

YogaTherapyinPractice

Bringing Yoga to the Classroom

Tools for Learning, Skills for Life

By Lisa Flynn and Marina Ebert

Children today often face very challenging environments in their everyday lives, particularly at school, which may be stressful and emotionally and attentionally demanding. The neuroscience of child development research indicates that excessive stress damages the developing brain architecture, leading to vulnerability in learning, behavior, and overall health.¹

Science has shown, and educators have experienced firsthand, that when children are anxious, stressed, distracted, or unbalanced it is very difficult for them to learn. A calm and present state of mind is a prerequisite for our children to be psychologically and physiologically learning ready. The necessary next step is to cultivate in children a set of mental skills central to the aims of education in the twenty-first century: self-regulation, prosocial dispositions, and positive attitude towards academic success.² Contemplative yogic practices provide tools for learning and skills for life by helping children develop self-awareness, compassion, self-regulation, and coping skills as well as the physical practices that guide children through movements that optimize their strength, flexibility, and balance.

The anecdotal benefits of yoga reported by practitioners are well known, and scientific evidence is starting to accumulate as well. Several empirical studies conclude that yoga, which inherently includes mindfulness practices, is one effective and cost-efficient way to promote healthy development and foster stress resilience by improving test anxiety, concentration, aggressive behavior, subjective well-being, and positive mood.³ According to one prominent yoga in schools program evaluation study,⁴ yoga class participation helped elementary school students improve self-esteem and physical health, decrease negative behavior, and was also associated with an increase in academic achievement. The first randomized controlled trial evaluating the mental health benefits of the yoga in school program has been recently completed.⁵ The research paper reported that secondary-school students participating in an eight-week yoga program improved their anger control and fatigue/inertia and decreased negative affect. The researchers suggest that implementation of yoga is acceptable and feasible in secondary-school settings and has the potential of playing a protective or preventive role in maintaining mental health.

The authors of an influential paper published in *Child Development Perspectives*

*Journal*² recommend an early start on healthy mind-body practices during what they call the “windows of opportunity.” They refer to the developmental periods when contemplative practices are particularly likely to produce habits conducive to learning, health, and well-being. Due to the brain's plasticity, any sustained practice occurring over extended periods of time has the potential to induce changes. These neural changes are associated with psychological functions and ultimately influence behavior. This is why healthy habits, such as yoga and mindfulness, are so important for achieving long-term results, and being introduced to them in childhood is crucial.

We are pleased to offer here some advice from our firsthand experience and expertise in children's yoga, taking the scientific evidence into account. Through Yoga 4 Classrooms®, the school-focused affiliate of ChildLight Yoga, we provide yoga-based education to children in schools.

Inspiring! How Can I Bring Yoga to My School Community?

As inspired yoga teachers who recognize the potential impact of yoga education in schools, you might wish to jump right in. However, you will need to recognize that the academic demands, time limitations, lack of funding, and other pressures inherent in education today often add up to a school culture that, for reasons of self-preservation, may appear to be closed off to new ideas. Therefore, it's useful to present yourself in a way that honors these and other potential concerns of the school. The following are some core principles to keep in mind when organizing and implementing a school yoga program:

PREPARE

- Get clear about your interests and intentions for teaching yoga in a school setting.
- Educate yourself accordingly—procure specialized training in child yoga and, preferably, an established evidence-based school yoga program.
- Join the community—network with others with similar interests.



Yoga 4 Classrooms Trainer, Sharon Trull, leads a second grade classroom in Balloon Breathing.

Photo credit: Yoga 4 Classrooms

- Get research savvy—learn about the field's best practices and research behind yoga.
- Understand the unique demographics and culture of the school community.

INVITE

- Don't sell, *invite*—adopt a mindset of planting seeds.
- Think and act like an educator—express your understanding of key school challenges and how yoga and mindfulness education can help address those challenges.
- Be transparent—build trust and lessen potential fears by being clear, obvious, and open about what will be shared in the school.

SERVE

- Keep it school-appropriate—presentation should be secular and non-dogmatic.
- Be relevant and engaging—ask questions and use tie-in concepts related to students' lives.
- Encourage mindful awareness—enhance breath and body awareness and include opportunities for reflection and integration.
- Make it sustainable—include professional development for school staff and parent and community education.

Certainly, as with any specialized yoga presentation, formal training for the potentially precarious school environment is a necessary step before implementing a yoga curriculum in classrooms.

Yoga Curriculum for the Classroom

A well-researched and properly designed program implementing yoga at school typically provides consistent repetition of key activities and concepts. This is achieved through systematic integration of activities into the class day as necessary to produce long-term effects on children, ultimately providing a foundation for lifelong well-being.

Yoga-in-the-classroom curricula ideally should include a mix of yoga-based movements, breath exercises, visualizations, mindfulness activities, creative movement, and community-building games. Importantly, classroom yoga activities need to be simple, safe, accessible to all ages and levels, and replicable, because for maximum effect, the goal is for educators and students to learn from a

qualified yoga professional and then eventually use the activities on their own. In addition, the activities should be tailored to the typical classroom space and schedule. That often means activities need to be done standing beside or sitting at desks.

Depending on the time available and the situation at hand, an individual activity or a sequence of activities may be shared. The following example is a five-to-seven-minute sample classroom yoga sequence appropriate for use prior to children's writing activities or as a writing break, as a transition. It can also be used anytime the class community needs to center and get ready to learn.

Once you know the basics of age-appropriate yoga practices, you can begin to create your own sequences tailored to the student's current needs.

The goal of a well-developed yoga curriculum in educational settings is to promote a peaceful and productive school climate, while providing children with important skills they can use in and out of the classroom for enduring physical and psychological health.

Sample Classroom Yoga Sequence: Pre-writing or Writing Break

Writing requires focus, concentration, postural strength and control, and fine motor ability. In addition, most writing assignments require some level of reflection and use of imagination. The following suggested sequence of instructions, appropriate for K–12 classrooms, nurtures these abilities while teaching students self-regulation and self-care. As you teach this sequence, it helps to model the poses for the children. You can also modify to introduce more playfulness as appropriate.

1. *Standing Mountain (with Shoulder-Roll Breathing and Crescent Moon)*

- Stand up tall and strong with your arms at your sides and your feet hip-distance apart.
- Inhale as you raise your shoulders up, exhale out “Haaa,” as you relax and roll your shoulders back and down. Repeat three to five times.
- Now, inhale your arms up and bring your hands together above your head. Relax your shoulders away from your ears. Exhale as you bend your upper body gently to one side. Feel the stretch in your waist and outer arm. Inhale to bring yourself back to center. Repeat on the other side and flow back and forth with your breath before exhaling your arms back down to your sides.

2. *Washing Machine*

- Keeping your feet in place, relax your knees and begin to turn your upper body from side to side. Allow your arms to be loose and floppy so that they wrap around the back and front of your body as you twist and breathe.
- Close your eyes and notice if there is some tension in your body you might like to wash out. As you swing your arms from side to side and exhale, imagine that tension being washed out and away from your body. Continue for five to ten breaths.

3. *Desk Puppy*

- Stand behind your desk with your chair pushed in. Place the palms of your hands on the middle of your desk.
- Take a step back and bend forward so that your head comes down between your arms.
- Check your alignment. Like a stretching puppy, your arms and legs should be straight, knees relaxed. Your heels are on the floor. Your back is flat with your hips pressing backward.
- Let your head hang and relax between your arms. Feel the stretch in your shoulders, arms, hamstrings, and calves. Release into the stretch a little more with each exhale “Ahh.”
- When you are finished, step forward and roll your spine back up to standing. Shake out your limbs as needed.

4. *Open Heart*

- Sit up tall in sitting mountain.
- Scoot forward slightly to bring your back and bottom away from the back of your chair.

(Continued on page 26)



Sample cards from the Yoga 4 Classrooms Card Deck.

- Adjust yourself as needed to ensure that your feet are flat on the floor and your posture is straight and tall. Your knees should be directly above your ankles. Rest your hands on your thighs.
- Reach back to hold onto the sides of your chair.
- Inhale as you roll your shoulders back, and lean forward as you lengthen your neck and open your chest towards the sky.
- Hold this pose for three to five full breaths. With each exhale, imagine you are sending out love and compassion from your heart into the world.
- Slowly exhale and return to sitting mountain. Repeat as time allows.

There are plenty of available resources (books, CDs, websites) that offer guided meditations for children you can use, or you can create your own. Below is a shortened version of one of ours, representing a modified, child-friendly approach to meditation. Through guided visualization, we invite students to use their imaginations to connect to their own inner wisdom. Students become empowered as their sense of self is improved and the connection between their mind and body is enhanced. Tension is released, while students learn strategies for dealing with life's emotional challenges.

5. Big White Star Imagination Vacation™

- Begin in sitting mountain or with your head down on your desk. Close your eyes and bring your awareness to your breath.

- Imagine there is a big, beautiful star above your head. It is glowing bright and shimmery, sending light out in every direction. The light is shining in your favorite color. Notice now that one of the biggest rays of light is streaming right down towards the top of your head. You feel the cozy, warm light touch the top of your head and it feels so nice. The light comes down into your head and face, relaxing all of your facial muscles (progressively guide students to relax each part of their body as the light reaches them). Notice the light is coming into your heart now. With each inhale, feel your heart getting bigger and bigger, brighter and brighter, filling up with love and warmth for all of the people you love. See the rays of light radiating out from your heart out into the world around you.
- When you are ready, take a long, slow, deep breath, exhale: "Haaa," through your mouth. Gently open your eyes. Notice how you feel.

Teaching the Teacher

You might also consider offering classes to the teachers, as well. The challenges that school professionals face themselves are often neglected—and not surprisingly, those are very similar to the problems we try to “fix” for our kids! While addressing the whole child approach to development, it's imperative to underscore the importance of teachers' personal and professional growth and well-being, providing them with tools to become more mindful and emotionally capable of handling the classroom. Finding this balance between teach-

ing the child and doing something for themselves is crucial as teachers integrate contemplative practices into the classroom.

What is being emphasized is the enhancement of professional development for educators to nurture the same skills and qualities we would like them to teach the children: the cultivation of healthy mind and body habits conducive to mindful classrooms and lifestyles. The combined effects of professional development and student programs on improving classroom experience and culture of public education are most powerful.

In Conclusion

The goal of a well-developed yoga curriculum in educational settings is to promote a peaceful and productive school climate, while providing children with important skills they can use in and out of the classroom for enduring physical and psychological health. As one school principal noted after a Yoga 4 Classrooms residency: *"They [kids] are doing it [yoga] on their own, independently. I get stories pretty regularly about the kids doing this at home and how it's helping them, or on the playground. They've really incorporated it into their repertoire to help them cope with all the stresses that they go through."* Experienced and appropriately trained yoga teachers equipped with the core principles (*prepare, invite, serve*) are keys to the successful and sustainable implementation of yoga programming in schools. We hope this article inspires you to further investigate and support the movement to bring yoga to school. **YTT**

Materials used in this article were partially taken from the *Yoga 4 Classrooms® Program Manual*, created and written by Lisa Flynn.

Yoga 4 Classrooms works to empower students and educators to create positive, peaceful, productive classrooms that support exceptional learning while teaching skills that promote resilience, positive perceptions, good health habits, and mindful awareness.

References

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3. Hyde, A. M. (2012). The yoga in schools movement: Using standards for educating the whole child and making space for teacher self-care. In J.A. Gorlewski, B. Porfilio, & D.A. Gorlewski (Eds.), *Using Standards and High-Stakes Testing for Students: Exploiting Power with Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 108–126.
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Suggested Resources

School Yoga Programs and Trainings:

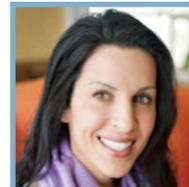
www.yogaed.com
www.bentonlearning.org
www.yoga4classrooms.com
www.getreadytolearn.net
www.coreyoga.com
www.littlefloweryoga.com
www.niroga.org
www.kripalu.org
www.hlfinc.org
www.yogacalm.org
www.lineageproject.org

Classroom Yoga Tools:

Yoga 4 Classrooms Card Deck
Move With Me Action Adventures
DVD Series
YogaKids Tools for Schools Toolbox
Yoga Calm for Children Book

Angeles, CA: Program Evaluation and Research Collaboration (PERC).

5. Khalsa, S. B., Hickey-Schultz, L., Cohen, D., Steiner, & N., Cope, S. (2012). Evaluation of the mental health benefits of yoga in a secondary school: A preliminary randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services and Research*, 39, 80–90.



Lisa Flynn, E-RYT, RCYT, is the Founder of ChildLight Yoga and Yoga 4 Classrooms and author of *Yoga 4 Classrooms Card Deck* (2011); and *Yoga for Children: 200+ Yoga Poses, Breathing Exercises and Meditations for Healthier, Happier, More Resilient Children* (2013).



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