

Yoga for the Whole Child

by Elizabeth Gibbs

What is Yoga for the Whole Child?

Several years ago, when I was teaching yoga in an after-school program in Hartford, Connecticut, one of my young students was consistently disruptive in class. I asked her why she came to class, since participation was voluntary and she didn't seem to be enjoying herself. Her answer: "When I feel bad, I go sit on my bed and say *Om*, and it makes me feel better."

That was a watershed moment for me. I realized that this child, in spite of her behavior, had made the connection between a challenge she faced and the effective use of a yoga technique as a solution. She had become a problem solver! I have never forgotten that exchange and have used it as the basis for designing programs that teach other children to make similar connections between an everyday concern or problem, a specific yoga technique, and a desired outcome, a mind/body/behavior connection. Such a connection leads to balance in the physical, energetic, mental and emotional levels and results in a relaxed state of awareness - in other words - yoga for the whole child.

Why Yoga?

Research has shown that a relaxed state of awareness is recommended as optimal for receptivity, learning, and problem solving. For over 5,000 years, yoga postures, breathing practices and mental exercises have been used to teach adults and children how to create and sustain this "relaxed yet aware" state of mind.

Adults often ask children to "sit still," "calm down," and "pay attention," but children are rarely, if ever, taught the specific skills they need to do so. Strategies that can bring about a relaxed yet aware state of mind and give children concrete tools they can use to help them "sit still," "calm down" and "pay attention," can be useful tools for both children and adults as long as they are simple and easy and designed to work within a two to ten minute time frame.

Most books on yoga written for children contain a wide variety of pictures or illustrations and descriptions of postures, activities and games, but lack the context that helps children understand how to apply yoga skills to their everyday, real life situations. Resource materials that can effectively help teachers, parents, health professionals and adults who work with children introduce these helpful techniques into their classrooms; practices and programs lag far behind the need. Most that exist currently are designed for specialized class settings that require certified instructors, dedicated times of a half hour or more, props, and a room empty of chairs and tables. Meeting these requirements is difficult to impossible during a busy school day, at home, in a doctor's office or when children need gentle yet effective re-direction within the confines of a structured situation. What children and those who work with children need are tools that provide:

- A context, in child friendly language, that explains how Yoga works to create and sustain a relaxed state of awareness
- Clear instructions on how to do simple effective exercises that require no special room set-ups, clothing or props
- Situation specific examples, which allow children to make the direct connection between a real life situation, a specific exercise and its intended effect
- Information for adults that clearly describes how to teach and integrate these exercises within the confines of regularly scheduled classes and activities in two to ten minute time frames.

How Does Yoga work?

Yoga postures and exercises remove lactic acid, metabolic waste and stress hormones from the muscles. They increase the supply of blood and oxygen to the brain and the body's organs. Weight bearing postures help increase bone density and improve skeletal health. The effects of yoga on the body and mind can last up to 24-48 hours. For example:

- Stretching and back bending increase energy
- Forward bends calm and relax
- Twists and balancing exercises increase the ability to focus
- Yoga breathing enhances the effects of the postures and helps to calm and focus the mind
- Guided imagery, chanting and meditation quiet the mind
- Relaxation practices stimulate the body's own healing process

Yoga can be an important tool for children to learn. According to the Yoga Research and Education Center, some benefits of yoga for children are:

- Increased self-awareness and self-confidence
- Children learn how to be gentle with themselves and others
- Develops the ability to focus and concentrate
- Develops balance and equilibrium
- Improves performance in all areas of life, including schoolwork
- Relieves stress and provides a greater sense of general well being
- Increases flexibility, coordination and strength
- Enhances sports performance

At What Age Should Yoga Lessons Begin?

Formal yoga lessons for children can begin at age eight. Before the age of eight, yoga as play is recommended. This is because children between ages 8 and 10 are more independent and physically active. They've made major gains in muscle strength, coordination and basic motor skills such as learning to throw, hit a baseball, or kick a soccer ball. Thinking, reasoning and decision-making skills mature more rapidly as they learn to think in more complex ways and at this age they tend to concern themselves with things that can be experienced through the five senses, one sense at a time.

Gaining awareness and an understanding of the growth stages in child and youth development is important because the knowledge provides a firm foundation on which to select age appropriate yoga techniques that can help children of all abilities gain self-awareness, optimal health, and a relaxed state of awareness - which is a key goal of any yoga practice.

How a Yoga Program for Children Can Work – One Example

Many schools and youth programs now successfully offer yoga to children as educators and program providers discover that teaching yoga to children helps them deal with stress, improve test scores and reduce disruptive behavior.

Camp Courant, a summer day camp for children from the City of Hartford, CT is one example. It is the largest—and one of the oldest—free day camps in the country, serving hundreds of inner-city children between the ages of 5 and 12. Since 2002, Camp Courant has offered general yoga classes to campers in the program and teaches the lessons to over 400 children each summer.

The ‘Wake Up and Relax’ yoga program at Camp Courant is designed to teach children the skills to help them “sit still,” “calm down,” and “pay attention,” and introduces them to simple ways to take those skills off their mats and into their daily lives for well-being and problem solving. Specifically, we teach them how to:

- Energize and relax the physical body
- Use the breath effectively
- Calm and focus the mind
- Enhance the ability to listen and cooperate.

The yoga exercises are organized into the following categories:

- Active physical movement and breathing
- Passive physical movement and breathing
- Balancing both sides of the brain
- Listening and cooperating

Each exercise has an effect that can be either:

- Energizing/warming
- Calming/cooling
- Balancing/focusing

The exercises can also facilitate awareness and clarify body/mind states:

- A physical or physiological state (back pain, constipation, racing heart beat)
- An energy state (waking up, calming down, paying attention)
- Emotions or states of mind (anger management, controlling impulsive behavior)

The program offers techniques for exercising the body, the breath, and the mind (*the whole child*) and is designed to be integrated into any program or classroom setting. In addition to daily classes, Camp Courant’s yoga program offers a ‘Yoga Rocks’ club for campers who want a deeper experience of yoga.

The program is managed by Laura Magnussen, RYT and a Certified YogaKids® Facilitator who has taught more than 300 classes for children, from preschoolers to teens. Camp Courant has managed to keep the program running through foundation grants, contributions from local yoga studios and donations from individual donors.

The best evidence for the need to encourage the teaching of yoga in schools, homes and youth programs comes from the children themselves. Here is what some of them have said about their yoga experience at Camp Courant:

“(It) helps with my asthma.”

“I do yoga ’cause it helps me to be quiet and calm. It’s not very calm at home.”

“To be strong and healthy.”

“To build muscle and concentrate.”

“To relax and open my mind.”

“My experience of yoga has been a success because I learned the take 5 breaths when angry or mad.”

“It was like it’s for people who are stressed so that they could empty their heads and just flow.”

“It was an opening in my life and a way to de-stress and concentrate.”

“My experience was I thought I would always do this for the rest of my life.”

For information on Camp Courant, go to www.campcourant.org

Elizabeth Gibbs, MA, E-RYT is the author of: *"Ogi Bogi, the Elephant Yogi"* - a yoga book for children and a companion manual for adults who work with children. The book and manual will be released in 2014. For information on the publications please contact Beth at: beth@proyogatherapeutics.com

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