

## Children and Yoga

Contributed by Isaac Eliaz, M.D., M.S., L.Ac.

Obesity and lack of overall fitness are at epidemic proportions in the United States. This trend is increasingly including children whose lives have become more sedentary in our technological society. Some parents realize the need for more exercise in their children's lives, but are wary of physical activities and sports of a competitive nature. They want to find alternatives that will help their children develop more fitness, as well as obtain other benefits. Many adults have seen the benefits of practicing yoga as yoga continues to become more mainstream in western culture. Parents who take yoga themselves naturally want to see their children derive the same benefits. Yoga classes for kids as young as three are springing up all over the country.

### Is yoga safe for children?

Many pediatricians feel yoga for children is fine, as long as it is practiced in moderation and safety precautions are observed. Some experts in the field of yoga question the safety of yoga as practiced by children. American Yoga Association (AYA) president Alice Christensen, believes that yoga is not appropriate for children under sixteen because the effect of yoga on nervous and glandular systems may interfere with natural growth. "Two of my great teachers, Rama and Lakshmanjoo, advised me of the dangers that Yoga asanas may pose for young children." explains Alice Christensen on the American Yoga Association's website <http://www.americanyogaassociation.org>. Patricia Rockwood of AYA states, "Yoga puts pressure on different glands. It changes the body's metabolism and structure and causes certain hormonal changes."<sup>1</sup> She feels that there are plenty of other activities and exercises more suitable for children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not have an official position on yoga. Dr. Hank Chambers, director of Sports Medicine at Children's Hospital and Health Center in San Diego and a pediatric orthopedic surgeon, believes that while yoga that is very physically demanding might not be appropriate for children, simple yoga exercises for stretching and relaxation are fine. He states, "I've never seen one injury from yoga in 20 years."<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics says there's no data on any negative effects of yoga on children thus far.<sup>3</sup> "While little research has been done on the risks and benefits of yoga, intuitively it is an activity that can improve flexibility and help in relaxation," said Eric W. Small, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness. However, Dr. Small advises parents (with the help of their child's pediatrician) to assess if yoga is suitable for an individual child, just as they would other physical activities such as martial arts, gymnastics, ballet, etc.<sup>4</sup>

### How should children practice yoga?

Just as adults need to consider safety precautions when practicing yoga, so should children. Children should not over stretch muscles or be pushed too hard. "For example, children might over stretch themselves and not be able to determine when they should stop or ask for assistance," said Dr. Small. "Children might not be able to localize pain." Yoga should also not be seen as a substitute for cardiovascular activities. Despite these considerations, Dr. Small said, "yoga can benefit children of various ages." Dr. Fernando Rustia, a pediatrician at the Aurora Health Care clinic in Mount Pleasant, also offers a few tips: "Activities of 20 or 30 minutes duration are best. That's probably all that they can handle. And the activities should not be too rigid. They tend to do better with the unstructured, spontaneous and kind of a free-flowing activity," Rustia said. Again, it is important to consult with the child's doctor if any health issues may preclude taking yoga, such as a spinal problem. "Yoga [asana] would be acceptable for children of about age 7 and older," he said .  
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Younger children have smaller bodies and lower attention spans so would probably not respond well to the position-holding and meditative aspects of yoga. Playful, introductory classes are best suited for the small child. In a typical class aimed at younger children, gentle yoga stretches and movements, often mimicking animals, are incorporated with

games.<sup>6</sup> Games involving and encouraging imaginative play are well-suited for preschool-aged children. As children become older, they may try breathing and meditation exercises.<sup>7</sup> Again, moderation seems to be the key word.

What are the overall benefits of yoga for children?

Apart from physical benefits such as flexibility and balance, advocates say yoga helps kids to become more aware of their bodies, relax and develop self esteem. Teachers and parents seem to especially appreciate its noncompetitive nature. Gloria Siech, who is in charge of the physical education program for the San Francisco Unified School District observed, "There's no keeping score, and there's nobody telling them that's not good enough. It helps to center kids and helps them concentrate. They are able to calm down and breathe, and the teachers see the improvement immediately ." <sup>8</sup> Wendy L. Wornham, M.D., assistant professor of clinical pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and who has practiced yoga for 25 years, states "The concentration involved with physical yoga postures (asanas) and breathing exercises (pranayamas) can help children relax and seems to decrease their anxiety." <sup>9</sup>

Can yoga help children with disabilities and ailments?

In 2001, the American Academy of Pediatrics did a survey of their members on their patient referrals to complimentary and alternative medicine. Of the 733 respondents, 55 percent said they recommended yoga as part of an asthma treatment regimen, and 24 percent said they recommended it for children with ADHD.<sup>10</sup> Thus far, the effect of yoga on managing bronchial asthma has been studied more than the effect on ADHD. While studies on the efficacy of yoga in managing ADHD are still spotty, preliminary research indicates that there are benefits to including yoga as part of an overall treatment plan.<sup>11</sup> Preliminary research also seems to indicate that there are benefits to the practice of yoga by mentally retarded children. One study in India showed significant improvement of social skills and mental abilities in mentally retarded children after practicing yoga for one academic year. <sup>12</sup> Currently, there are a number of children's yoga instructors working with special needs patients (DSI, ADHD, Autism and CP) in the United States. The response from teachers and therapists have been positive as to the improvements seen in the children. Unfortunately, there aren't many studies in the mainstream western scientific press to confirm these claims. Much of the research on the effects of yoga seem to be published and sponsored by institutions in India.

## Conclusion

Many people in the west, including doctors, practice yoga themselves and intuitively realize that there are probably benefits for children as well. While there are few studies, many pediatricians seem to see no problem with children practicing yoga as long as it is practiced in moderation and the focus remains on gentle stretching, balance and relaxation. It seems advisable, as a precaution, for young practitioners to avoid the more strenuous aspects of yoga such as advanced poses, extended stretches, holding of poses for long periods, and the more advanced breathing exercises. Studies thus far seem to indicate positive benefits of yoga on conditions such bronchial asthma and ADHD. Perhaps soon, there will be more confirmation that yoga has positive benefits for other ailments and disabilities in children.

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