

# Yoga Goes to School

**S**tressed out Kids? Come on, really? Though it's hard to believe, it's true – many school age children are under extreme pressure to excel. There are so many scheduled activities that some kids practically need a secretary (a.k.a. Mom) to keep track of all their weekly commitments. Demands on their time range from school assignments to language lessons, sports and other extra-curricular activities. Bullying at school is on the rise. External stimulation and marketing messages come at them from all angles – TV, radio, video games, computer, cell phones etc. Parents are overloaded and stressed out, with less time and energy to contribute to being patient and/or listening. All of these things make it harder for kids to relax, play and even learn as they are supposed to.



A well-known 2003 California State University study showed a link between yoga and better learning, improved behaviors, and higher self-esteem. Since then, dozens of additional studies have been completed, supporting those results. The very same benefits subjectively seen by people who work with children, have now been measured and reported.

Overwhelmingly, research shows that children who practice yoga and mindfulness are better able to regulate their emotions, manage stress and calm themselves. They may also choose better foods to eat and engage in more physical activity than children who do not. The studies also illustrate that centered, calm and focused children learn more easily, have better social skills and, in general, are much happier kids.

The following are some of the benefits of yoga to maximize the learning process:

- Provides students healthy ways to express and balance their emotions.
- Promotes a more relaxed, comfortable state of being - the perfect state for teaching and learning.
- Brings students into the present moment – the most basic requirement for learning.
- Encourages community and connectedness within the classroom.
- Helps to create an atmosphere of confidence, enthusiasm and non-competitiveness where everyone can succeed.
- Provides opportunities for beneficial motor breaks throughout the day.
- Eases anxiety and tension (such as pre-test or performance jitters).
- Enhances focus, concentration, comprehension and memory.

- Provides opportunities for reflection, patience and insight, reducing impulsivity and reactivity.
- Supports social and emotional learning.
- Improves listening skills.
- Wakes up sluggish minds and creativity as needed.
- Enhances organizational and communication skills.
- Improves posture, assisting students to sit comfortably for long periods.
- Enhances motor skills and balance.
- Improves mind/body awareness and connection.
- Improves confidence and self-esteem.
- Encourages respect for oneself and others.
- Creates a calm, harmonious classroom.

Science has shown, and educators have experienced first-hand, that when children are anxious, frustrated or stressed, it is nearly impossible for them to learn. It is only from a relaxed, calm and present state of mind and body that our children can be psychologically and physiologically learning-ready. Encouraged perhaps by the overwhelming pressures of the “No Child Left Behind Act,” teachers and school administrators around the U.S. are searching for a means to this end.

In France, South America, India, Italy and other countries where social/emotional learning is deemed as crucial as academia, yoga has been part of the school curriculum for over 25 years.

After years of an increasing focus on results over process, the pendulum of American education is finally swinging towards a focus on the whole child, physical, social and emotional.

More and more schools are recognizing the effectiveness of taking a few minutes here and there throughout the day for yoga breaks– right in the classroom. A few deep breaths, physical movement or stretching to reconnect the body/mind, and moments for quiet introspection, are often a quick and easy way to ‘reset’ the nervous system to calm and focus. Children are brought into the present moment, a place where they can pause, truly hear and feel, reflect and learn.

Though many teachers recognize yoga’s potential benefits in the classroom, many are not practicing yoga and therefore may initially feel uncomfortable leading yoga breaks. That is where a trained yoga instructor with a child focused skill-set can become quite valuable.

A child who learns yoga, mindfulness and relaxation will not only be more learning-ready, but will also be developing essential skills he can use for lifetime of health and wellness in mind, body and spirit. The pendulum of American education is definitely swinging in the right direction. ▲

**For more information:**

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