

## Yoga for Kids

### For Infants to Teens – This/Mind Therapy Works Wonders

By SHERRY LEBLANC

I love teaching yoga to children. Every day I travel all over the city, teaching children of all ages and abilities from different cultures and backgrounds. I meet children who are happy and carefree, serious and intense, scared, sad, easily distracted, or who need individual help to move more efficiently. I love to see the subtle and sometime profound transformations that occur. I have marvelous and often whacky conversations that teach, tickle and inspire me. I enjoy hearing from parents how their child goes home and teaches them their favourite yoga poses or goes off alone and is found sitting in meditation, silent and still. I love the heart-felt greetings, warm hugs, and enthusiasm. I love the drama, the chaos and the challenge. I get to play, sing, and dance. I have fun almost every day. I like my job.

As adults, many of us have discovered how yoga works on many different levels. How it has a healing effect on the body, the mind and the emotions. Let's give our children the opportunity to develop a supple healthy body, to lessen anxiety and to stimulate creative thinking and intellectual growth.

#### **Yoga with Infants**

Begin doing yoga with your infant. Create a soothing and nurturing atmosphere. Caress and massage. Be gentle. Watch, talk and sing to your baby while you attend closely to his/her movements.

Do 2 -4 repetitions of foot rotations and ankle flexion and rotation to improve strength and flexibility that will help establish good posture later. Do knee bends, a push/pull motion with the legs and gentle hip joint rotations to stimulate the abdominal organs to alleviate gas and constipation. Improve lung capacity and upper body strength and flexibility with parallel and lateral arm lifts.

#### **Yoga with Pre-school Children**

*A group of four and five year olds are practicing a cleansing breath that helps clear excess mucus and phlegm from their sinuses and respiratory tract.*

*"I really needed that," says one child as he pauses to blow his nose.*

*"Me, too." "Me, too." The others chime in with authority.*

This is an ideal time for children to begin a yoga practice. Their young minds are naturally curious and creative. They learn by playing, singing, moving and imitating. They learn by watching each other.

Yoga, adapted for children, inspires their imaginations to teach them about nature and their environment, helping them to learn about the real world. Bunnies hopping, frogs

leaping, crabs dancing, herds of elephants marching develop body awareness, language, good listening skills, cooperation and powers of observation. Balloon breaths, buzzing bees, panting dogs and hooting owls all prepare a child for the breathing techniques used in yoga. A short period of relaxation or activities that encourage children to close their eyes briefly calms them down and prepares them for meditation. Moving their hands while singing teaches them rhythm, melody and visual-motor coordination. Role-play, game play and make-believe develop self-discipline, conceptual thought and problem solving skills.

### **School Age Children**

*Sherry: "Sally, can you stretch just a little further in that pose."*

*Sally (6 years old): "No!"*

*Sherry: "Why Not?"*

*Sally: "My bones are in the way."*

*Sherry: "Let's practice our tree pose. Feel your roots growing deep into the earth and feel steady and strong as you balance on one leg. Do you feel your roots?"*

*Mimi (7 years old): "Yeh, I feel roots, but I don't think they're mine."*

Practicing yoga poses, pranayama (breathing techniques), visualization, meditation and deep relaxation help to improve the learning abilities of school-aged children. They develop concentration, memory and the ability to integrate abstract ideas. Calm and self-assured children learn better. They are able to manage their daily challenges more successfully.

As children grow and become pre-teens & teens, the regular physical and mental discipline that the practice of yoga offers helps to channel emotional energies in a positive manner. Adolescents maintain a greater sense of inner strength and have healthy alternative strategies to deal with anger and inappropriate urges. I make yoga classes for preteens and teens physically challenging, but when I ask why they enjoy yoga, the most frequent response is, "It's relaxing". "It's fun."

### **Yoga for Children with Special Needs**

*A 4-year-old girl whose speech and development is delayed shouts out "rock pose" as she demonstrates the yoga pose for her class. Developing a yoga vocabulary has given her movement to help express herself.*

*A 4-year-old boy diagnosed with autism was preoccupied with images of monsters when he started his yoga practice. He now envisions butterflies, cornfields, buzzing bees and children playing in the park. He is more composed and verbally expressive. His attention span and ability to learn has improved.*

*A 6-year-old girl with mild cerebral palsy can walk, jump and run with greater ease. She can make transitions effortlessly from lying down to sitting upright and then to standing. Balance, coordination, strength and stamina have noticeably improved. She has also gained social independence.*

*A 13-year-old girl with a developmental disability that bends and twists her spine is beginning to achieve posture that is more erect. This enables her to breathe deeply and consequently strengthens her lungs. As a result, her over-all health and vitality are positively affected.*

Sonia Sumar, Director of Yoga for the Special Child™ has designed a yoga therapy program specifically for children and adults with Special Needs. Yoga Therapy works well with children on an individual basis. It reduces hyperactivity and improves concentration to help children with learning disabilities, autism, ADHD and ADD gain self-control. Yoga therapy increases basic motor, cognitive and communication skills in children with developmental disabilities such as Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy and Spina Bifida. It helps to soothe the emotionally disturbed, destructive and aggressive child.

### **Introduce Yoga into your Child's Daily Routine**

Nowadays many yoga studios, dance studios, private clubs, community centres and camps offer children's yoga. Other effective ways to introduce yoga into your child's life is in daycare, in kindergarten and school, or at home.

Daycares often bring in teaching specialist to enrich programs. Yoga in the classroom is simple, effective and affordable. One does not need any special equipment or much space. Students can participate in a 10 -20 minute yoga session while sitting or standing at their desks. They can do simple yoga stretches, eye exercises and deep breathing to help regain attention and renew vitality. Teachers can make curriculum connections with yoga in physical education, health, music, drama, dance, science & visual arts. A children's yoga specialist can come into the school to run 45-60 minute lunchtime or after school programs.

### **Yoga with the Family**

Establishing a time to do yoga and meditation with your children will help cultivate a healthy life-style and reinforce the bond between family members. Parents and siblings have fun doing yoga together.

Make yoga part of your daily routine. Set aside space or a quiet peaceful corner in your home. Dim the lights and play soothing music. Light a candle and create an altar with photos of loved ones.

Put aside 20 minutes before breakfast to do a series of Sun Salutation, simple yoga stretches and deep abdominal or alternate nostril breathing. You and your children will feel more relaxed, focused, and mentally alert during the school or workday. Do yoga together in the evening before bedtime. It will help everyone sleep better.

There are so many ways that you can make yoga part your child's life. Teach them to be tolerant, generous, and to do good deeds; to be present and patient; to be grateful; and to cherish life. This is Yoga.

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*Sherry also teaches professional development workshops for adults that qualify as continuing education units through Yoga Alliance.*

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