

By Kelly McGonigal, PhD

yoga for kids

Yoga may be more than 5,000 years old, but these days it's getting younger.

Yoga for kids is exploding in popularity and gaining acceptance in schools. An ongoing survey on the state of "youth yoga" finds that kids' yoga is taught in community centers, yoga studios, private and public schools, and after-school programs throughout the U.S. According to lead researcher Robin Lowry, a doctoral candidate in kinesiology at Temple University in Philadelphia, "Kids today are motivated to learn yoga."

tips for teaching yoga to kids

- Add a creative twist to familiar "adult" yoga practices. For example, you might tell adults that full belly breathing is like expanding a balloon. Ask kids what color the balloon is, and let them pop it to exhale!
- Keep poses and games short. For younger kids, each exercise may take only 30 seconds to a minute.
- Use themes or stories to link the poses and games. A trip through a garden can inspire poses and games related to nature. Picture books can provide great ideas for class themes.
- Alternate periods of focus and quiet with opportunities for the kids to move, make noise or be "silly."
- Provide structure. Younger kids love repetition, themes and defined activities. Older children welcome the familiarity of social support and of class "rituals" like guided visualization during final relaxation.
- Leave room for self-expression and creativity. Ask questions and use the names of poses to inspire play-acting. For instance, when doing hero pose, ask, "What kind of hero are you?"
- Pay attention to transitions. With kids, something as simple as finding a partner or returning a prop can become a major event. Give clear directions to avoid chaos.
- Focus on poses and exercises that most kids can do safely. Leave out poses with a higher risk of injury (e.g., headstand and shoulderstand) and exercises that involve holding the breath. Breath-holding can have an agitating effect on kids and unintentionally turn into a competition of who can hold the breath the longest.
- Don't underestimate kids' need for quiet and rest. Many teachers are surprised to find that many kids' favorite part of yoga class is a guided relaxation.
- Involve parents. Provide handouts, host a family yoga workshop, and ask kids to teach their parents what they learned in class.

It's not just the children who are keen. "Parents have experienced the benefits of yoga and want to give them to their children," says Maria Vailakis-Wippick, a yoga teacher in Westport, Connecticut.

"Our children's lives are becoming more stressful with all the activities, social and school pressures, and family pressures," says Karen Prior, creator of Let's Play Yoga, a kids' yoga program in Plano, Texas. Sisters Jacqueline and Teddy Kellam, founders of Yogadoodles™, a preschool program based in San Francisco, see their classes as a balance to this trend. "Kids have an overstimulating environment, and parents instinctively want to give kids something that has a therapeutic element."

As kids' yoga becomes more popular, demand for teacher training is also rising. Marsha Wenig, founder of the national YogaKids program, says, "When I led my first teacher training in 1996, I had two

people in class. Nine years later, we've trained thousands." Beth Shaw, founder of the YogaFit® teacher-training organization, attributes the growing popularity of YogaFit Kids to increasing awareness of childhood obesity and attention deficit disorder. "I believe it is a national crisis, and people are starting to catch on."

The Benefits of Yoga

Parents, teachers and school administrators alike are starting to recognize the mind-body benefits of yoga, which can help kids concentrate, regulate their emotions and cooperate with others, all while being physically active. A study conducted by the Program Evaluation & Research Collaborative at California State University, Los Angeles, found that when a 36-week yoga program was included in a school's physical education curriculum, students' physical fitness, behavior and grades improved (Slovacek, Tucker & Pantoja 2003).

Yoga also provides an alternative to competitive sports and a relief from the performance demands that kids face every day. Lela Schneidman, a yoga instructor in Evanston, Illinois, says, "My class is a safe space. There are no tests, no demands. The students think yoga is fun and relaxing. Most of them are not athletic and don't prefer group sports."

Silvia Mordini, director of Total Body Yoga, a Family Yoga Center, in Mundelein, Illinois, agrees. "Most children are involved in competitive activities. Everything is about the gold star, getting the A, performing at the highest level. We teach that exercise is fun and healthy. Yoga is about doing something good for yourself, without having to prepare for some performance."

Child's Play

The most important difference between kids' and adults' yoga classes is the element of play. "You're playing *with* kids, not teaching *to* them," says Vailakis-Wippick.

Yoga classes for children may include only a handful of recognizable yoga poses, thrown together with games, singing, storytelling and creative movement. However, according to Susanna Nicholson, who teaches kids' yoga in Charlottesville,

Virginia, it is a mistake to think that kids' classes are "watered-down yoga." Successful yoga programs for children simply adapt traditional practices to meet kids' needs for variety and creativity. Classes often include a broad range of yoga practices: poses, breathing exercises, chanting or singing, meditation or visualization, and relaxation. As Jacqueline and Teddy Kellam note, "Kids are more open in general and are willing to explore the full range of yoga practices."

Amid all this play, one of the first things that teachers learn is how quickly a yoga class can spiral from enthusiastic participation to chaos. Nancy Williams, a yoga teacher in Perth, Ontario, learned this lesson early on. "I was asked to do a yoga presentation for an entire elementary school of 183 students in the gym. We started off with the bumblebee breath. Big mistake! With so many bees buzzing, they couldn't hear my directions to STOP!"

Managing the energy of the group without discouraging the class or acting like a disciplinarian can be the greatest challenge when teaching kids. Through experience, the Kellam sisters have found that what works best is a lighthearted

the thunderstorm

This game, taught in the Yogadoodles™ teacher training, is played in boat pose, a balancing seated posture. Kids love this game because it allows them to express their exuberance. Teachers love it because it balances that release of energy with self-control. Lead the class by modeling the movements and sounds.

"A storm is coming. . . . Here comes the rain." Lightly tap the floor with your feet, like the pitter-patter of rain. Tap your face and head with your fingers, like raindrops.

"It's raining harder—it's pouring!" Stomp the floor with your feet. Row the boat through the puddles, using your arms.

"Here come the big gusts of wind!" Wave your arms and make whooshing noises.

"Here come the thunder and lightning!" Slap your legs or clap.

After the noise and movement have peaked, "Freeze!" Everyone balances in boat pose and tries to be as still and quiet as possible—embodying the peaceful silence after the storm.

approach. "Instead of scolding—'Sit down now! Quiet please!'—we sing our requests. A song is playful and bypasses the tendency to rebel. The children just want to join in."

Encouraging Kids

Yoga instructors who are used to working with adults also find it challenging to let go of the emphasis on physical control. Teachers accustomed to correcting the most minute details of alignment learn to be grateful that every child is on his or her own mat, let alone doing a perfect pose. When Schneidman made the transition from teaching adults to teaching kids, she learned that correcting students' form could be more discouraging than helpful. "[Now] I don't do any corrections, unless it seems like a kid is going to hurt herself. Kids don't like to have individual attention from the teacher unless it is positive."

Jacqueline and Teddy Kellam offer another reason for this approach: Focusing on doing the pose "right" takes children out of the creative and playful experience of yoga. "When you ask children to assume a pose like downward-facing dog, they aren't children practicing a pose called 'down dog.' They become a dog. And you don't tell a dog how it should look." In a kids' yoga class, teachers are far more likely to ask students to bark or wag their tails in dog pose, than to straighten the arms, press into the base of every finger, and lengthen the spine.

In adult yoga classes, silent self-focus is the norm, but kids like to talk. Vailakis-Wippick found that this was one of her biggest teaching challenges. "I've started to use a bell when they're very chatty, and only the person holding the bell is allowed to speak." Other teachers encourage students to express themselves. "We always begin with a brief check-in so the children can share important news and get it off their minds," says Williams. Nicholson reports that this strategy provides added benefits for her students. "Students give one another support and listen carefully if others are having a bad day or a hard time with family issues. They become great listeners, and comforters too."

The Future of Yoga for Kids

What does the future hold for kids' yoga? The ultimate goal of many teachers is to give children specific tools for everyday

challenges, and the opportunity to use those tools at school and at home.

Wenig makes this prediction: "I see yoga integrated in the child's day, in many settings, instead of being just one more extracurricular activity." Wenig's latest innovation, the "Tools for Schools" program, suggests yoga practices for specific moments in the day: poses to do before a test, practices that prepare kids to be learning-ready, and movements designed to release stress.

Heidi Feldman, MD, PhD, a yoga teacher and professor of child development at the University of Pittsburgh, makes sure that parents know how to help kids apply what they learn in yoga class. "I ask a child to demonstrate a pose or breathing exercise that they learned, and suggest times when the parents might think about using it with the child."

And, of course, most teachers hope that the future of kids' yoga is a generation empowered to make healthy choices. As Wenig says, "Kids who practice yoga turn into teenagers and adults who practice yoga."

Kelly McGonigal, PhD, teaches yoga and fitness at Stanford University and is the editor in chief of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy. She leads teacher trainings and workshops that integrate contemporary psychology and medicine with traditional yoga and meditation practices. Contact her at kelly@openmindbody.com.

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Reference

Slovacek, S.P., Tucker, S.A., & Pantoja, L. 2003. A study of the Yoga Ed. program at the Accelerated School. www.yogaed.com/pdfs/researcharticle.pdf; retrieved November 2005.

resources

These organizations offer teacher-training programs and other information on yoga for kids:

Let's Play Yoga, www.letsplayyoga.com

Radiant Child Yoga Program,

www.childrensyoga.com

Yogadoodles, www.yogadoodles.com

YogaFit Kids, www.yogafit.com

YogaKids, www.yogakids.com