



Kids hold hands and lift their feet in a united version of Butterfly Pose.

Child's Play

How yoga affects your child's body, mind, and grades

By Gina Roberts-Grey

While yoga helps adults relieve tension, find emotional balance, and increase muscle strength, it's also child's play: Many schoolteachers, weight-management experts, and mental health professionals recommend yoga as a valuable physical activity for children. These leading experts say that practicing yoga gives children significant benefits, such as relieving stress, battling obesity and insomnia, and even increasing self-esteem.



"By lengthening and stretching a child's muscles, yoga effectively develops core strength and flexibility, and helps to make a child's body more resilient to injury," explains Alice Anderson, MS, PCS, a physical therapist who incorporates yoga in a new weight-management program for pediatric patients at Children's Medical Center Dallas.

Studies show that children who do yoga at least twice a week have better study habits and can concentrate more easily. A January 2007 study conducted by Dr. Janet Buckenmeyer

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Triangle Pose helps the children feel grounded..

Primary Practice

- Yoga for children under the age of three is more of a partner activity, with the adult passively moving the child through stretching movements. As children begin to stand on their own or with assistance, they can start with limited standing postures.
- Children ages three to eight can begin to follow direction and flow from one pose into another. They can participate in games that incorporate yoga postures and learn how to focus, breathe, and appreciate their bodies just as they are.

from Purdue University and Dr. David Freltas from Indiana University, concludes: “Yoga has a significant positive effect on the academic achievement, general health, personal attributes, and relationships of students in kindergarten through fifth grade.”

When third-grade teacher Leslie Stewart accepted the offer of a parent volunteer to teach her students yoga once a week, she had no idea how much it would impact their lives. The third-graders began using yoga to relieve stress and anxiety both in and out of school. “Our yoga practice opened up pathways of communication and assisted us in building a peaceful and kind classroom community,” says Stewart.

Registered yoga teacher Mary Kaye Chryssicas recommends introducing elementary school students to yoga with poses such as Child’s Pose (Balasana), Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana), and Butterfly



Everybody strengthens their core muscles in Boat Pose.

Instead of the regular Side Crow, Ben Reed starts with his legs in Eagle for a creative twist on an already difficult pose!



Two Birds in One

For a creative boy, doing asana also means creating new poses

Since the day he was born, eight-year-old Ben Reed has been doing yoga with his mom, Power yoga instructor Adrienne Reed, founder of Namasté Yoga Studio in Tampa, Florida. “He is amazing to watch because he really wants to ‘understand’ a pose, not just do it,” says Adrienne. “So you can actually watch him work his body part by part to find the right technique for each pose.”

Arm balances are a special favorite for Ben. “He’s a very analytical kind of boy, so I think he likes these because they require technique and are challenging,” says his mom. Ben also likes to play with the poses, so one day he decided to combine two he likes: Garudasana (Eagle Pose) and Parsva Bakasana (Side Crow Pose). He starts with Eagle, wrapping one leg around the other, then squats to place his hands on the mat. Next, he places his Eagle legs on the upper part of his arm, and suddenly he’s two birds in one, or *dwi*, the Sanskrit word that means both “two” and “bird.” We’ll just call it the Side Eagle Crow (Parsva Garuda Bakasana). —Lorraine Shea

(Baddha Konasana). “It’s important to introduce them to Child’s Pose because it’s an excellent way to calm down and focus on breathing,” says Chryssicas. Butterfly is also beneficial because it opens their hips, as well as their minds. “Ask them to imagine where they would fly if they were a beautiful butterfly,” says Chryssicas.

Pranayama calms jitters before studying for or taking a test—or before tackling homework. It is especially helpful because kids can do this in any position, either while seated at their desks in class or at home on the floor in Lotus Pose (Padmasana).

Yoga is equally beneficial on the day of a test or oral report. A child who gets out of bed and rolls into Rag Doll (Uttanasana) starts his day with an inversion that, Chryssicas says, stimulates blood flow to his head, helping to wake him up and relax him at the same time.

“This should be followed with a balance pose such as Tree or Eagle,” says Chryssicas. These asanas help children concentrate and focus on their breathing, which helps them prepare to shut out distractions they might encounter during the test.

Yoga should be taught to encourage children to concentrate on their own bodies—but not to compete with each other’s flexibility. “This significantly reduces the chance that a child will cross the line and jump beyond their ability, thereby becoming injured,” says nationally recognized yogi and author Baron Baptiste.

It is also important that children practice yoga at their own pace and level of ability. “If the child is forced to participate, he may be more likely to not follow directions, get injured, or, worst of all, decide he doesn’t like any type of exercise,” notes Anderson. 🧘