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Features

Interview

Shari Vilchez-Blatt

The Karma Kids founder and director talks about the natural connection between youngsters and yoga. By Jack Crager

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When Shari Vilchez-Blatt was laid off from her advertising job in 2002, she found herself doing a lot more yoga—often while hanging out with her young nieces and nephews. "I started to notice that when I would do poses, they would copy me," she recalls. "But I really didn't know if that was something kids should be doing, so I went online to find out."



Karma Kids yoga

What she discovered surprised her. There were only two nationwide programs teaching yoga to kids: [Yoga Kids](#) and [Radiant Child](#). Vilchez-Blatt went on to train with both of them before launching her own Manhattan studio, [Karma Kids Yoga](#) (at 104 W 14th St), in early 2003. "It was all new, but I fell in love with it," she says.

Since then, the idea of teaching yoga to kids has grown like an organic garden. Once studies showed that yoga could have a positive effect on disturbing trends such as post-9/11 stress, school violence, the obesity epidemic and attention-deficit disorders, school-based programs like Yoga Ed and popular books like Baron Baptiste's *My Daddy Is a Pretzel* were born.

At Karma Kids and other New York venues, the new movement is yoga for the whole family. "Yoga is something that you can always do together," says Vilchez-Blatt, who regularly practices with her four-year-old daughter, Layla Moon. Yoga comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "union" so it's not surprising that families are discovering its bonding power.

Time Out Kids spoke with Vilchez-Blatt about the magic that happens when this ancient mind-body practice meets young minds and bodies.

When you started Karma Kids, you weren't yet a parent, right?

No, but with the kids in my family and my friends' families, I was always more of a peer than an adult. I just loved to play with them. I also had a background in working with children from my advertising days in product research, and I drew on that. What's been rewarding for me over the years is to see kids come back, to see them get stronger, more flexible, and increase their self-esteem and confidence.

Do kids enjoy yoga?

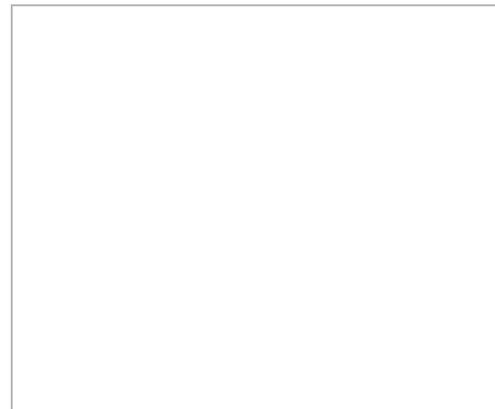
Yes, kids do yoga naturally. Infants, when they lift their head, are doing the cobra pose. Then they are on their knees, doing cats and cows, and when they start to push up they're doing downward dog. And the amazing thing is they do it so perfectly, because they don't really have any stress yet. They're using their bodies instinctively.

Are there special challenges in teaching yoga to youngsters?

Of course. Children have an amazing natural energy—I drink a lot of coffee in hopes of getting [the same amount]. It's important for them to be able to move and groove and feel how their bodies feel. So we do it in a fun way. Also, as they get older, there are more school-related stresses: peer pressure, tests, carrying bags full of books. Every child is different, but on average, at about ten or 11, they really start to lose flexibility.

Who comes to the kids' yoga classes?

I find yoga to be complementary to almost anything they want to do. Some kids come because their parents are yoga people. Some have a weak core and come to build strength. A lot of them come as almost a last resort. The school says, "Your child can't sit still, you



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need to address this, or put him on Ritalin." No parents want to put their kids on drugs, so they come here. What we often find is that there's a problem with diet—or it's natural energy, because kids were not meant to sit at their desks all day long. They need to move around. Whatever the reason, I say, "Bring it on!" Yoga will help kids focus and release anxiety.

What do you tell kids and parents about nutrition?

They usually don't want to hear me talk about food, and I keep the focus on yoga—but I will tell you, sending kids into our studio with a can of soda and a package of Starbursts is a recipe for disaster. Sometimes they are just bouncing off the walls.

What else do you do when they're bouncing off the walls?

The energy levels go up and down—kids need to run, they need to jump and play. You're not going to get a child to meditate. It's difficult to get an adult to [do it]. But I do have four- or five-year-olds who do the crow pose. I've got little kids who can just beautiful jump into poses I've been working on for years. We dangle the carrot as far as difficult poses go, and they love to do that. It's accomplishing a task through play. They also love to invent poses—it's very empowering. And sometimes they just need a pat on the back. Sometimes saying "Good job!" to these kids sends them flying and makes them feel good about themselves.

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