Teaching Yoga to School-Aged Children: Principles and Personal Experiences
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Abstract

School-aged children are expected to learn new skills and work productively in many domains of life. Those who fail to keep up, particularly those who have developmental disorders, often experience feelings of inferiority and social isolation. I created a Yoga class for school-aged children of all abilities that is designed to serve as a haven from the performance demands of their lives. The class capitalizes on children’s pleasure in learning and actively promotes self-awareness without self-judgment. The class draws inspiration from tantric philosophy, which allows for life to be experienced playfully while recognizing the sacred interconnectedness of all things. Three features differentiate this class from a typical adult Yoga class: (1) use of an integrating theme, (2) designated times for discussion and movement, and (3) inclusion of a creative portion. These features are designed to engage and motivate school-aged children. Some traditional elements of a Yoga practice, including breathing exercises (prāṇāyāma) and the final relaxation in corpse pose (shavāsana), are adapted for children. Educating the parents about the vocabulary, structure, and benefits of Yoga enhances the therapeutic potential of the class for children. Students in the class report that Yoga enhances their ability to focus and that they benefit from the relaxation of body and mind.

Introduction

School-aged children are expected to learn new skills, perform on demand, and achieve positive results in many areas of their lives. The intense pressure of this developmental period can create a high degree of stress, which can compromise both physical health and psychological well-being. Inability to succeed can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and social rejection. I created a Yoga class for school-aged children of all abilities that serves as a haven from these intense performance demands. This class creates a safe and nurturing environment to promote the physical, psychological, and spiritual development of each student.

The design and features of the class derive from theories of developmental psychology and are rooted in four fundamental philosophical principles. Though much of the class is similar to an adult class, some elements, such as integrating themes, encouragement of discussion, and creative activities, are designed to meet the unique needs and interests of children. In this paper, I address the core developmental needs of school-aged children, the underlying philosophy of my approach, the basic structure of the class, and how a traditional Yoga practice can be adapted for children. I then discuss the benefits of the class based on my own
observations and the comments of my young students.

**Child Development**

When children enter school at about the age of six, their lives typically change. Whereas their days were previously dominated by self-directed play, they now find themselves in structured classrooms. They are required to follow the teacher’s instructions and must learn a variety of new skills. After school, there are more demands, such as music lessons or sports. There, too, children are expected to succeed. The famous developmental theorist Erik Erikson dubbed the dynamic tension of this stage of development as “Industry versus Inferiority.”

According to Erikson’s theory, children between the ages of six to twelve are required to become productive and industrious. Those who master the challenges by earning high scores on tests, winning games, or accumulating trophies develop a satisfying sense of competence. Parents of school-aged children can become swept up in the emphasis on performance and push for intellectual precociousness at the expense of imagination and play. When this happens, family life may cease to be a refuge from the stress of school.

Children who fail to make the grade, literally and figuratively, are often left feeling unworthy and undeserving. Children who feel unworthy then begin to doubt their ability to meet new challenges. According to Bandura, only when people believe that their actions can produce positive results do they muster the motivation to act or persevere in the face of difficulties. Children who lack this self-efficacy are likely to experience difficulties managing the ongoing stress of learning new skills and exploring new environments.

The sense of failure and inferiority when children struggle with skill attainment is particularly acute for children with disabilities, whether they have severe disabilities, such as mental retardation, or less severe conditions, such as learning disorders or attention deficits. In addition to feelings of personal inadequacy, these children often also experience intense social isolation or rejection. Anxiety and depression commonly accompany a neurodevelopmental disorder and can contribute to the severity of the condition.

**The Goals and Philosophy of Teaching Yoga to Children**

I created a Yoga class for school-aged children that provides a haven from the intense performance demands of school and family life. The class builds on their natural interest in acquiring skills, while simultaneously nurturing their physical, psychological, and spiritual development. Each class addresses the following four major goals:

- Increased body awareness and physical control
- Improved mental concentration
- Enhanced sense of competence and confidence
- A deep sense of inner harmony and peacefulness while having fun

To achieve these goals, the class rests on four fundamental philosophies:

- **Inclusion:** Creating a learning environment that supports children of all abilities
- **Tantra:** Appreciating the natural energy and flow of children
- **Body-mind connection:** Encouraging children to link their physical and psychological experiences
- **Self-acceptance:** Fostering self-awareness without self-judgment

**Inclusion**

As a pediatrician who specializes in evaluating children with neurodevelopmental disorders, it is very important to me to welcome children of all abilities to the class. Inclusive education benefits children with developmental disorders as well as children developing typically. The children with developmental disorders use their typically developing peers as role models, particularly in terms of communication, behavioral regulation, and social skills. The typically developing children learn to practice compassion and appreciate the diversity of the human experience. Some children are uneven in their developmental skills, advanced in some domains and yet delayed in others. These children also benefit from the inclusive environment because they can feel comfortable throughout all activities.

The inclusive classroom can become a safe haven from the performance demands of school and home life. The key is to emphasize the process and joy of learning, not just the performance outcomes. All children can be encouraged to learn new poses, try balances, or remember sequences. All children can be truly appreciated for tackling these challenges, whether or not they master them. All children can be recog-
School-aged children are full of energy that they bring to the Yoga class—children are frequently in motion. They need opportunities to laugh. Their energy needs to be honored and harnessed. As I came to appreciate from the teachings of Shobhan Richard Faulds,³ Tantric philosophy serves as the appropriate philosophical foundation for teaching Yoga to children. Whereas the *cītta* path, exemplified by Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sūtra*, emphasizes the importance of stilling the mind, the tantric path emphasizes the spiritual nature of flow. Tantra allows for life to be experienced playfully, with a profound awareness of the sacred interconnectedness of all aspects of life.

In children’s classes, especially inclusive children’s classes, there will inevitably be fidgetiness, insuppressible urges to speak, and several requests to use the restroom. I have learned to accept and appreciate this natural activity. I build in opportunities for the students to take breaks, talk, and move around the room, to encourage the flow.

**Body-Mind Connection**

One important feature that differentiates a Yoga class from other physical activities or sports is its focus on the body-mind connection. Whereas Yoga classes for preschoolers may focus on a playful introduction of poses, Yoga classes for school-aged children can more deeply develop the body-mind connection. Children can learn to observe how various emotions and thoughts are reflected in their bodies, and conversely, how changes in their bodies can influence the mind.

The ability to reflect on an experience while it is unfolding is a challenge for school-aged children.⁹ I often use imagery to encourage self-reflection. Imagery can be used not only as a cue for the physical actions of a pose, but also to create awareness of an emotional state. For example, rather than simply asking children to sit straight, I might ask them to imagine that they are a king or queen, supporting a crown on their head and wearing the family crest on their chest. This image is designed to foster the connection between a tall, straight spine and feelings of confidence or self-worth. I also routinely pause and ask the students to reflect on the feelings a posture creates. There are no wrong answers. Everyone’s reflection is reinforced as valid.

Through experiences like this, children learn how postures or breathing techniques can change negative emotions. As a pediatrician, I am enthusiastic about teaching this awareness to young children, so that they can use it as a tool for handling emotions as they mature. Ideally, Yoga can eventually assist them in managing stress and finding equanimity.

**Self-Acceptance**

The fourth philosophical foundation of the class is the central teaching of Swami Kripalu, for whom the Kripalu Center is named. Swami Kripalu taught that self-awareness without judgment is the highest form of spiritual practice.¹⁰ I hope to provide incremental experiences by which students can gradually develop self-reflection with an attitude of acceptance and grace. I want students to recognize and appreciate their willingness to participate in the class and explore this unfamiliar discipline.

A key to creating self-acceptance is for me, the teacher, to remain non-judgmental and highly supportive. I praise the children for their energy, openness, and effort. The praise is always truthful and individualized to the student. My voice remains soft and gentle throughout the class. I have observed that adjusting or assisting the students in their poses can inadvertently communicate criticism, without helping them find a fuller expression of a pose. Some of the students seem truly defeated after adjustment. I now rely on verbal encouragement and reserve assistance for rare circumstances when I am concerned about their safety.

**Practicalities of Teaching Yoga to Children**

Attention to the practical aspects of teaching children can greatly
enhance the class experience. It is important to take into account the needs of both the children and their parents when scheduling and structuring the class. The center where I teach is fortunate to have two studios for Yoga practice. I schedule the children’s class on Saturday at the same time as a basic adult Yoga class for all levels of practitioners. The children’s class lasts 60 minutes and the adult counterpart lasts 90 minutes. Several of my students are the children of adults who attend the all-levels class. These children often join the class with a basic Yoga vocabulary and understanding of the physical, behavioral, or spiritual aspects of the practice. They set an excellent example for the other students, and in particular the children with disabilities.

Drop-in classes can be more practical than a series, because it is difficult for children to attend reliably every week. Children often have conflicting commitments and are at the mercy of their families for transportation. Even if they are not scheduled for alternatives, their parents may be. Because I teach a drop-in class, I am prepared for new students every week. Weekly repetition of basic rules, class structure, and descriptions of the poses and sequences are all helpful to the new attendees and to children with disabilities.

Structure provides a sense of comfort to children. I follow the same broad outline for each class: Introduction concluding with the chanting of om, meditative breathing exercises (prânâyâma), warm-up exercises, a posture sequence (âsana), final relaxation in corpse pose (shavâsana), and conclusion, which includes the chanting of om.

Finally, I have established a few straightforward rules for the class. The first rule is that while on the mat the children should attempt to listen and follow the instruction given. If they are unable to follow along, they can rest in bâlâsana (child pose) or step off the mat until they are ready to rejoin the group. The second rule is that children are free to leave the class once during the hour to get water or go to the restroom. Since establishing this rule, children take advantage of the opportunity and do not request a second departure.

Distinctive Features of Classes for Children

Three features of the class are designed to engage and motivate school-aged children:

- Use of an integrating theme
- Designated times for discussion and movement
- Inclusion of a creative portion

In addition, I have found that two features of a traditional Yoga class must be modified when teaching children:

1. Meditative breathing exercises (prânâyâma)
2. Final relaxation in corpse pose (shavâsana)

Use of an Integrating Theme

Children respond well to having a theme for the practice. Each class theme introduces a concept or focus for that session. I use the theme to unite the segments of the class. Linking all aspects of the practice to the class theme helps children develop mental focus.

One example of a theme I have used is “Warriors and Heroes.” Based on the philosophy in Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior, I open the class by inviting the children to conceptualize a warrior not as a fighter, but as an individual willing to advocate for what he or she believes in. I ask them for examples of traditional and nonviolent warriors. The poses for the class include kneeling and standing warrior poses, with an emphasis on opening the heart. From time to time, such as after a difficult series of postures, I ask the children what they would be willing to defend or fight for in their lives. They often mention family and friends. Occasionally, some mention nature or a social justice cause. In final relaxation, I emphasize that within each of them is the strength and commitment of the warrior. I entreat them to harness that power in defense of the greater good.

Another theme that works well is “Triangles and Triads.” In the introduction of this class, we talk about the importance of the number three,
including the stability of a triangle and the trinity in various religions. The poses include trikonâsana (triangle pose) and prasârita-pâdottân-âsana (wide-legged forward bend). After practicing the poses, we pause to look for the various triangles created by legs, arms, and torso.

Three features of the class are designed to engage and motivate school-aged children: an integrating theme, designated times for discussion and movement, and a creative portion.

A third example of a theme is “Exploring the Spine.” This class begins with a discussion of the spine as a series of stacked vertebrae, capable of curving in the anterior-posterior plane, arcing laterally, and twisting. After assuming a set of poses, we reflect on the positions that their spines were in. In the final relaxation segment of the class, I remind the students that they have the ability to use their spine to remain straight and stable, and also to be flexible when needed.

I also created a series of classes that dedicates each session to a different yama or niyama, or ethical principle, underlying Yoga. I was surprised and gratified by how the students engaged with these themes. In the introduction, we discuss the literal meaning of the yama and then expand to the abstract meanings. For example, in the class dedicated to asteya, or non-stealing, I ask the children about the meaning of stealing. Students give the expected answer first: taking an object or possession that belonged to someone else. Then I ask them what you can steal that is not actually an object. We discuss concepts such as wasting other people’s time and taking credit for something that you did not actually do. In the class dedicated to ahimsâ, or nonviolence, we start from the principle of not hurting other people, and extend it to not hating others, and to not hurting ourselves or hating parts of ourselves. Though brahmacarya, or moderation, is often used to refer to sexual abstinence or moderation, we consider how to refrain from excesses in behaviors like eating. In the class that focuses on tapas, or heat, we talk about the importance of commitment and passion in life. The students share examples of when they have experienced such dedication and commitment in their lives. Throughout the posture sequence, I refer to the theme of the day. For example, in the tapas class, I ask students to assess the level of heat the pose generated in them. In final relaxation, I encourage students to practice the day’s ethical principle off the mat in their everyday lives.

Designated Times for Discussion and Movement

Even healthy and typically developing children cannot remain totally focused for a full hour. Children have more physical fidgetiness than adults do. Children with neurodevelopmental disabilities in general have an even shorter attention span than typically developing children. To accommodate the relatively limited attention span and high activity level of my students, I create opportunities within the class to speak or to move about.

For example, when I ask students questions, I want them to answer out loud, and not internally, as you might in an adult class. The questions typically require body awareness or body-mind connection, which are goals of the Yoga experience. In some classes, after a period of relative stillness, I ask the students to walk around the room at different paces, exploring how their feet hit the ground differently in a slow walk versus in a run or in walking forward versus walking backwards. These designated departures from quiet and stillness allow the students to release pent-up energy and concentrate more intensely afterward. By incorporating these planned departures, I do not need to request quiet.

Inclusion of a Creative Portion

To capitalize on the creativity of young children, and with respect for their limited attention and high activity level, I often include a creative activity in the class. This segment fosters self-expression, encourages teamwork, and hopefully provides opportunities for the children to discuss the class with their families. The activities can challenge and encourage students whose creativity has not been nurtured in school.

I link the creative portion to the class theme. A favorite is to ask the children to weave the poses of the day into a story. In those classes, I concentrate on poses with animal names. If the class is large, I break it into smaller units of three or four children. Each group has the opportunity to perform its story for the other groups. In classes where the children have learned to flow through sun salutations, I have asked them to invent a salutation to
the moon or to the stars. I have paired children to create sculptures related to the theme of the class, such as a warrior and who or what he or she must defend. In another class, the creative portion was generating and naming a new Yoga pose.

Meditative Breathing Exercises (Prânâyâma)

Breath control is a useful technique for increasing body awareness, developing physical and psychological control, and calming the body and the mind. However, awareness and control of the breath are unfamiliar to almost every new student. Even very simple breathing exercises are a challenge for children.

I routinely include a breathing exercise in the class and make that exercise accessible to all students. Relying on multimodal techniques, I often suggest physical prompts to assist with mental attention on the breath. For example, the children lie on their abdomens to sense the rise and fall of their bodies with inhalation and exhalation. To encourage deep abdominal breathing, they spread their fingers over the lower ribs to experience the expansion with inhalation and contraction with exhalation. Other breathing exercises that the children master are breathing in and out to a specific count. After the meditative breathing exercise, I ask students to reflect on the impact of controlled breathing on their bodies, minds, or emotions. Students often comment that they feel relaxed or focused after the exercise. Some of the older regular students have successfully mastered ujjayi prânâyâma (the victorious breath) and occasionally use it during the âsana portion of class.

Final Relaxation (Shavâsana)

There are many benefits to final relaxation in a Yoga practice. It does, however, provide another opportunity to witness the differences between adults and children. Most children do not lie still. Many do not close their eyes. Some remain tense in their bodies. If I gently touch children to help them relax, they sometimes stiffen instead.

I consulted with colleagues whose professional activities include helping children go through painful medical procedures, and I learned that rich imagery is helpful at inducing relaxation. I now often incorporate imagery in this phase of the class, as invoking a scene at the beach or in the forest does seem to help some students reduce movement and tension. Soft music serves a similar function. My students often request a particular piece of flowing flute music for the relaxation period.

I also use the period to offer children messages they might not hear frequently in the course of their everyday lives. I hope that in the state of relaxation the children will be receptive to the message. I emphasize how proud they should feel for coming to a Yoga class and participating fully. I also return to the class theme. For example, I might remind them that they have the inner strength to be a warrior for a cause they find important, or that they are ethical people who recognize the difference between right and wrong. Providing positive messages, like using imagery, reduces the degree of movement in their bodies and enhances relaxation.

Class Conclusion

After relaxation, we chant om three times, as we do in the introduction phase of the class. We also do a brief chant, which the students enjoy. I have explored a few options, such as chanting a traditional om shanti and chanting the lyrics to “Give Peace a Chance” by John Lennon. The students enjoy both the English and Sanskrit chants, as long as they are simple and are repeated until the students have learned the tune and words.

Educating Parents about Yoga

I have come to appreciate how important it is to inform my students’ parents about the goals of the class and the specific lessons. For example, one of the students in my Yoga class is also a patient in my clinical practice. At a clinic visit, she became extremely agitated. I suggested she do bâlásana (child pose). To the amazement of her parents, she dutifully assumed the pose and quieted her emotions. I realized that her parents had not learned the vocabulary or structure of the Yoga practice, and therefore they could not use Yoga therapeutically for their child. For example, they would not know to recommend breathing exercises to help her cope with distress.

Based on that experience, I
make a deliberate effort to communicate with parents about the details of the class. I try to greet parents at the end of each class as they come to pick up their children. I sometimes provide a handout about the class theme and the posture sequence of the day, including pictures of the different poses. I occasionally ask a child to demonstrate a pose that he or she just learned, and then suggest times when the parents might think about using it with the child.

As a further effort to educate parents about the joy and therapeutic potential of Yoga, I have offered Family Yoga Workshops. The workshops introduce parents and children to Yoga postures together. I design these workshops based on the same principles as the children’s class and include an integrating theme, a meditative breathing exercise, a posture sequence, a creative portion, and final relaxation. In the breathing exercises, parents and children collaborate to build awareness of the deep Yoga breath. For example, with the parents lying supine on the floor, I have the children place their head on the abdomen of one of their parents and observe how their head rises and falls with each breath.

Alternatively, I have the parents and children place their hands on each other’s side ribs and sense the expansion and contraction of the ribcage. In the posture sequence, I include partner poses. An excellent source for partner Yoga is the book *Playful Family Yoga: For Kids, Parents and Grandparents.* In final relaxation, I suggest that parents and children line their mats up with the long dimensions parallel. The parent’s head is at one end, the child’s head at the other end, and they can touch fingers or hands while they lie supine. When two parents are present, the child lies between them, touching the hands of both parents. In the relaxation portion of the workshop, I offer messages about the importance of family, the value of interacting not only verbally, but also physically, and the opportunity to understand each other and the world through the practice of Yoga.

**Benefits of Yoga for Children**

The best evidence that Yoga makes a positive impact on the students in my class is that they return week after week. I have interviewed those who attend regularly about why they return to Yoga, and I have observed many changes in my students over time. Both the students’ reflections and my observations suggest that I am achieving the four major goals of the class.

**Increased Body Awareness and Physical Control**

I have noticed impressive changes over time in both the typically developing children and the children with disabilities. For example, their ability to hold balance poses such as *vrikshâsana* (tree pose) or *bakâsana* (crow pose) has improved dramatically over time. This requires both awareness and control. One child has appreciated improving in flexibility, though many students are quite flexible when they first come to class and require strength and control to balance this flexibility.

**Improved Concentration**

Children mention that they experience and appreciate increased focus. One athletic 10-year-old boy said that at the end of Yoga class, he felt like he could go out and win any soccer match. He attributed that feeling to the combination of focus and physical relaxation. Some of the children with disabilities who struggle to maintain attention have nonetheless shown substantial improvements in the portions of class that require concentration.

**A Deep Sense of Inner Harmony and Peacefulness while Having Fun**

My students frequently mention...
that they enjoy the relaxation effects of the class. I strongly suspect that they are not referring to the release of muscular tension, but to the release of emotional tension. A few of the regular students have learned to relax fully, as evidenced by the cessation of movement. These students have commented on how it changes their internal state when they enter deep relaxation. I think that for almost all of them, the class stands out as a safe haven in their lives where they feel respected and welcome. They do not feel pressured to perform or succeed.

**Expanding the Benefits of a Yoga Practice**

The benefits of a weekly Yoga class are inevitably limited. To make a more substantial impact on the lives of children, Yoga needs to be integrated more fully into home and school. To make a more substantial impact on the lives of children, Yoga needs to be integrated more fully into home and school. To make a more substantial impact on the lives of children, Yoga needs to be integrated more fully into home and school. To make a more substantial impact on the lives of children, Yoga needs to be integrated more fully into home and school. To increase the impact of Yoga for children, I am exploring how to encourage children to develop a true practice. Programs that bring Yoga to the classroom have been shown to have excellent outcomes. I plan to increase my efforts at educating parents about the vocabulary, philosophy, practices, and benefits of Yoga, and I will ask them to engage with their child between classes. I hope that increased parental involvement will enhance the therapeutic potential of Yoga for children, regardless of a child’s level of physical, cognitive, emotional, or social skills.

**Conclusion**

Teaching Yoga to school-aged children is a rewarding experience with many potential therapeutic aspects. A successful inclusive class recognizes that children are not simply small adults, but rather individuals at different stages of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development. It provides an alternative to the stressful performance-driven environment in which most children live. It honors all children where they are, stimulates them to connect body and mind, and encourages them to observe their own actions and emotions without the punishing effects of judgment. Children can achieve greater body awareness and control of their bodies, improve their concentration, gain insights into the connection between body and mind, and experience inner peace. The therapeutic potential of Yoga for young children is related to the regularity of their practice and may be enhanced by increased parental involvement.

**Endnotes**


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