Calming the Journey to Kindergarten Through the Vagus Nerve

By Robyn Papworth

Starting kindergarten can be a big transition for young children, often accompanied by feelings of excitement mixed with anxiety. To help children manage these emotions and start their day on a positive note, it is beneficial to engage in activities that stimulate the vagus nerve during their commute to kindergarten.

What is the Vagus Nerve?

The vagus nerve is one of the longest nerves in the body, running from the brainstem (base of your skull area) through the neck, down into the chest, and into your abdominal area.

The vagus nerve is an important part of the parasympathetic nervous system, often referred to as the "rest and digest" system, which counterbalances the sympathetic nervous system's "fight or flight" responses.

Stimulation of the vagus nerve activates this calming parasympathetic response, which slows the heart rate, relaxes the body, and decreases stress and anxiety.

The Role of Sensory Experiences

Engaging in sensory experiences is a highly effective way to stimulate the vagus nerve.

Activities that involve touch, movement, sound, and deep breathing can directly influence this nerve's activation, promoting a state of calm and relaxation.

For children feeling anxious about the new routines and social interactions awaiting them at kindergarten, these sensory-rich activities can be particularly beneficial.

They help regulate emotions, making the transition smoother and more enjoyable.

Why Focus on the Vagus Nerve for Children With Anxiety

For children who are anxious, stimulating the vagus nerve can offer immediate and noticeable relief from the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a racing heart or shallow breathing.

Regular activation of the vagus nerve through targeted activities can also build a child's resilience against stress over time.

By incorporating simple, enjoyable activities that stimulate the vagus nerve into the daily walk or drive to kindergarten, parents and caregivers can help children:

- Enhance their focus and attention by reducing anxiety levels.
- Improve their mood and overall sense of well-being.
- Increase their readiness to learn and interact with others upon arriving at kindergarten.

Incorporating these strategies is not only beneficial for the emotional and psychological well-being of the child but also contributes to a harmonious family dynamic as children feel supported and understood.

This guide provides a range of activities designed to stimulate the vagus nerve in fun and engaging ways, ensuring that every child can arrive at kindergarten feeling calm, centred, and ready to embrace the day's adventures.

LESSON PLAN

For any of these activities, make sure that you're putting safety first. Look out for traffic when walking to kindergarten. Don't be distracted while driving.

ACTIVITY TITLE

Listening to Soft Music with Gentle Head Turns

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A device capable of playing music.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Play a selection of soft, soothing music in the car or just before leaving for kindergarten.
  - Encourage your child to slowly turn their head from left to right in rhythm with the slow music.
  - Ensure that the movements are gentle and that the child feels comfortable.
    - Focus on the smoothness of the motion and the calming effect of the music.
  - Continue for the duration of one song.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "What instruments can you hear in the music?"
  - "Can you match your head turns to the beat of the music?"

- **Why It's Important:**
  - The soft music helps soothe the mind, while the rhythmic head turns stimulate the neck muscles and nerves, including the vagus nerve, promoting a state of calm and relaxation.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Singing with Gestures

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A device capable of playing music.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Choose a calm song that both you and your child know and enjoy.
  - Sing the song together while incorporating facial expressions or gestures that match the lyrics.
    - If you're driving in the car, make sure that you keep focusing on the road with both hands on the steering wheel
  - Encourage your child to be expressive and use their whole body if possible.
  - Keep the pace gentle and the facial expressions exaggerated to maintain the fun element.

- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you show me how big the mountain is using your arms?"
  - "What movements can we make when we sing about the wind?"



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Progressive Muscle Relaxation while waiting

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A safe place to stand on the way to kindergarten.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Guide the child to focus on their feet, instructing them to tense their feet muscles tightly for a few seconds and then relax, while they're standing.
  - Progressively move up the body, instructing them to tense and relax each muscle group from the feet, to ankles, to knees, to elbows, to head.
  - Repeat the cycle twice, with each muscle group being tensed and relaxed.

- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you feel the difference between tense and relaxed in your legs?"
  - "Which muscle group feels good to relax?"

- **Why It's Important:**
  - This activity enhances blood flow and stimulates the parasympathetic responses by engaging the vagus nerve through muscle relaxation.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Storytelling with Facial Expressions

MATERIALS NEEDED

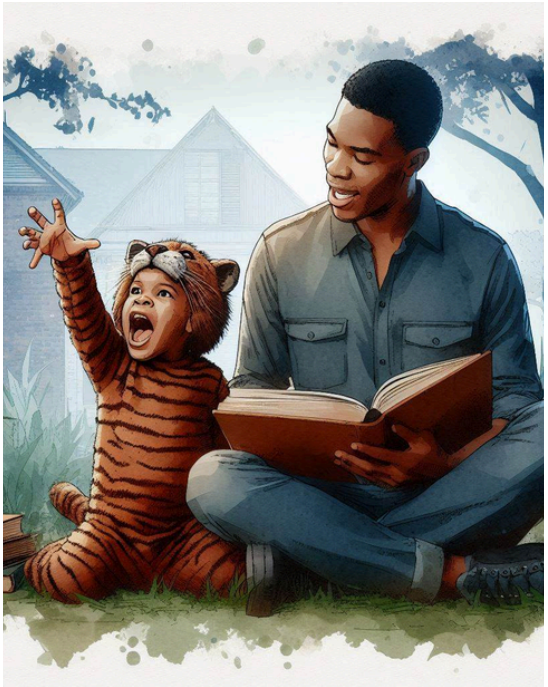
- A favourite book or an imaginative story.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Select a story with varied characters and emotions.
  - Read or narrate the story using animated facial expressions and different voices for each character.
  - Encourage your child to mimic your expressions and participate in the storytelling.
  - Discuss the emotions and actions of the characters in the story.

- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "How do you think this character feels right now?"
  - "Can you make a face like the character when they are happy/sad?"

- **Why It's Important:**
  - Engaging the facial muscles stimulates the cranial branches of the vagus nerve, enhancing emotional expression and empathy, which can have a calming effect and promote emotional regulation.



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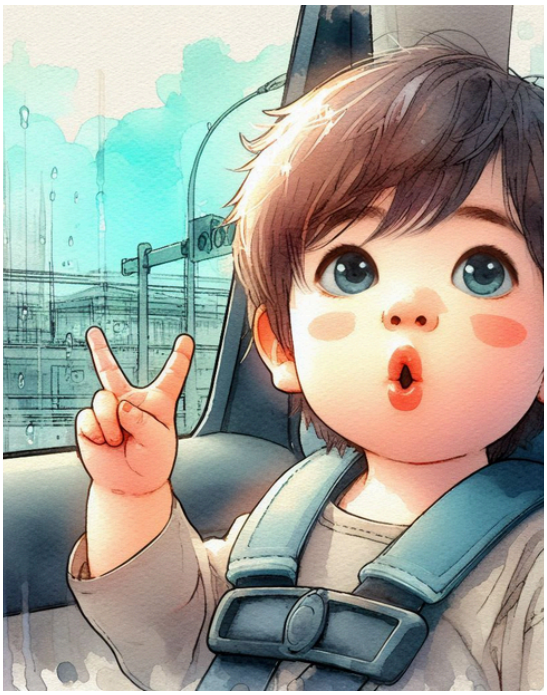
Counting Games with Body Movement

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Select objects outside the car to count (e.g., blue cars, trees).
  - Each time a chosen object is spotted, the child does a simple body movement (e.g., tap on the knee, clap).
  - Keep the counting and movements playful and encourage vocalisation of numbers.
  - Continue for a set number of objects or duration of the journey.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you count how many red cars you see? Let's clap for each one."
  - "What other things can we count and make movements for?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This activity helps in focusing the child's attention and reducing stress. It also involves physical movement that stimulates the sensory pathways important for calmness, engaging the vagus nerve through the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Humming with Gentle Swings

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Swing

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Start humming a soft, melodious tune together.
  - Sway gently from side to side, or engage with each other while your child is on the swing, mirroring the rhythm of the humming.
  - Encourage the child to feel the vibration in their throat and chest as they hum.
  - Continue for a few minutes, focusing on the soothing sensations.

- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you feel the humming in your throat and chest?"
  - "Does the swaying/swinging make you feel more relaxed?"

- **Why It's Important:**
  - Humming involves controlled breathing and vocalisation that stimulates the vagus nerve, while the rhythmic movement provides sensory input that enhances calming effects.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Visualisation with Gentle Yoga Poses

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Guide the child through simple seated yoga poses, such as hands together in prayer position or gentle twists.
  - As they hold each pose, describe a calming scene for them to visualise (beach, forest, river).
  - Encourage deep, slow breathing throughout the activity.
  - Repeat each pose a couple of times, with different visualisations.
    - Be sure to only be prompting your child. Keep your two hands on the steering wheel at all times
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you picture a quiet forest with tall trees as you hold that pose?"
  - "What sounds do you imagine hearing at the beach?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - Yoga poses help in activating the muscles and the respiratory system, which are connected to the vagus nerve, promoting relaxation and stress reduction through increased body awareness and controlled breathing.





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ACTIVITY TITLE

Soft Toys with Tactile Exploration

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A soft toy or blanket

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Provide the child with a soft toy or blanket before turning your car on.
  - Encourage them to explore its texture, squeeze, and hug it.
  - Discuss how the toy feels and if it makes them feel calm.
  - Use this as a moment to teach gentle, soothing self-touch like stroking the arm with the toy.

- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "How does it feel when you hug your toy?"
  - "How does your teddy or toy feel when you gently rub their back, tickle their toes, go upside down?"

- **Why It's Important:**
  - Tactile (touch) stimulation can significantly influence emotional and physiological responses, reducing anxiety and promoting calmness by engaging sensory pathways linked to the vagus nerve.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Sensory Walk with Balance Challenges

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Begin your walk and point out different surfaces like grass, pavement, or sand.
  - Encourage the child to walk along these textures, feeling each one under their feet.
  - Introduce simple balance challenges, such as standing on one foot or walking along a line.
  - Discuss the sensations experienced with each new texture and balance posture.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "How does the grass feel compared to the pavement?"
  - "Can you balance on one foot while counting to five?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This activity stimulates the sensory and proprioceptive systems, enhancing neurological development and balance skills. Engaging multiple senses helps regulate the child's emotional state through increased body awareness and mindfulness.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Leaf Collection with Sorting and Categorising

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A small bag or basket for collecting items.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Collect various leaves, stones, and natural items during the walk.
  - At the end of the walk, sort these items by colour, shape, or size.
  - Encourage the child to feel each item's texture and discuss the differences.
  - Create a small nature collage from the collected items as a recap of the walk.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Which leaf is bigger? Can you find the smallest stone?"
  - "What colours do you see in these items?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - Sorting and categorising enhance cognitive skills, while handling and feeling different textures stimulate tactile sensory pathways, crucial for emotional regulation and nervous system stimulation.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Nature Scavenger Hunt with Storytelling

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A small bag or basket for collecting items.
- A list of items to find or pictures of them.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Begin the walk with a scavenger hunt list, including items like a smooth stone, a piece of bark, a leaf, etc.
  - As each item is found, ask the child to imagine a story involving the item.
  - Encourage the child to describe the story, adding details from the environment.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "What adventure could this flower be from?"
  - "Can you make up a story about where this stone has been?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - The scavenger hunt engages the child's visual and auditory senses, enhancing focus and attention. Creating stories stimulates cognitive development and language skills, crucial for emotional expression and social interaction.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Cloud Imagery Game

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A clear view of the sky

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Find a spot with a good view of the sky during your walk.
  - Lay on a grassy area, stand together holding hands, or sit on a bench and look at the clouds.
  - Take turns identifying shapes or objects in the clouds.
  - Encourage creative descriptions and stories about what you see.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "What shapes can you see in the clouds?"
  - "What story can you imagine about that cloud shape?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This activity promotes relaxation and creativity, which can help reduce anxiety and stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system through calming visual engagement.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Sound Hunt

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - During your walk, find a quiet and safe spot or a moment when traffic is minimal.
  - Close your eyes together and listen carefully to the different sounds around you.
  - Ask the child to point in the direction where they think each sound is coming from.
  - Discuss the sources of the sounds and what might be making them.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you hear the bird singing? Where do you think it is?"
  - "What's the quietest sound you can hear right now?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This exercise helps in developing the child's auditory processing and spatial orientation skills. It engages and stimulates the auditory branches of the vagus nerve, enhancing focus and reducing anxiety through mindful listening.



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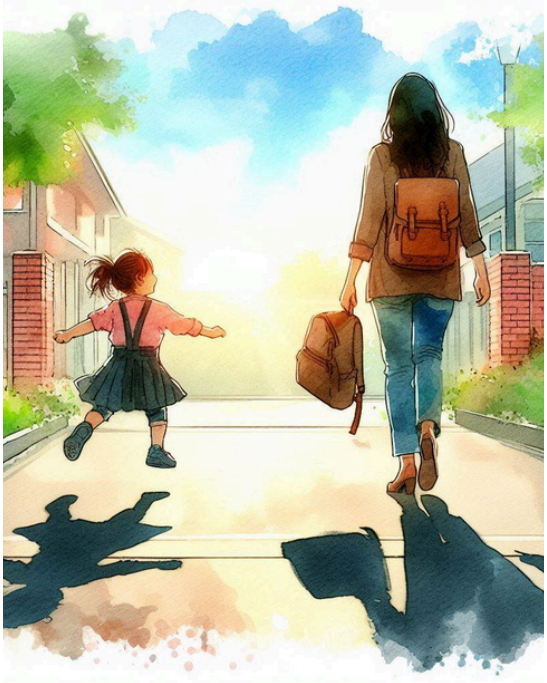
Jump and Count

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Identify markers along your path, like cracks in the sidewalk or shadows.
  - Challenge the child to jump over each marker while counting them aloud.
  - Encourage rhythmic jumping and counting to maintain a fun and engaging pace.
  - Vary the counting challenge by switching to fast and slow jumps, big and small jumps, or counting backwards.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "How many jumps can you make before we reach the corner?"
  - "Can you jump small like a mouse?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This activity combines physical exercise with cognitive challenges, promoting motor skills and mathematical thinking. It also helps in releasing energy in a controlled way, which can be calming and help with focus upon arrival at kindergarten.



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ACTIVITY TITLE

Follow the Leader with Nature Gestures

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- **Activity:**
  - Take turns being the leader on your walk to kindergarten.
  - The leader imitates movements inspired by nature, such as fluttering like a butterfly or swaying like a tree.
  - The follower mimics these movements, trying to match them as closely as possible.
  - Switch roles after a few minutes to keep the engagement high.
- **Engagement Questions:**
  - "Can you move like the wind through the trees?"
  - "What animal are you pretending to be now?"
- **Why It's Important:**
  - This playful activity encourages creativity and physical activity, enhancing motor coordination and balance. Imitating natural movements provides a sensory-rich experience, stimulating the vestibular system and proprioceptive senses, crucial for regulating emotions and enhancing overall sensory integration.

