Progressive muscle relaxation is easy to teach to children. There are several techniques available, but here is one that is quite effective for beginners. As children progress through this technique, they’ll pay attention to each muscle group, taking note of the difference between tense muscles and relaxed muscles. Read each set of directions slowly, using a calming tone in your voice. It’s important not to rush through them.

1. Close your eyes. Breathe in deeply through your nose. Pause and silently count to three. Now, let out your breath very slowly, as if you’re giving a long sigh. Repeat x 3

2. Next, we’ll begin to relax the muscles in your body. Pretend that you have an orange in your right hand and squeeze as hard as you can. (Hold the squeeze for about five seconds.) Pay attention to the tension in your muscles. Now, drop the orange and let your muscles relax. (Repeat for the left arm.)

3. Now, stretch your arms high above your head and back as far as you can without hurting yourself. Now, let your arms drop. Don’t try to stop them. Just let them fall. See how good that feels? Now, reach for the ceiling. Stretch higher. Higher! Go as high as you can. Then pull back. (Hold for three to five seconds.) Now let your arms drop to your side. Doesn’t that feel good?

4. Now, let’s work on your jaw muscles. We’re going to pretend that you have a hard sweet in your mouth, and you’re going to try as hard as you can to bite through it. Bite hard. Harder! Now, relax your jaw muscles. Let’s try it again. (Repeat.) Now, relax. Feel the tension melt away in your entire body.

5. We’re going to work on your face and nose. Scrunch up your nose as tight as you can, making lots of wrinkles in your face. Don’t laugh! Just keep scrunching. Now relax. Let’s try it again; scrunch harder. Harder! Relax. Notice how relaxed your face feels.

6. We’re moving to your tummy now. For this exercise, you’re going to squeeze your belly as hard as you can, making you look as skinny as possible. Now squeeze…squeeze…squeeze. Good. You can relax now. Next, you’re going to try to make yourself even skinnier, and hold it for a good five seconds each time. Squeeze. (Slowly count to five.) Relax. Let’s try it one more time. Squeeze as hard as you can. (Count to five.) Relax. Now relax your entire body, and notice how good that feels.

7. Now, pretend you’re on a sandy beach. Squeeze your toes into the sand. Feel the wet sand squish between your toes, using the muscles in your legs to squeeze your toes into the sand as hard as you can. Relax the muscles in your legs. Feel the tension wash away into the ocean. Let’s try it again, only this time, dig deeper into the sand, using your legs once again to help you grip with your toes. Relax your toes. Relax your legs. Now, relax your entire body.

8. Pretend you’re a rag doll, and let your entire body go limp. Notice how good it feels to be relaxed. Now, just enjoy the feeling. (Allow one to three minutes for this exercise, depending on the age and concentration level of the child.) I am going to slowly count to three. When I get to three, slowly open your eyes. One…two…three. Do you feel different than you did before we started? (Let the child answer). Tell me what’s different about how you feel now? (Let the child answer). Now you know how to melt away the tightness in your body. Whenever you feel anxious, take a few minutes to tighten your muscles; then relax them.

Children respond well to progressive relaxation techniques and you can modify the script to make it fun. For instance, when they’re stretching toward the ceiling, suggest that they pretend to be a cat, doing a long, lazy stretch. When they’re tightening facial muscles, tell them to pretend they’re an old man or woman, making as many wrinkles as they can. This keeps children interested in the exercises. Design a script that works best for your child.

Progressive relaxation techniques are an effective way to manage stress with children. Schedule them any time when your child feels anxious. For children who have difficulties falling asleep, these exercises may serve to relax the child to the point where falling asleep becomes more manageable.