Speech and Language Therapy Advice

BREATHEING

Breathing is something that we all do and generally do not think about. However, sometimes we need to pay attention to our breathing or become aware of it. This is known as bringing it under voluntary control. This happens in activities such as public speaking and singing.

What can go wrong with breathing in?

- There can be a build up of tension in your upper chest.

- The movements in your shoulders and neck can be too big. You might put in too much effort or try to get extra air by snatching breath. We often think that good breathing involves lifting our chest and shoulders. This is wrong and can lead to a build up of tension.

- If you do not breathe at the right time you can run out of air leading to breathy voice and a build up of tension.

- You might begin to use your breath incorrectly. This can mean you use up the air too quickly or breathe in again too soon.

Skills to practise:
A few simple changes can often make all the difference.

- Make sure that you are standing or sitting well. You should stand/sit tall with your shoulders back. Do not allow your tummy to slump down as this reduces the lung space that you can use easily. Think about where you position props, words, music etc so that you can read it and maintain a good posture.

- Learn how to breathe in and out correctly in a relaxed manner, so that you can feel when you are doing things right. You need to learn to feel when you are using all your lung space.

- Lung capacity (the amount of air that your lungs can hold) is something that can grow. It is important to practise good breathing to help you increase your lung capacity. Physical Activity is also important as you develop better lung capacity as you get fit.

- Be prepared. Think about how much air you need for different situations. Look at the song you are going to sing or speech you are going to make and work out where you should breathe. Our breathing tends to change in stressful situations, becoming shallow and inefficient. Learn to recognise when this is happening and try to practise calm breathing as a skill.
Breathing in should be quiet and you can normally get adequate amounts of air into your lungs by breathing through your nose. You should not need to put effort into breathing. Think about breathing out, and breathing in will happen by itself.

**Breathing exercises:**

The most important step is to learn how to fill your lungs in a relaxed manner. You need to be able to use your diaphragm (a muscle that lies across the bottom of your rib cage) to increase the capacity of you lungs and it can take a little while to learn how to do this easily. Here are two ways to practise:

1. If possible stand in front of a long mirror. Make sure that you are feeling relaxed. Place your hands on either side of your waist with your fingers spread at the front and pointing towards your tummy button and your thumbs behind and pointing towards your back. Press firmly with your hands, as though you were trying to make them meet in the middle, and breathe out. Keep this hand position and take a breath in. Thinking about the air flowing down to where your hands are and watch/feel the gap between your fingertips grow. Check you shoulder movement. Your shoulders should stay low and relaxed. You do not need to raise your shoulders to fill your lungs.

2. Stand, sit tall or lie in a relaxed manner. Place one hand on the soft upper bit of your tummy just inside your lower ribs and the other on your chest. Breathe in gently through your nose. You should feel the lower hand move, whilst the upper hand stays still. Breathe out. Repeat this and focus on the gentle movement of the lower hand. This is a great way to practise calm diaphragmatic breathing.

Once you have become aware of how to breathe down to your diaphragm, breathe out before you begin, then breathe in gently through your nose and breathe our slowly through your mouth until a smooth and relaxed rhythm has been established. Some people find it helpful to count, eg. breathe in for a count of three and out for a count of three.

You are now ready to develop your breathing skills to fit in with the demands of talking and singing.

- Quickly take a breath in (on a count of two) and then breathe out saying “ssss”. Try to make the “ssss” long. Remember to think about your neck, shoulders and chest and make sure that they stay relaxed. Practise this until you find it easy and can make a good long “ssss”.

- Now you need to learn to change the way in which you make the “ssss”. Breathe in and this time, instead of keeping the sound constant, start with a quiet “ssss” and gradually make it louder, so that it you hear “ssssssssss”.

- Repeat the exercise the other way round. Begin with a loud “s” and then make it quieter eg. “ssssssssssss”.

- Now repeat the exercise, but make a quiet, noisy, quiet pattern, so you hear “ssssssSSSSSSSSssss”.
Finally, you can try complicated patterns in which you switch between quiet and noisy “s”, eg. “sSSSsSSSSsSSSSsSSSSsSSSS”.

Once you are confident using “s” you can change the sound that you use. Try “f” or “sh” and then move on to noisier sounds such as “z” or “v”.

**Experiment with breath pressures.**
This can also help you to improve your breathing techniques.

- Take a breath in and then imagine gently blowing a feather off your hand.
- Imagine keeping the feather airborne for as long as possible - or try with a real feather. Make sure that you do not become tense towards the end.
- Imagine blowing out four candles on a cake (with short, quick blows). It can be fun to try this with real candles, or pretend that your fingers can be knocked down with a quick blow.
- Now practise blowing out six candles on a cake with one long blow.
- Imagine blowing out ten candles on a cake (using varying pressure).