

Yoga! It's Academic

Schools create stress-free zones by putting playful poses to work.

By Deanna Michalpoulos

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Stress isn't cool. And if yoga classes in schools continue to win the popular vote, a Buddha-like behaved, stress-less child near you will be the next Beverly Hills hottie like Bikram—or even a benevolent mogul like Bill Gates. (In fact, put down your fencing mask, Junior; Harvard's admission committee wants to know you've been self actualizing since mom took you to Baby Om.) Yoga in schools is being used as a secret weapon against issues like anxiety, weight gain, and low self esteem. If three breaths a day can calm ADHD, improve intelligence, and create social skills, you may begin to feel optimistic about your family's long-term health again.



Y'all could use a "Yoga Moment"

It's a warm weekday morning at Madison Rose Lane Elementary School, in Phoenix, Arizona. In perfect unison the student body puts down their pencils, stops reading their books, and closes their eyes. The voice on the morning PA system has announced it's time for their daily "Yoga Moment." Zen-like, even the antsiest kids put their hands together in front of their chests and take three deep breaths before they float open their eyelids and get back to work. These kids don't have to know that their breath work is actually called Pranayama to feel its calming benefits.

"Stress" might not be in their vocabulary, and "relax" might be something that mom just asks you to do, but kids really do sense the tranquility they get from a yoga class. "It's really powerful. One boy asked me whether I could teach his parents to calm down," says Diane Cline, founder of YogaLand, based in Scottsdale, Arizona. "I told him that I'm not going to see his parents, so he'll have to show them."

As the number of overweight and overachieving kids increases in an over-driven academic world, schools have become open to unconventional solutions to student stress, says Cline. A one-stop lesson in fitness and self-awareness, yoga seamlessly fits into the day without bumping anything off the curriculum; teachers can take their bag of Buddha tricks and sprinkle fun breathing exercises and stretches into their lessons at any time. Since its debut in July 2006, YogaLand has successfully initiated yoga programs that include a daily Yoga Moment in 19 public schools and 5 private schools in Arizona. That's over 3,000 kids who've found a little boost through yoga.

Proof for the practice

The call for parking yoga mats in the classroom has grown louder, increasing more support in recent years – and science backs it up. Studies have shown that yoga not only boosts kids' physical and mental fitness (1), but also improves their behavior and grade point average. Other exploratory studies suggest that yoga practice improves impulse control among boys with ADHD (2), decreases depression and anxiety in abused teen girls (3), helps anorexic girls deal with stress in a healthy way (4), and may regulate emotions among autistic kids (5).

Although there aren't yet statistics on the growth of children's yoga – anecdotally, Cline says it's on par with this season's American Idol ratings – national programs that certify children's yoga instructors have been busy. YogaKids, an Indiana-based program born in 1991, currently holds between 100 to 200 children's yoga training workshops internationally. They've also grown the franchise to include a yoga curriculum, "Tools for Schools," which aims to manage students' fitness levels, behavior, energy, and attention. The program includes 10 half-hour sequences as well as handy breathing exercises, games, and visualizations teachers can pull out as needed throughout the day. For example, to alleviate midday restlessness, a teacher might suddenly ask her students to do tree pose for 30 seconds; before a test, a teacher may tell them a calming story or lead a guided visualization relating to their test topics to help them recall facts.

Some school districts across the country are signing up their staff using the curriculum from YogaEd, a California-based organization that has certified 450 children's instructors. Schools can opt to use the 36-week progressive programs that are based on PE and Health standards, or the "Tools for Teachers" professional-development program that trains schoolteachers and staff how to use breathing, basic postures, games, and visualizations throughout the day in five- to 15-minute stints, with no special equipment or space. Teachers can lead kids in self-affirming sing-alongs, or get them into simple poses that imitate cat or snake movements.

Tools for Life

With YogaEd-certified trainer Joanne Spence at the helm, the Pittsburgh public school district piloted an extensive yoga program in several schools in 2005. Many of the teachers were impressed with the improvement in their students' focus. By next year it plans to roll out the program in all 45 schools in the district. Several thousand staff members will be trained to teach the curriculum in the gymnasium and use yoga elements within the classroom.

"We work with a lot of inner-city kids who are at-risk and special-needs students, and the yoga approach trains them to be more self-aware. They can recognize their feelings, like anger and sadness, and then use yoga techniques as way to diffuse these huge emotions and respond to the world with compassion," says Spence. "I have seen a student provoked by another peer, and he will take a deep breath instead of verbally or even physically attacking back."

We might think kids have endless energy taps, but their teachers tell a different story. "They're up late indulging in electronics, watching scary movies, taking care of their siblings – they aren't supervised, and they're putting themselves to bed at all hours," says Spence. "Learning new content is hard when you're dog tired, so when they're lethargic, we use 'Breath of Joy' to wake them up. They inhale while lifting up their arms, and bring their arms down with the exhale, which is a heavy HAA through their mouths."

Suzanne Hall's daughter, Abby, now 10, took yoga during the pilot program in the first grade while she was in occupational therapy. Abby was born six weeks early, which left her dealing with some developmental delays by the time she hit kindergarten. "It was wonderful that yoga came in while she was working intensely with a medical routine; she didn't have a lot of confidence when it came to physical coordination and gross motor skills. Unlike competitive sports, like baseball games or gymnastic meets, children came into yoga without any preconceived notions. It put everyone on a level playing field, so no one could look at one another and call them out on doing something wrong. The kids were just focused on taking it in and relaxing," says Hall. "There were elements of playfulness, like doing animal poses, but the classes were so focused on the kids being peaceful. I actually remember her saying she "de-stressed" in yoga! That year she was being bullied by a kid on her bus, and it tensed her up. Yoga was the bright spot during her day."

Controlling a classroom is never easy, but always rewarding. "You see kids that don't pay attention and do their own thing. On the other hand, you get ones who just sit throughout the practice," says Wenig. "Then I'll meet their parents, and they'll tell me, 'Roger LOVES yoga, he comes home and shows me tree pose,'" says Wenig. "At first, I was so surprised, because Roger never did anything in class! But children are learning all the time. When they're into it, they get it."

Om a Little Teapot

They may not resemble your favorite Vinyasa Flow class, but children's yoga programs have similar purposes: to enhance physical and mental fitness and learning. The biggest difference between the two is the instruction.

When it comes to stretching out young students, teachers don't need a yoga studio. Most schools train their own teachers, rather than bringing in outside instructors. These one-time training programs are less expensive and maximize the schools' precious resource – its educators. Plus, many children's yoga experts recommend that it's better to train an adult who has a relationship with the kids rather than a stranger who happens to run adult classes in the area.

"Many yoga teachers teach children like they are mini-adults, but children don't listen and follow directions like adults do. The teacher must go with the flow – and the flow is NOT always a Vinyasa! Kids move and mimic the minute a teacher demonstrates a pose." says Marsha Wenig, creator of YogaKids. "It takes an astute person to teach children with love, compassion, patience, and creativity, and schoolteachers are accepting of anything that might happen on a regular basis. They just need training from a program designed for educational professionals who do not have yoga experience."

Many of the poses are taught through role-playing, visualization, and games to engage kids who might be confused if someone told them to do Utthita Trikonasana. In YogaKids, Wenig teaches Triangle to the tune of "Om a Little Teapot"; children sing till they tip over into the posture. They learn to bust tension by pretending they're motionless statues. Teachers encourage them to feel the "wiggles" inside of them and breathe them out.

"It's a fun transition for the kids, because they go from feeling out of control to taking charge of themselves and their moods," says Leah Kalish, program director for YogaEd.

[How to get your kid's school to jump on the yoga bandwagon](#)

- (1) Factors affecting student achievement and related behaviors. (Buckenmeyer, Janet: Purdue University Calumet; Freltas, Indiana University South Bend), January 2007: This study explores the effect of the YogaKids Tools for Schools program on the academic achievement, general health, personal attributes and relationships of participating students.
[A Study of the Yoga Ed Program at the Accelerated School](#) (Slovacek, Simeon P., Ph.D.; Tucker, Susan A., Ph.D.; Pantoja, Laura, B.A.), Program Evaluation and Research Collaborative by the Charter College of Education
- (2) The effects of yoga on the attention and behavior of boys with Attention-Deficit/hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Pauline. S. Jensen School of Behavioral & Community Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Science, University of Sydney, Journal of Attention Disorders, Vol. 7, No. 4, 205-216 (2004)
- (3) Study presented at the International Journal of Yoga Therapy Symposium. (Bortz, A. & Cradock, K. (2007). Making the case for the use of lila yoga as an adjunctive therapy for traumatized children. International Journal of Yoga Therapy Symposium, Los Angeles, CA, January 2007.)
- (4) Incomplete [case study](#) presented at the International Journal of Yoga Therapy Symposium by Susana A. Galle, Ph.D., N.D., C.C.N., D.H.M., F.B.I.H., C.C.H., R.Y.T
- (5) Small sample study presented at the International Journal of Yoga Therapy Symposium by Rachel Fridholm.