

YOGA FOR CHILDREN? YES!
By Shakta Kaur Khalsa

The following is a slightly edited version of an article that originally appeared in Washington Parent [D.C.] Magazine.

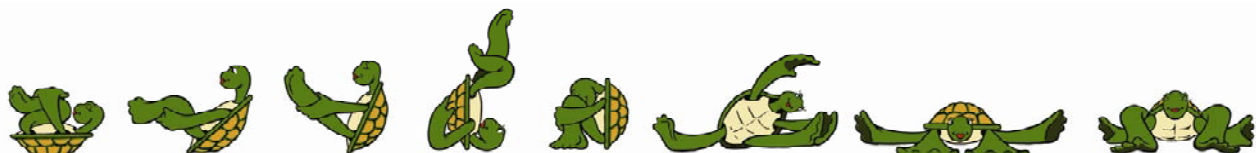
Why yoga for children? Ten years ago, that question was most likely asked about martial arts. Now there are classes for children at martial arts studios around every corner. And, like martial arts, yoga develops many wonderful qualities in children. In addition to the obvious benefits of exercising the physical body, both sharpen the child's ability to focus and give self-confidence and self-discipline. And yoga, practiced regularly, helps children become aware of themselves from the inside out. From this awareness, children can change and grow in new and positive directions.

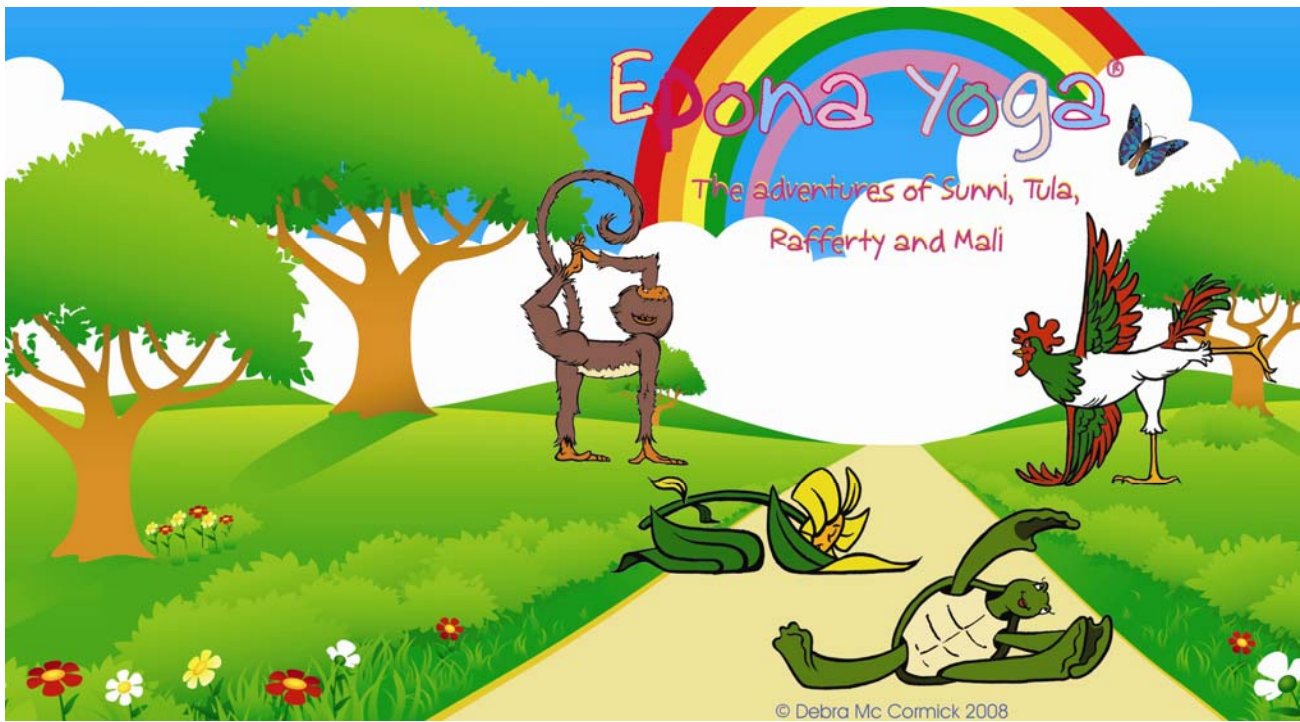
More and more professionals who work with children with autism, special needs, sensory integration, learning disabilities and ADD/ADHD are being trained to teach children's yoga--and with great results. Yoga is a natural for children, since it addresses the whole child, including the brain/body connection.

In my twentysome years of teaching children's yoga, I never fail to delight in the self-discoveries that children make through yoga. Children are so fresh and unhampered by the dictates of society. Their approach to life is unique. And yoga encourages their creativity to flow; their fears, anger and sadness to release; their trust in the inner self to shine; and their minds and hearts to be in synch.

If there is one thing I learned in my years of experience as a Montessori teacher, it is this: Children are capable of much more than we think they are, and if given the right environment they will excel beyond our belief. In 1982 I started a small Montessori school in Baltimore. In my cozy little school I applied this understanding to teaching children yoga. Their creative, innocent selves expressed such simple truth that I

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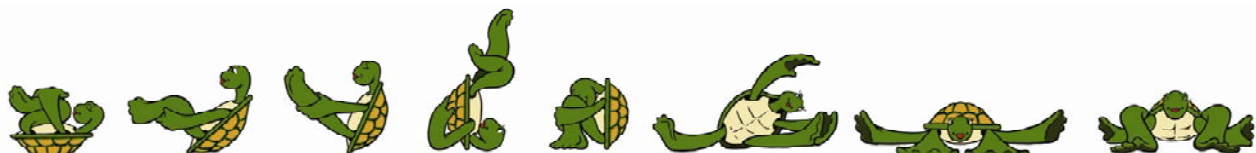


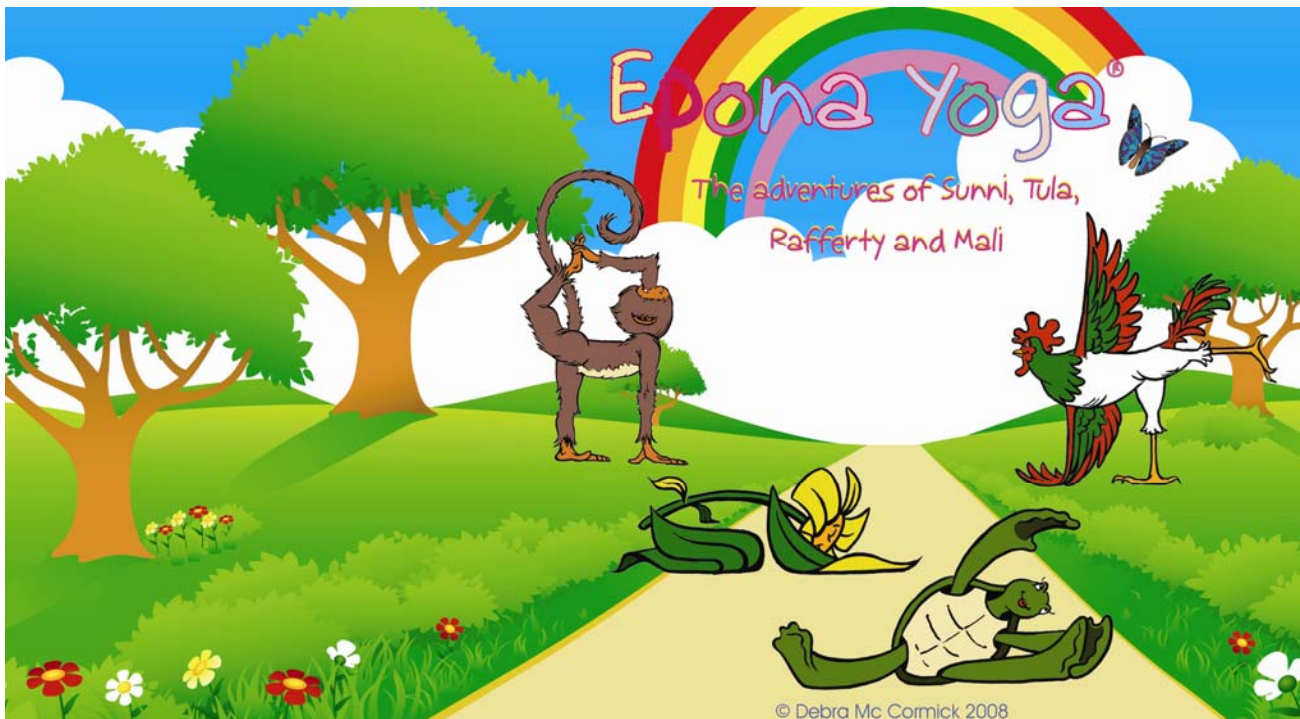
realized I was learning as much from them as they were from me. The reality became this: I gave them the tools of awareness, and they expressed their awareness with such clarity and wisdom that within me was born a deep respect for them. Quite often they have shown themselves to be my teachers!

Recently I was teaching yoga to a group of children between the ages of four and seven. They flexed their spines in cat and cow, mooing and meowing enthusiastically; stretched into cobra, hissing all the while; balanced on their bottoms, holding their legs up in lotus flower pose; and focused as fierce warriors in archer pose. The active yoga exercises were followed by a deep relaxation, on their backs with arms and legs straight but relaxed. In this particular class, I guided the children in a visualization in which they imagined they were lying on a warm, sandy beach. As they breathed in they imagined the waves of the ocean coming up to the shore. On the out breath, the waves returned to the sea. As I looked around the room at the various children, I noticed that each of them seemed to have internalized these images in such a way that they were profoundly relaxed--even more so than if they were in a deep sleep. They were consciously relaxing, bringing their minds and bodies together to achieve a peaceful awareness of inner space. This state is the basis for the practice of yoga and meditation. And it is the basis for a happy, peaceful life. The inner experience of yoga gave these children a gift they can never lose, because it will be within them all the time.

After our relaxation, we sang a song together--me strumming my autoharp and they singing with gusto. The song instructed: "You can make the sun shine any old time, Even when the clouds are there." We sang for a while, then I asked, " Does anybody have an idea what this song means?" One five-year-old girl answered immediately, "It means that even when things are not so good, you still have the sunshine in your heart, and you can make things better!" Need I say more?

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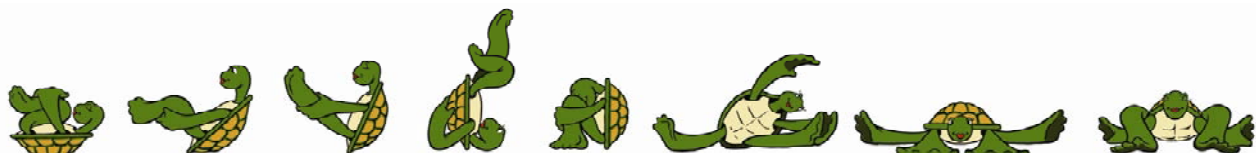


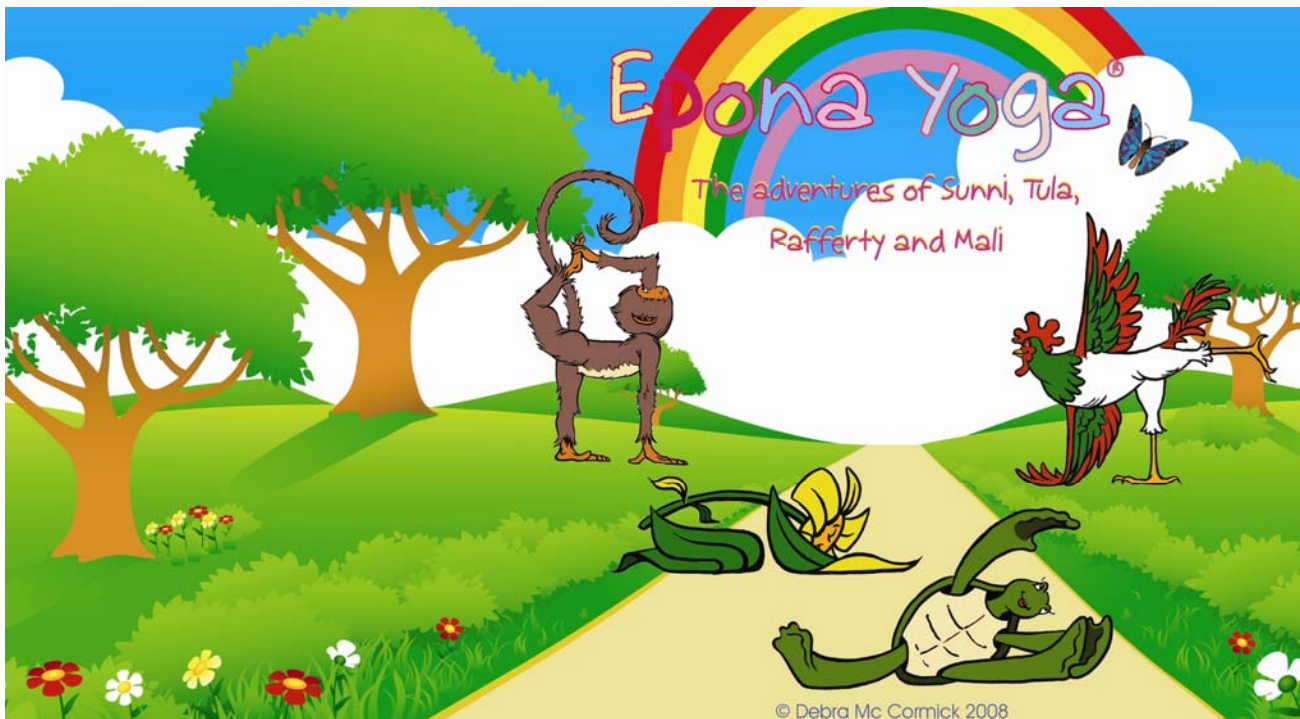
How can you introduce your child to yoga? There are many resources for learning yoga, several of which focus on children's yoga. My book, *Fly Like A Butterfly*, is a resource that is simple enough for those who know next to nothing about yoga. It offers instruction on learning yoga poses, deep relaxation and meditation. Parents have expressed appreciation for its playful manner--its presentation of actively moving exercises balanced with those that require stillness and inner concentration, all in a child-friendly way.

Tips for Doing Yoga with Your Children

1. Create a special time of the day for yoga with your child. Take some time in the morning or evening and follow it with a deep relaxation.
2. Make a "sacred space." Use a small table or cover a box with a cloth. Decorate it with pictures and objects that have special meaning for your child. Use a candle for focus during a meditative yoga time.
3. To begin, sit with your child on the floor with legs crossed and eyes closed. Take a few deep breaths to quiet your mind and tune in to your inner guidance.
4. How long to do yoga? With preschoolers, 10 to 15 minutes is a good start. Each exercise should last 30 seconds to one minute. You can increase the time as they get used to it and develop the ability to stay focused. Elementary-age children can easily practice yoga for 20 minutes, including a few minutes of deep relaxation and perhaps a few minutes of meditation. Of course, each individual child is different. You will know best what your child's capacity is. Remember, it is better to start simply and build gradually.
5. F-U-N. Those three letters that are so important! Entice your child with interesting, imaginative, engaging exercises. Challenge them, for example, by using a timer ("Let's see how long you can stay up in that pose with deep breathing!"). Use your intuition and light-hearted humor rather than your intellect to motivate them.

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You might feel that you would like to have a teacher for you and your child. Many yoga centers are beginning to offer classes for children. You will find that the techniques and styles of yoga differ greatly from one center to the next, so explore and ask questions. Good luck, and get ready for lots of pleasant surprises, fun and great blessings from yoga!

Shakta Kaur Khalsa has 30 years of experience as a yoga teacher, teacher trainer and Montessori educator. She is the author of *Fly Like A Butterfly: Yoga for Children*, among other books. She travels nationally and internationally, presenting "The Radiant Child Yoga Program," a fun and comprehensive workshop for learning how to teach children yoga. See her website, www.childrensyoga.com, for more details; to find a children's yoga teacher in your area, send an E-mail to yogainfo@earthlink.net.

Shakta Kaur Khalsa will teach "Giving Children the Gift of Yoga," teacher training levels I and II on September 6th and 7th in Chicago. To register, call 773.975.9754 or visit www.spiritrisingyoga.com.

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