

Teaching Yoga in Schools

Yoga for children and teenagers



It's easy to think of yoga as a practice for adults - something that grown-ups do in order to reduce stress and stay physically well, flexible and strong. However, in recent years more and more parents and teachers have discovered the joy of sharing the practice of yoga with children. Increasingly, they are recognising yoga as the inclusive and versatile practice it is.

It turns out that children often make the most receptive and appreciative participants of yoga. Yoga can work just as well in a school hall with a group of excitable six year olds as it can with fitness-focused adults in gyms and health studios.

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Yoga in Schools

Given the profound benefits of yoga for children, it's no surprise that in recent years, more and more schools have set up their own yoga teaching programmes. No longer the preserve of after school classes for the select few, many schools are working to ensure all children can have a go at yoga. They recognise that yoga in schools is a fantastic way to bring about:

- **Improved focus and concentration.** Which school doesn't want children to be less distracted, and easier to engage in learning? When children are able to focus better, their productivity and progress is likely to improve.
- **Happier children.** The biggest benefit of yoga, really, is that children enjoy it. They love the chance to play with something new, to learn a skill and try something different. For many children their yoga sessions become the reason they are excited to come to school.
- **Improved relationships.** As children become more socially and emotionally aware, they build more positive relationships with each other. Practising yoga in groups improves group dynamics, increases social intelligence and builds mutual trust. It can be a bonding experience for a class to practise yoga together.
- **Empowered teachers.** Many teachers who train in teaching yoga with their pupils find that it's an incredibly fulfilling way to develop as professionals. It gives them a chance to offer something different to their pupils, and respond to pupils' emerging needs in a sensitive way.
- **Creative classrooms.** Often as teachers get to know the benefits of yoga fully, they'll bring the techniques into the classroom. They might teach children to observe "mindful moments" as a way to calm and settle the children after break, or use the creativity of movement in yoga as a stimulus for creative writing.
- **Access to yoga for all.** Perhaps the best thing about yoga springing up in schools is that it means all pupils and young people can access it. While some interested parents might take their children to kids' yoga classes, or even teach them bits themselves, yoga in schools means all have the opportunity to access its benefits.

How it can work

Children are natural yogis. Still in touch with their bodies, and with a sense of playfulness and curiosity about the world, yoga provides an ideal focus for their energy. Children don't need to be taught not to take themselves too seriously, and often find it far easier than their parents to jump straight in and have a go at new yoga poses and sequences.

For the littlies, yoga can be grounded in play - the teacher might show them how to make shapes (and sometimes noises!) with their bodies, transforming into different yoga creatures. One day they can be stretchy yoga cats and cows, the next swimming turtles or roaring lions. They learn to connect their minds with their bodies, coordinating thought and intention with movement.

As children get a bit older, their teacher might introduce them to breathing techniques, and ways to stretch and relax their bodies. Some of the foundations of yoga, such as ujjayi breathing can be taught in fun ways - who wouldn't enjoy learning to breathe like Darth Vader? They might also start to build in exciting gymnastic moves like handstands or crow pose to keep children curious, engaged and playful. Many kids love nothing more than learning something new to show off when they get home.

For teenagers, yoga can be explored as a holistic practice, helping them to deepen their connection with and acceptance of their changing bodies and minds. Often adolescence is a time when young people begin to challenge established way of thinking about themselves and their position in the world. Yoga can allow them to find a creative expression of their fresh perspectives and insights.



Why it's so powerful

Yoga is the distillation of thousands of years of wisdom and insight into the body, mind and spirit. It makes sense that we'd want to give children access to this wisdom. When we teach them young, children learn techniques and strategies that will keep them healthy and well throughout their childhood, teenage years and into adulthood.

Not only that, but children's natural sense of inquisitiveness and joy means they bring a spirited and refreshing approach to yoga. For many children, they are not yet burdened by the inhibitions and reservations that adults face when they begin something new. They have perhaps fewer layers to dig through before they can liberate themselves. They're free to simply enjoy the practice.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of yoga play out on a number of levels. Let's consider the difference yoga can make to children physically, mentally and emotionally.

Physical Benefits

- **Yoga gets children moving.** It is a safe, tried and tested practice which can be energetic and dynamic. It's no secret that children need physical activity, and in the modern day where computer games and mobile phones dominate, it can be ever more challenging to lure children away from their screens and encourage them to move. Yoga is a great way to get children to kick off their shoes and experience the sheer joy of moving their bodies.
- **Yoga boosts coordination and balance.** As children grow so quickly, many go through stages of finding balance and coordination quite challenging. By improving the mind-body connection, yoga is renowned for boosting proprioception, the sense of position of your own body in space. With practice over time, this can support children to improve their agility and control, helping them to move better in sports, play and in life.
- **Yoga builds strength.** Having strong, healthy muscles and bones is a key part of maintaining physical well being, and pumping iron is not only way to achieve this. For children, yoga is great, because it lets them use their own body weight in a safe and controlled way to naturally build strength.
- **Yoga helps children maintain their natural mobility.** Have you ever watched a child effortlessly slide into the box splits or press up into a perfect full wheel pose without batting an eyelid? Children are naturally more flexible and mobile than adults. Some of this they will lose as their bones firm up with age, but by working with their flexibility, they can learn to maintain more of it and build strength in their range of motion as they grow.

Mental benefits

With all the physical benefits and movement of yoga, it can be easy to overlook the fact that yoga was originally created as a practice to ready the body for meditation. Through the body, yogis learn to better understand, calm and harness the power of their minds. The mental benefits of yoga for children go beyond simply wearing them out so that they'll sit still and focus on something, although undoubtedly, that is a factor!

Yoga can also provide mental benefits for children by encouraging:

- **Concentration.** Yoga teaches children and young people how to focus their minds on one thing, eliminating distractions and bringing awareness to what they are doing. Many teachers and parents notice and enjoy the periods of calm concentration that their children exhibit after a yoga session.
- **Relaxation.** Yoga is renowned for its stress-reducing benefits, helping people to relax mentally as well as physically. As much as we don't like to think of children as being stressed, most children will experience some kind of anxiety or worry at least once in their early years. Yoga can teach them how to relax when they are feeling wound up.
- **Mindfulness.** The techniques of yoga can be used to promote mindful awareness, teaching children how recognise their own thoughts and feelings. Awareness is the

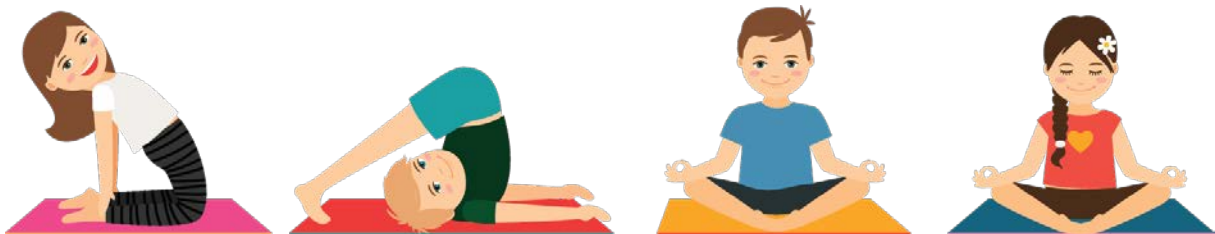
first step to being able to influence these, so in time children can learn how to think and feel more positively, a hugely valuable life skill.

Emotional benefits

The modern world is full of pressures on young people. More than any previous generation, children and teenagers are surrounded by influences from advertising, social media and television. They are often given messages that they need to strive, be productive and do better. Education is increasingly driven by assessment, and while this may have had a positive impact on standards and progress, it does mean that children as young as five or six can be subject to exam pressure and stress.

Yoga cannot change the presence of any of these stressors, but it can change the impact they have. How?

- **By holding space.** Yoga provides a space for children simply to be themselves and to learn that they don't always need to be striving. It gives them an alternative way of being in the world.
- **By encouraging self-acceptance.** By creating an environment where they feel safe to just be present, children can learn self-acceptance. They will notice, in a non-judgemental atmosphere that everyone is different, and that this is ok.
- **By reducing competitiveness** Yoga is non-competitive, and pro-self-esteem, teaching children that they don't need to beat anyone else in order to feel good. They will find that they are already enough. Just think how powerful could it be for our society and our world if we were all taught this message as children.



How can yoga promote healthy living messages?

In a confusing world where both obesity and eating disorders are on the rise, even the topic of exercise for children can be a minefield. Parents and schools alike want to ensure that children develop healthy habits, but without them becoming fixated on calories or fat burning. For many, what they want is simply a way for children and young people to get active and move because they enjoy it, not because they think they should. Yoga can be a safe and fun space for children to explore and enjoy movement, without the need to perform or achieve goals.

There are many young people, especially teenagers, who might be lured into an unhealthy relationship with exercise, at risk of over-exercising in order to try to control their body and appearance. For these young people, the physical practice and benefits of yoga, coupled with the emphasis on compassion and mindfulness make it a safer bet. Yoga can teach them how to make friends with their bodies, rather than punish themselves.

The concept of befriending your body through yoga also provides a natural way in to talking about making positive, healthy eating choices with children and teenagers alike. They can learn to fuel their bodies with plenty of delicious nutritious food and to make more mindful choices about when and how much they eat.

Yoga for Teens and Young People

Dealing with stress

Perhaps even more than their younger siblings, young people and teenagers can be battling a vast range of conflicting pressures, meaning they always feel they need to be something other than what they are. They juggle the expectations of their peers, their parents and their teachers, all the while trying to make sense of the changes in their bodies and emotions as they hit puberty and figure out who they are. It can be incredibly confusing and stressful. Teaching young people how to manage their own physical and mental wellbeing is a priority that cannot not be ignored.

Yoga can help teenagers to process the social and emotional stresses they are under, while learning to accept and embrace their developing bodies and the difficult feelings this can bring up. It gives them a space where they are allowed to just be themselves, free from distraction and noise. It teaches them tools and techniques to calm their minds, as well as helping them to connect in a positive way to their physical bodies.

Providing structure

Yoga by its very nature requires discipline, and the structured nature of the practice can support teenagers who need clarity about what's expected of them. After a few classes, they know the drill, and many respond really well to this consistency. What's more, if they attend regularly, they'll see themselves develop and improve. The challenge some of the postures present can give young people a real sense of pride and accomplishment, leaving them feeling great about what their bodies can do.

Moving deeper

As many who work with teenagers know, they are often highly soulful, spiritual beings, keen to explore a deeper connection with their world as their own sense of self develops. Through yoga, they can find a way into this. Yoga opens up the doors to a lifetime of learning, self-study and exploration, and the freedom for young people to choose just how far they want to go with this.

Yoga Styles for Children

If an adult chooses to start yoga, the choice of classes and styles can be overwhelming. If they're injured or overworked, they might consider gentle restorative yoga. To build flexibility or learn to calm their mind, they may choose a slow, deep style such as yin yoga. To explore more of the spiritual aspects of yoga, they may look into a kundalini or sivananda style of yoga. Or if they're looking for a fitness boost, a dynamic power yoga or vinyasa yoga styles is likely to appeal the most.

For young children

Most teachers will opt for a modified style of hatha yoga, where they can play with different poses. In hatha yoga, you try each posture individually, so the teacher can take a bit of time to explain each one and let children have a go. There's plenty of room then for creativity and playfulness. Children also often love to play with sun salutation sequences, practising them until they know them off by heart and can do them without instructions.

As children get older

They'll likely be introduced to some of the more mindful aspects of yoga, bringing their attention into exactly what they are doing. There are even school programmes specifically around mindfulness for children, which are said to improve self-regulation and emotional awareness.

For teenagers and young people

The more dynamic, energetic nature of vinyasa yoga often appeals. This is where they move through the poses in a flowing sequence connecting movement with breathing. The complexity is great for holding teenage attention, while the dance-like nature of the flow can be a great way to explore creative self-expression. More challenging postures such as inversions and arm balances can be easily integrated into this style of yoga too, which are great for boosting confidence.

Are there any styles of yoga that definitely don't work for children?

Well, deeper, slower styles of yoga such as yin yoga can be less suitable. This is partly because on a mental level, the focus and discipline required to fully engage with the postures when they're held for a long time - often five minutes in yin yoga - can be really challenging for young yogis. On a physical level too, we know that children's bodies are naturally more flexible, and while this is a great asset, it's important not to encourage hypermobility or excessive range of motion, which can put pressure on the joints and cause problems for them later in life.

Finally, a word of warning about hot styles of yoga. While parents may have gone wild for practising yoga in heated studios, using the heat to go deeper into postures and sweating out their stresses, this is not advisable for children. Children's heat regulation systems are

not as fully developed as adults', and they are therefore more susceptible to overheating. It's better to stick to "normal temperature" styles of yoga where if they get hot, it'll be because they're working hard, not because the heaters are on full blast.



Five Great Yoga Poses for Kids

Want to try some yoga with your children? Here are five fantastic poses to get you started:

1. **Mountain Pose.** Children are rarely still by choice. Teach them this powerful standing pose and get them to imagine being so still and so strong that they could stand there for thousands of years. Great for calming the mind.
2. **Warrior Two Pose.** This pose where the legs are apart, front knee bent and arms open to a T-shape, with the gaze looking along the front arm is a great pose for teaching the power of taking aim. They can visualise whatever their goal or target is along the end of their gaze, and picture themselves like a strong warrior, ready to tackle any challenge.
3. **Tree Pose.** Children often love to play with balance poses, and they're great for improving their concentration and proprioception. Tree pose, standing on one leg with the other leg bent, foot resting on the calf or thigh, offers a great place to build stability and strength. They can play with variations of being a sapling, then raising their arms to grow their tree, spreading their branches and even swaying in the wind.
4. **Shoulderstand.** This is a pose children often do anyway, without any prompting from yoga teachers. It's a lovely inversion, where they support their hips with their hands and turn their lower body upside down. Teach them to keep their head still when they are in the pose to protect their neck, and focus on calm, steady breathing.
5. **Child's Pose.** The clue is in the name. This pose, which children get into from kneeling then folding forwards over their knees to rest their foreheads on the floor is a fantastic rest pose, and a great one for calming them down, and helping them to feel safe and secure. They can stretch their arms long on the ground in front of them, or place hands by their feet.

Final Thoughts

Their openness and lack of inhibitions mean children are the perfect candidates for learning yoga. In fact, it's likely that we as adults can learn a lot from their inquisitive curiosity and spirited approach to doing something new. When they learn the benefits young enough, the sky really is the limit - they can take and apply this learning anywhere. Whether children want to become astronauts, dancers, scientists, athletes or surgeons, it's likely that the ability to connect with their bodies and calm their minds will be of great value.

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