learned skill? Not everybody realizes this, but it is. And it's a skill that children should begin to acquire in early childhood – for a lot of reasons. Among them is the research showing that stress is detrimental to learning, so relaxation techniques can help improve a child's early education experiences. Moreover, by calming the nervous system and loosening muscles, relaxation exercises promote better sleep and boost the immune system.

The late Clare Cherry, in her book *Think of Something Quiet*, wrote that being able to relax can make serenity a part of children's lives, helping them learn “they can be in control of their own bodies and feelings rather than having to let their bodies and feelings control them.” This is a big part of self-regulation, necessary for so much in life.

In addition to the relaxation exercises offered here, there are other simple activities that typically calm children. Coloring is one of them, as long as there's no pressure whatsoever to color in a certain way. Coloring, painting, and drawing *with no expectations* can focus children's attention and can be very soothing, particularly if you dim the lights a bit and perhaps play some peaceful music. Similarly, molding playdough or putty can help children de-stress.

The activities that follow focus on breath and the contraction and release of muscles – in a way young children can understand!

#1

Being Balloons

Talk to the children about balloons slowly inflating and deflating. Better yet, if you have a balloon available, show it! Then demonstrate inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth.

Invite the children to pretend to be a balloon (any color at all!), slowly inflating by breathing in through the nose. Once fully inflated, the “balloon” begins to deflate by letting air out through the mouth.

Repeat only a couple of times to avoid hyperventilation!

Curriculum Connections: Inflation & deflation are *science* concepts. You might also include a discussion about the lungs as part of the activity to further connect it to science.



#2 Being Balloons II

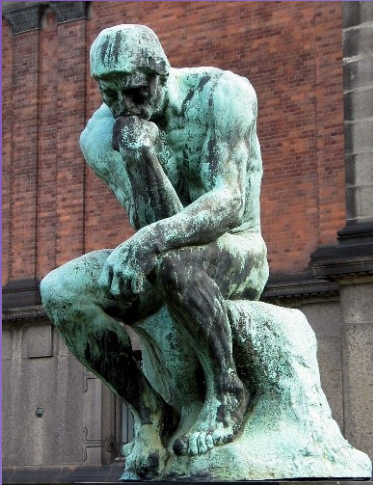


An alternative to the first activity is to invite the children to lie on their back. Placing hands on their belly, which they imagine is a balloon, they feel the balloon fill as they inflate (breathe in through the nose) and empty as they deflate (breathe out through the mouth).

Curriculum Connections: Inflation & deflation are *science* concepts. You might also include a discussion about the lungs as part of the activity to further connect it to science.

#3

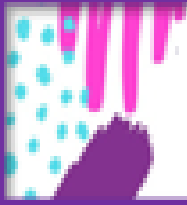
Statues & Rag Dolls



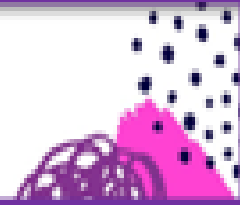
Talk to the children about statues and rag dolls. Ask them what they think of when they imagine statues and rag dolls. What would it feel like to be a statue? A rag doll?

With the children lying or standing, ask them to demonstrate, alternately, being a statue and a rag doll. Continue the pattern for a while, always ending with the rag doll!

Curriculum Connections: The contraction & release of muscles makes this a *science* experience.



#4 Contract & Release



We may not be able to instruct children to contract and release muscles, but we can *inspire* them to contract and release muscles by giving them specific assignments.

As the children are lying or sitting, invite them to perform the following actions, repeating each two or three times:

- Bring your shoulders as close to your ears as you can. Hold while I count to 3, and then let them go.
- Open your mouth as wide as it will go. After I count to 3, press your lips together really tightly. After I count to 3 again, smile.
- Close your eyes and squeeze them really tightly. After I count to 3, open them wide.
- Clasp your hands and squeeze your fingers together really tightly. After I count to 3, let them go.

Curriculum Connections: The contraction & release of muscles makes this a *science* experience. The body-part identification further involves science. Counting is an element of *math*.

#5 Push!



Invite the children to each find a space at a wall and to face it. Then ask them to use their whole body – arms, legs, and back muscles – to push against the wall as though trying to move it, while you count to 10. You then count to 10 again, during which time they stop pushing and breathe deeply. Repeat a couple of times, always ending with the breathing!

Curriculum Connections: Resistance & the function of the muscles are *science* concepts, while *math* is addressed with the counting.

#6 Birthday Candles

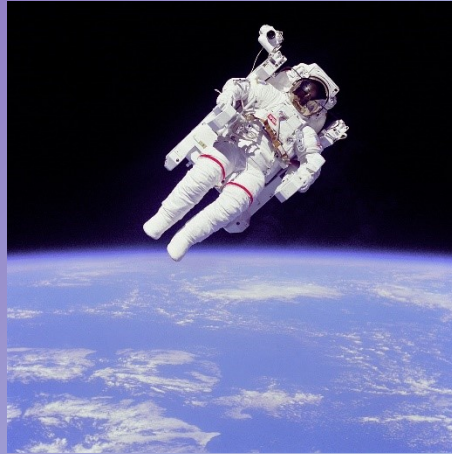
Invite each child to hold up the fingers of one hand. Ask them to imagine that each finger is a candle on a birthday cake. Then, one at a time, they blow out each candle, using a long breath (as opposed to a quick puff). As each candle is extinguished, that finger curls back down toward the palm.

Curriculum Connections:

You can add *math* to this activity by counting the five candles, both when they first appear & then one at a time as they disappear. This is also a fine-motor exercise, which will eventually contribute to writing (*emergent literacy*).



#7 Robots & Astronauts



Talk to the children about the inflexibility (stiffness) of robots and the weightlessness of astronauts floating in outer space. Ask them to demonstrate first one and then the other. Repeat these alternating requests several times, always ending with the astronaut.

Curriculum Connections: *Science* is involved in exploring the contraction & release of muscles. Also, if you have a discussion about the job of being an astronaut or the people who make robots, you'll bring in *social studies*.

#8 Breath Rhythms



Invite the children to make a huge body shape by starting small and then breathing in slowly, letting the body “grow” with the inhale. The children then slowly exhale, curling in toward the center of the body. Repeat this process until the children have grasped it, at which point you can ask them to do it even more slowly.

Curriculum Connections: Asking children to focus on the breath constitutes *science*. You can take it further by initiating a discussion about the lungs.

#9 Breath Rhythms II



A more challenging version of the previous activity is to ask the child to breathe in as though “growing” against some resistance and to breathe out as though the resistance is gone.

Only try this activity once the children understand the previous one – and it’s okay to demonstrate!

Curriculum Connections: As with Activity #8, asking children to focus on the breath constitutes *science*.

#10 Tight & Loose



Ask the child to make their body as tight as possible, bunching up the fists and hitching the shoulders up toward the ears. Count aloud from 1 to 5, at which point you invite them to make her body as loose as possible. Repeat this a few times.

Curriculum Connections: Counting is a simple *math* activity, while any consideration or discussion of what the muscles are doing brings in *science*.

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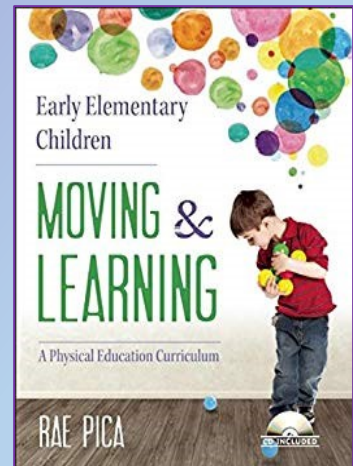
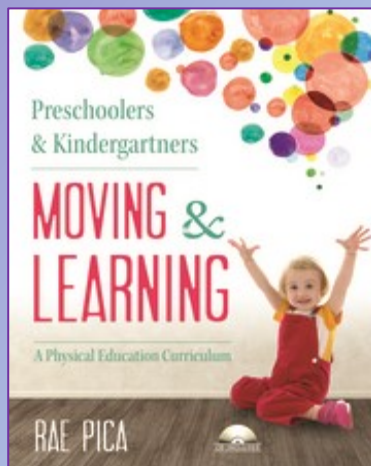
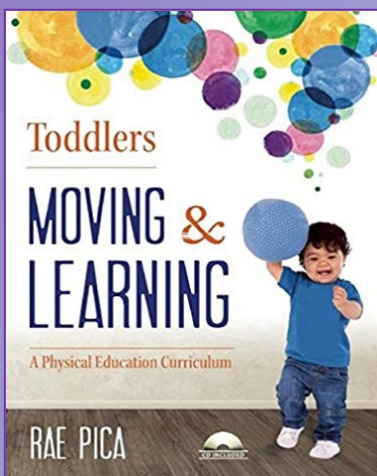
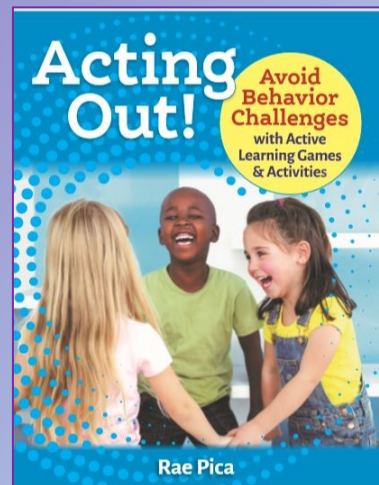
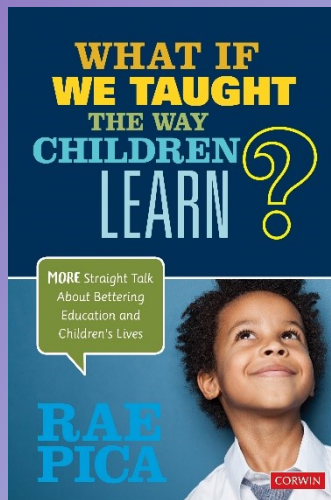
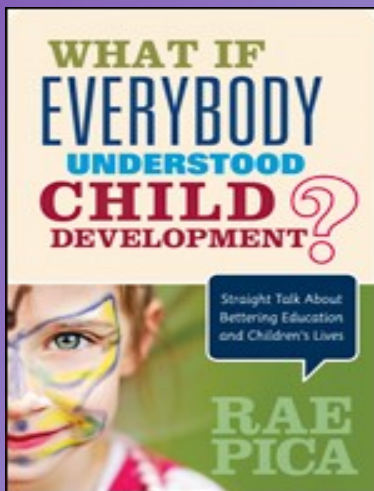
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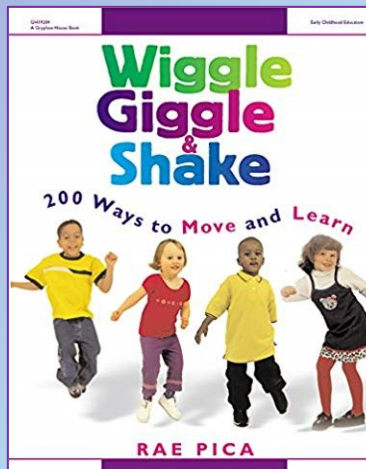
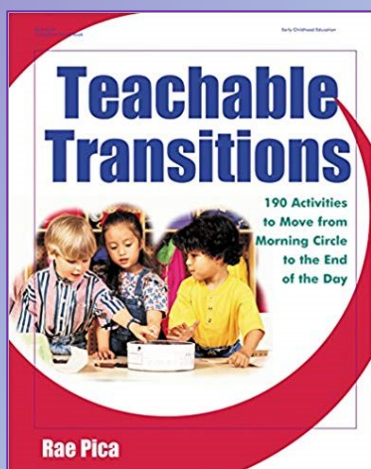
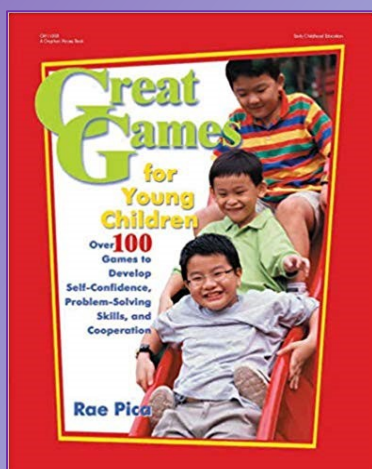
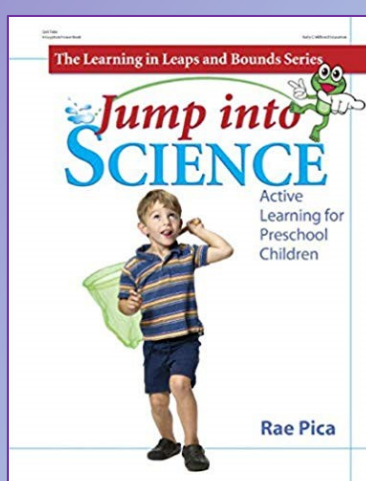
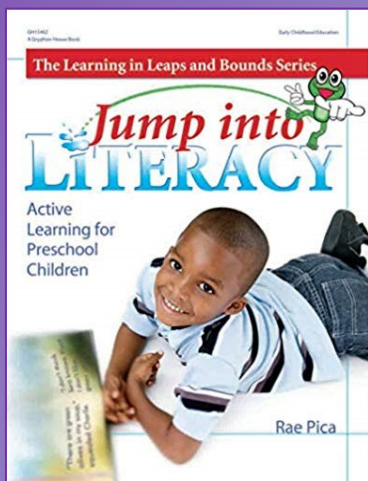
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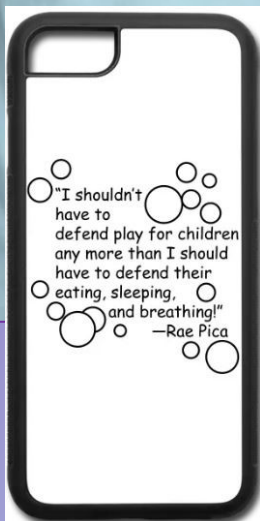


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RAE PICA



Rae has been an early childhood education consultant since 1980. Dedicated to developing and educating the whole child, Rae is the author of 21 books, including the text *Experiences in Movement and Music* (in its 5th edition), and two of her latest books, *What If We Taught the Way Children Learn?: More Straight Talk About Bettering Education and Children's Lives* and the award-winning *Acting Out! Avoid Behavior Challenges with Active Learning Games & Activities*.

Rae is a former adjunct instructor for the University of New Hampshire and is currently a blogger, online course creator, and popular presenter, both virtually and in person. The National Association for Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, state WIC organizations, Eric Jensen's Learning Brain Expo, universities and colleges, and education conferences, resource and referral agencies, and schools in 46 states and Canada are among those who have invited Rae to address their groups.

As a consultant, Rae has shared her expertise with such groups as

- ✓ *Sesame Street* Research Department
- ✓ Head Start Bureau
- ✓ Centers for Disease Control
- ✓ President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
- ✓ Nickelodeon's *Blue's Clues*
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