

Celebrities do it, professional sports teams do it—and now yoga is gaining popularity with New York City teens.

Yoga has long been credited with increasing focus and concentration while reducing stress, benefits that can be especially important for teenagers who are juggling school, sports and active social lives.

“They often come into the studio exhausted,” says Shari Vilchez-Blatt, the founder and director of Karma Kids Yoga, who has been teaching teens since 2003. They usually need more restorative work than younger children, so she starts her classes with at least 10 minutes of relaxation.

It’s time that her students appreciate. “The best thing about yoga is all the stretching and relaxing,” said 12-year-old Emily Allen, who added that she and her twin sister Katherine had been studying yoga at Karma Kids since they were 4.

“Exercise is a form of stress-relief,” Vilchez-Blatt said. “Our effort is for them to leave feeling good about themselves and feeling relaxed.”

Jennifer Ford, a certified middle and high school teacher and yoga instructor, said that as a public school teacher working with at-risk teens, she started doing yoga with her students in the classroom.

The benefits were both instant and noticeable, she said. Starting the school day with even five minutes of meditation can help teens shrug off the stresses of commuting and make them more ready to face the day.

She went on to co-found Bent on Learning, a non-profit organization that offers yoga instruction primarily in underserved public schools. “We want to provide yoga to kids who generally may never even hear the word ‘yoga,’” she said.

Bent on Learning, now in its ninth year, used yoga to help children in downtown schools manage post-traumatic stress after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

“The most important thing for teens is to slow down,” Ford said. She tells students to “just try to let everything go, don’t worry about where you came from, where you’re going after this.”

Arlen Zamula, the physical activities liaison for Healthy Schools Healthy Families, a part of NY Presbyterian Hospital Ambulatory Care Network, trains teachers to do physical activities, including yoga, with kids in the seven schools in which the health-outreach program works.

She said the program aims to show teachers how physical activity is a necessary component of education, not just a supplement, and to show kids that exercise can happen at any time at any place – even in the classroom.

After doing her own yoga training with the instructors at Karma Kids, Zamula developed yoga moves that teachers can do with students during “brain breaks,” or two-minute breaks between subjects during the school day.

“Yoga is a great way for them to clear their minds and help them focus,” she said, especially as they prepare for standardized testing. “There really is a connection between how kids feel physically and how well they’ll do under assessment.”

Zamula started a program this year where teachers do a small amount of yoga with their students before and after test-preparation. She hopes this sense of routine will help the students on test days.

“If you don’t have those proper channels to get rid of your nervous energy, you won’t do as well,” she said.

But the benefits of yoga in schools extend outside the classroom. Ford said many schools are willing to offer yoga as a gym-alternative. “It’s a great activity to do with all different ability levels and all different energy levels,” she said.

“The nice thing about yoga is that there are variations on all the poses,” said Vilchez-Blatt, whose classes combine students of

all ability levels. “It’s a very non-competitive environment.”

Emily Henning, age 12, said, “It’s really fun and relaxing. It’s a time when you can hang out with your friends while getting exercise that’s good for you.”

“There’s no succeeding or failing, it’s just trying,” Ford said. She added that kids often

aren’t used to that concept. In basketball, for example, “you either make the basket or you don’t, where in yoga that’s not even part of it at all.” In yoga, the competition is with oneself.

However, yoga can be beneficial for students who also participate in traditional competitive sports.

“Yoga is a complement to any sport,” Vilchez-Blatt said. It helps to increase strength, coordination, flexibility and balance, which Emily Allen said is crucial for her favorite yoga pose.

“I like to do the ‘wheel’ because you have to be really good at balancing,” she said.

And having more flexibility, Zamula said, allows your muscles to move in a greater range of motion to prevent injuries and make you, for example, a better runner or a stronger football player.

“With any sport, you need cross-training and different methods of exercise to develop your body and develop your mind,” she added. ☺

THAT’S A STRETCH

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By Caitlin Nish



Lesley Siegel

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