

Dr. Roxanne Daleo

Teaching kids to relax their minds, bodies – and spirits

By Karen Sharpe

When she was a little girl, Dr. Roxanne Daleo struggled in school with reading and tests, and felt great anxiety over her performance. She was lucky, however, to have a mother who made special one-on-one time for each of her three daughters, nurturing their creativity and confidence. Today, Daleo specializes in health psychology and mind-body relaxation techniques for children, focusing on childhood anxiety and stress, hyperactivity and behavior issues, as well as terminal and chronic diseases.

Daleo's interest in the mind-body connection coalesced as a doctoral student at Harvard University, when she worked as a research associate on studies conducted by Harvard Medical School cardiologist Herbert Benson, author of the 1975 ground-breaking work, *The Relaxation Response*. Benson's work explores psychoneuroimmunology, the connection that links behavior, thoughts and health and weaves in spirituality as a healing method. During her work Daleo became fascinated by brain research and the possibilities for using relaxation, meditation and de-stressing techniques with children. Daleo has worked with kids at Harvard University's Health Services, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and Children's Hospital in Boston, teaching non-drug alternatives to pain relief, stress and anxiety.

Daleo is a private counselor and works with children and families at home and in educational and medical settings and is the founder of MindWorks for Children, a collection of health and relaxation books, CDs and tapes. She has maintained a daily meditation practice since the early 1980s when she trained with Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. Daleo lives in Harvard. Her



web site, mindworksforchildren.com, includes podcasts of her Dr. Roxanne radio show.

How did you begin working with children?

My work started with hospitalized children. In the beginning I helped children emotionally prepare for surgical procedures at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Hospital, in the general pediatric unit. I saw everything from farm accidents, to amputations, open-heart surgery, brain surgery, and all kinds of pediatric disorders. I began to cultivate an awareness of their needs and that there were some hotspots in the hospital: pain management, boosting their esteem, getting ready for IV treatment, and high anxiety and redirecting hyperactivity. I saw those themes as the key pressure points. When I began working on a master's and doctorate I did an internship at Children's Hospital with the bone marrow transplant kids. That's when I began to bridge what was going on in the medical field to my work.

Can you explain that bridge?

There was a lot going on in psychoneuroimmunology, the study of the emotions, how they trigger certain chemicals from the brain, how they would either promote healing or inhibit it. I was blessed to work with a pioneer in the field: Herbert Benson. He was one of the first people in the country to examine meditators by having Tibetan monks come into the hospital and monitoring their heart rates, blood pressure, respiration, while they were meditating. It was fascinating. Being a cardiologist, he said, "Wow, this is a breakthrough for my cardiac patients with hypertension." He could teach them medication as a non-drug intervention to help themselves heal and lower their blood pressure. And, indeed, he had many, many studies that proved that people could help themselves. Specialties were developed after that, especially pain management. Many people who could get no medical relief got it when they began to practice meditation and this particular type of stress management. During that time I was selected to be a research assistant to Joan Borysenko, who was heading up programs for Dr. Benson and teaching adults how to understand the mind-body connection. Actually it's the mind-body-spirit connection, because if your body is off and you're in pain, your spirit is in pain.

What do you say to naysayers?

There is an absolute, undisputable impact of thoughts on the physical body. You can help to right those thoughts, and thus your body, through various methods and techniques like meditation and positive thinking. Ground it in whatever research you need. It's not hard to find credible, published scientific work that really speaks to this. There's so much research. I've been doing this since the '80s but many people are just catching on to it now.

This is not hocus pocus, it's grounded in measurable science and we now have testimonials from people who've had all kinds of disorders from stress to cancer to ulcerative colitis to migraines and they are bespeaking the healing powers they have learned through these practices. ... I can tell you from working in a hospital for 18 years, I witnessed the medical miracles as well as the disasters, but I mostly saw a patient's will to live and that desire against medical explanation would cause a kid to move through a treatment plan and survive when the odds said they would not. I used to have two kids at a time, each in a laminar airflow room, each recovering from bone marrow transplants, and one time, one of the children, who did have a good prognosis for recovery, but whose mother would come in depressed and hopeless, that child did not survive. That kid contracted that depression from the mother and she developed no will to live. When I was in that arena I was in my early years of understanding the power of the mind, but when you see it like that, with children who have nothing invested and it's genuine, it's hard to ignore.

How do you get children, especially stressed, sick or hyper ones, to be open to relaxation and meditation?

I try to captivate them by coming in the side door instead of the front door. I tell parents not to tell kids I'm a counselor, but more that I'm their coach, someone who really can show them how to bring out the best in themselves, who can show them how to help themselves. For little ones, I send home a CD and they listen to my voice and a story with images and guided meditation. ... It's not a scary thing. In order to teach children something that abstract, I use metaphors, usually from nature, to help illustrate a point with guided imagery. For example, in my CD "From a Grain of Sand," the oyster takes a grain of sand, an irritation, and it turns that pesky grain of sand into a pearl. So with that idea I wove this theme of reframing a stressful situation into a storyline.

What's going on in today's families and does that relate to the stresses kids and teens are feeling now?

That's a great question. There are

some things that were in place years ago that are totally missing today. One of the basic ways that we get to truly bring out the best in each other in a family is by having a listening time, to each other, not in a way where it's about the tasks or subjects, but listening to what's important to each other. That has been lost because of the accelerated pace of life and the illusion of no time. I say the illusion, because we do have all the time we need, we're just not prioritizing it.

The fast-food industry, too, has changed how the family comes together. That's one of the key problems as I see it in my practice. There isn't a forum, there isn't a time. Unless a crisis hits, kids aren't sitting in front of their families and talking things out. There isn't a structure where a family comes together to break bread, light a candle, to ask, "How was your day?" Kids and parents are overscheduled. I do not agree with the idea that enrolling your kids in a lot of activities is a good thing. You need to carve out space. Space outside. Space inside. Space to be together. In my own family, my mother made it clear that

no matter what, we were to be breaking bread. We did that every night. Now it's almost impossible to get a family to do that for more than two or three nights. When I can get them to do that, the transformations are amazing. Why? Because we know from learning in the brain that there is in this emotion center, called the limbic system, a doorway. It's like if you're not seen, if you're not acknowledged, that doorway does not open. So when some of the consultations I do with Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, public schools even, I say to the teachers, when children come into the classroom if you acknowledge the children by name when you greet them, you are opening the doorway to their learning center.

One delightful kid I was counseling, her name was Katie. She'd come into the classroom and announce, "Here I am!" as if intuitively she knew she had to be acknowledged and now she was ready to learn. When there isn't that sense that mom or a dad can really see you, hear you, acknowledge you, what happens? The door is shut. They are not listening

to you, and you're not listening to them.

And is that where self-doubt, anxiety, depression and many behavior issues follow?

Exactly. And the children do not learn the value of emotional intelligence and expressing fully with openness that what they have to say is valuable and that it's valuable to listen to others' stories. Sometimes I'll go into the home and teach moms and dads how to set up a situation, even with kids as young as 4 or 5, to say, "I want you to let your brother go ahead and tell his story and then you are next." The ability to listen is improved. Teachers will tell you today that listening skills are way down in addition to reading skills because kids are busy being talked at, being on computers and video games and things that do not help them to develop listening skills. What they're doing is learning to tune things out.

Our culture, too, is at fault, isn't it? There's nothing in our culture of entertainment that promotes the value of slowing down or tuning into yourself.

Focus and concentration is not valued. Let's look at that. There are so many opportunities to expand a child's ability to focus and it doesn't have to be painful. It can be when you're in the midst of family activity—which is another thing that improves concentration and impulse control. ... Just doing something as simple as going to a lake or pond and doing something like rowing, swimming or fishing will captivate a child's attention. Those types of activities help them to get into a rhythmic exercise that calms the mind down automatically.

Fishing for some kids is a fascination and for many kids, it's the only time a kid will calm down. Give the brain something to focus on and it's a hook to pinpointing and expanding the ability to concentrate. But why doesn't it happen? Parents are not always aware of the opportunity. They do not concentrate themselves. You can stop in the driveway and kneel down next to your preschooler who is fascinated by bugs to attend to it, to honor the attention and expand it. Whatever is inspiring to that child is

a beginning place to expand attention. But it can't be a force fit. You have to go with the child. Setting a positive tone in the home could be as simple as quiet time. No distractions. No TV or radio. Put on soothing music or just listening to nature. Another thing that is very easy to implement is what I call loving time. Carving out a sanctioned time get your kid up on the couch and decide that each and every one of your children is going to have that quality time with you. My mom would take each of her three girls and one at a time we would sit with her

and listen to opera while she brushed our hair or stroked our hair. It was delicious. The world stopped.

How do you present the idea that a spiritual source of power can help your health?

Having terminally ill children and their families face-to-face with me every day I was confronted with my own mortality and my beliefs in what happens after death. These kids who were having really major struggles and parents who had very little faith would

lean on me for expertise and suggestions and spiritual guidance for coping. When I did my Ph.D. it was a psychological and anthropological approach to healing. I looked at what different cultures and different people did across the world that makes them heal. I thought I was going to find a medical secret, like breathing or meditation and standing on your head or something like that. But what I found in each culture was that what they believed was sacred and divine was the source of healing, ultimately.

The gentlest way to open the avenue, for me, is through the Native American traditions because they look to nature. Everything in nature is alive, is a circle, is in the medicine wheel, and everything has a spirit. I found this approach to be one of the easiest ways for parents to talk about this subject, even to for themselves. Once you begin to say, even simply, everything is kind of like a season, it has a cycle and there is no distinction between birth and death and it's not good or bad, it just is. In our world, the idea of life is linear, with a beginning, middle and end, and you



really do drop off the end.

In the Native American traditions there is a sphere or a circle and the message that these evolutions and changes are normal. ... When you begin to look at nature and you use it in that way then you can begin to bridge to the question of what happens after, what kind of life happens after and who is in charge of all of this and where did all the beauty come from. ... Look to nature to see that there must be something sacred

and divine to put this beauty all around us. The same force that grows the trees is inside of us and that is the essence of who God is, so to speak. That is the way that I would open up the conversation.

Do children have an innate sense of spirituality?

When I ask kids to touch a tree or the ground and tell me if they had ears to hear what the tree or the ground is saying, what the message would be, you would be amazed at the kind of information they would come up with. Kids are not inhibited by anything that society imposes. It comes from their insight and intuition. I'm going to a conference called Child Spirit in the fall and the talk is about how kids know what they know about spirituality. I think that there is a misconception that we need to tell children things when they have it all. They know a lot and people aren't listening. They see angels or they have a sense of how to communicate with their baby siblings without a language, when they are first newborn. ... We should be creating a listening atmosphere. You

might be surprised to find out what your kids know.

What do you think about the prevalence of medicating kids for behavioral problems?

The medical establishment has been fueled by pharmaceutical companies. Those companies are courting doctors and others, particularly school psychologists to find, diagnose, treat and, in particular, medicate children who are looking like anything like ADHD and hyperactivity of any sort. However, if you understand that the pharmaceutical companies invest big bucks in this, they send physicians on vacation to places like Hawaii if they reach a certain quota on a certain drug.

That to me is outrageous but it's not uncommon and it is why we are seeing more kids diagnosed than ever. I am certainly in the minority, but I will go to

bat for a family and I will insist that a kid not be on medication and there are alternatives that may not be a substitute for medical treatment if medical treatment is necessary, but would complement medical treatment if it's necessary.

So what should parents do?

As an educated consumer, as an educated parent, you do have to be mindful. If you are inspired to medicate your child, I want to ask you why. Is it

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because you're out of patience, you're spent and you're hoping that the medication will give you a little bit of relief? Because that's the fast-food mentality and that accelerated pace in which we live, but in the end it will not be the solution. When you

medicate your child from age 5 or 7 or 10, anything during the growing years, you are going to get a compromised immune system. ... We really need to pause and

reflect on what motivates us to put our children on medication, especially when they start at an early age.

What are the bottom-line benefits of tuning in to yourself and becoming grounded?

The real message is it's really important for us as adults to practice and tune into our own inner life because there is no mistake about it, you cannot fool your children. If you do not take care of what's going on within you, you cannot expect your children to improve their own behavior. They are like little barometers, they pick it all up. It's important to honor how you are at any given moment and stay tuned in to keep your spirit high and remember the joy of a child. Simply put, what can you do right now to bring yourself joy, to indulge yourself, to make yourself feel luxurious or feel special, what brings you peace, gratitude and joy? ●

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