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# Cultural Daily

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## How to Breathe at Bedtime: A New Calming Down Book for Kids (and Parents)

Lori Oberbroeckling · Thursday, May 29th, 2025

As a mom of four, I am no stranger to the bedtime struggle. Over the years, we tried a lot of different techniques. We started the bedtime routine early. We read books. We tried warm baths (my own mom swore this would work). We tried structure. We tried freedom.

No matter what we tried, it never prevented those kiddos from getting right back out of bed after a cozy tuck in to ask another question or tell us “just one more thing.” No amount of back rubs, extra cups of water, or stories about monsters would calm those busy brains. That’s why I was happy to find a new childrens’ book that speaks to parents and kids about calming down at night in a fun and playful way.

*Max and the Imaginary Tree* is a beautiful new book that just resonated with me as a parent of children with busy brains. The authors, Risa Williams and Erica Curtis, two therapists and moms, have crafted a gentle, empowering tale that taught us really easy ways to find calm amidst chaos.



Max and his imaginary animal friends have different ideas about what to do at bedtime. By learning to take long deep breaths, Max discovers that he can calm down his animals (and himself) and fall asleep. If only I knew the power of breath work as a young mom! I talked to Risa Williams and Erica Curtis about how they came up with this insightful story to help kids calm down at night.

### **How did you come up with the idea for *Max and the Imaginary Tree*?**

**Risa:** This was a story I made up to tell my own kids when they were little. My two kids wanted to stay up all night, play, talk, ask questions, and jump on the bed. Anything but sleep! So, I wanted to teach them how to take deep breaths to settle down their busy bodies and brains.

With most kids, you can't just say "breathe" and they'll do it! This doesn't even work for most adults! So I invented this idea of an imaginary tree – each time they took a deep breath in and out, they could imagine moving the leaves of the tree with their breath. The kids loved this. They instantly got it and wanted to take really deep, slow breaths and see how far they could make the imaginary leaves go! In my own home it caught on as a regular bedtime "calming down" story. All these years later, I decided to write it for other kids (and parents) to use as well.

Erica and I were friends writing books separately and I had seen her amazing artwork, so one day, I showed her my book idea – and we grew it together from there – along with her magical and

whimsical drawings of Max and the animals.



It was very peaceful to watch the leaves dance around in the wind.

**When you were telling the story to your own kids, did it feel like it calmed you, too? Bedtime can be so stressful as busy parents!**

**Risa:** Definitely! As parents, it's easy to rush around and never take that big, deep breath we need. Sometimes, I felt like I was holding my breath all day from the stress of it all. It took me a lot of practice to train my body to take deep breaths throughout the day to keep the stress from rising.

Parents who have read *Max and the Imaginary Tree* have told us that when they read it with their kids, they instinctively remembered to breathe when Max does in the book! We're thrilled that this story reminds both kids and adults to use calming tools, and they can practice them together.

**What are some ways parents can practice “calming down” tools with their kids?**

**Erica:** Kids are more open to calming tools when they are effective, fun, and meaningful! Taking long exhales with Max or swaying like the leaves on his imaginary tree hit all of these marks. The tools work with our bodies' natural calming response while also allowing kids to connect to the story in a fun and meaningful way. So, before using calming tools during high stress times, try practicing them during playful or relaxation times first, like while reading the story and cuddling. Once you and your kids are familiar with the tools, remind them to use them in higher stress moments.

**Are there any breathing techniques that older kids can try?**

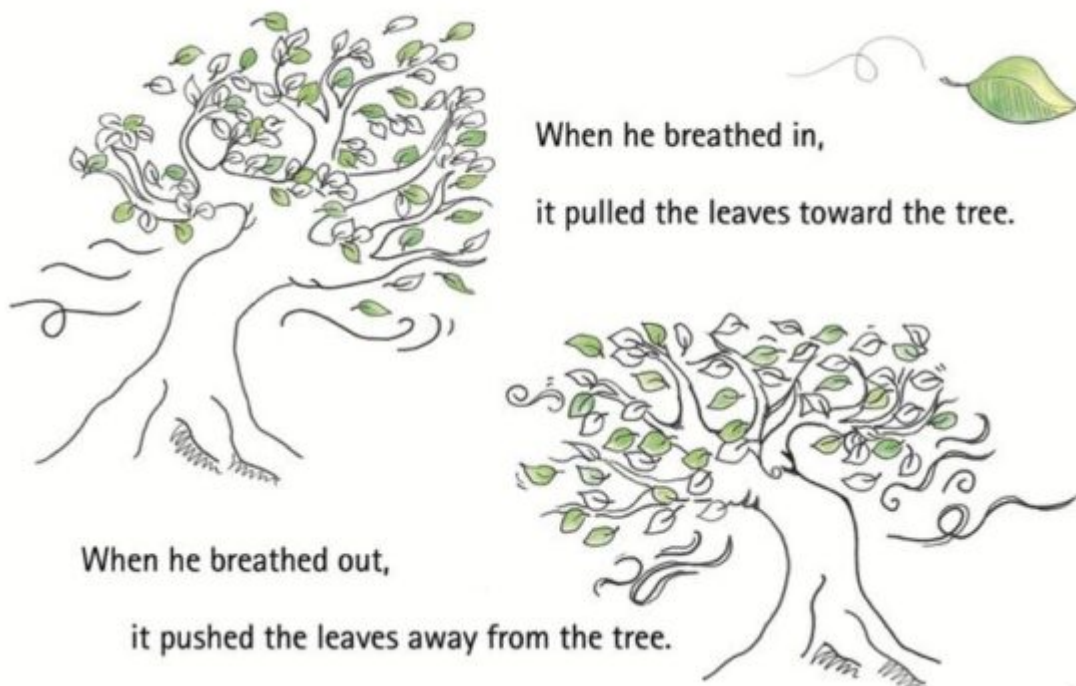
**Erica:** Sometimes slightly older kids respond well to the idea of a challenge. Just like Risa's kids liked seeing how far they could blow the leaves in their imagination with huge breaths, give older kids different challenges like seeing how long and slow they can exhale without making a sound, for example. You could even cut a leaf out of a piece of paper, place it on your head, and challenge your child to blow the leaf off! We give several creative ideas in the back of the book but you can

use your own creativity, too!

**We often talk about managing our own stress as parents but we don't always think about how our kids manage their stress... why do you think this is?**

**Risa:** I think many of us have an unstated and unexamined belief that kids aren't feeling as much stress as adults, but this clearly isn't true. Kids feel a lot of stress! Lots of things are new and different for them, they're always having to adjust to new skills, new rules and new situations. They don't always have the awareness and words yet to express the stress they're feeling.

As moms and therapists, we wanted to write *The Calm Kids Collection* to help kids learn calming down skills that they can use throughout childhood and beyond! *Max and the Imaginary Tree* is just one book in this collection. The books in the collection are each about a simple stressful situation that kids tend to face: Going on a new field trip, taking a math test, a loud trip somewhere with people, or feeling restless at bedtime, and teach kids that these are normal, stressful things people experience, and there are some easy ways they can navigate them. Some of these ways include taking deep breaths, noticing calming colors or sounds, or remembering somewhere you felt calm inside and using your imagination to hold that picture. These are things both Erica and I teach kids and adults too! You can use these skills your whole life, not just when you're a kid.



page from *Max and the Imaginary Tree*

Watching Max breathe life into his imaginary tree helped my children (and me) understand how simple mindfulness practices can soothe even the most energetic minds. This book is a must-read for any family navigating big emotions, big ideas, and busy days together.

Buy *Max and The Imaginary Tree*: [citybeebooks.com](http://citybeebooks.com) or [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

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