

Yoga isn't just for adults
 – it also promotes
 a child's physical
 health and emotional
 happiness. Jane Lee
 Wiesner explains how,
 why and when

YOGA

Jane Lee Wiesner

CHILD'S POSE

Illustrations by Annie White, from the book *Who Am I?*

IF I ASKED you what you wanted most for your child, you'd probably answer "health and happiness". What you may not realise is how much these two depend on each other. It's pretty hard to feel healthy when you're miserable and it's not easy to feel happy when you're in poor health. Yoga is a way of promoting your child's wellbeing all round.

Why yoga? Yoga will teach your child positive health habits, reinforcing a strong sense of self-worth. For a child to grow into a happy, healthy adult there are certain needs that must be met. Psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests that the following 'Hierarchy of Needs' must be satisfied for us to thrive physically, mentally

and emotionally:

- Physical needs** – food, water and shelter.
- Safety needs** – protection from threat.
- Social needs** – love and companionship.
- Self-esteem needs** – a positive self-image, a sense of understanding ourselves and others and an appreciation for nature.

When these needs are met we experience something called self-actualisation; a sense of carefree, creative expression and happiness. In Yogic terms, self-actualisation means bliss (Samadhi in Sanskrit). This is something we experience naturally as a child but often lose as we grow up.

Yogic tradition claims that bliss (happiness) is our natural state of being. Leigh Blashki, from the Australian Yoga Institute in Melbourne, agrees that bliss is natural to human nature. He writes: "Children have a natural curiosity and wonderment and seem to effortlessly experience life in the present moment – a state akin to the 'mindfulness' of yoga-based and Buddhist meditation."

Unfortunately, life's demands can rob us of our present-moment consciousness, leaving us floundering in anxieties about the past and the future. Blashki suggests that by teaching children yoga, we are providing them with life tools that help them retain their curiosity and creativity. Yoga unites the child's 'creative inner self' with their 'outer personality' and provides them with a way to retain that precious sense of wonderment into adulthood.

Yoga can teach your child to direct their emotions in a positive and healthy way, creating benefits on many different levels. For instance, studies carried out



by the Australian Institute of Criminology (for the Australian Sports Commission) claim that physical activity actually helps correct antisocial behaviour in young people. Furthermore, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Dr Daniel Goleman states that a child's success in life has more to do with the sound development of their emotional skills than school grades and IQ scores. Yoga not only provides a fun-loving approach to exercise – promoting good health – it strives to unburden your child from emotional stress.

If taught well, yoga can captivate the child's imagination, taking them on an interactive journey of fun and fitness, creating an opportunity for them to express feelings in a non-threatening, carefree way. Yoga teacher Heather Galea, also from the Australian Yoga Institute, believes yoga gives a child a sense of power. Instead of feeling at the mercy of life, the child learns to take responsibility for their decisions and becomes empowered by this sense of choice. As a result they learn to feel comfortable and at ease with life.



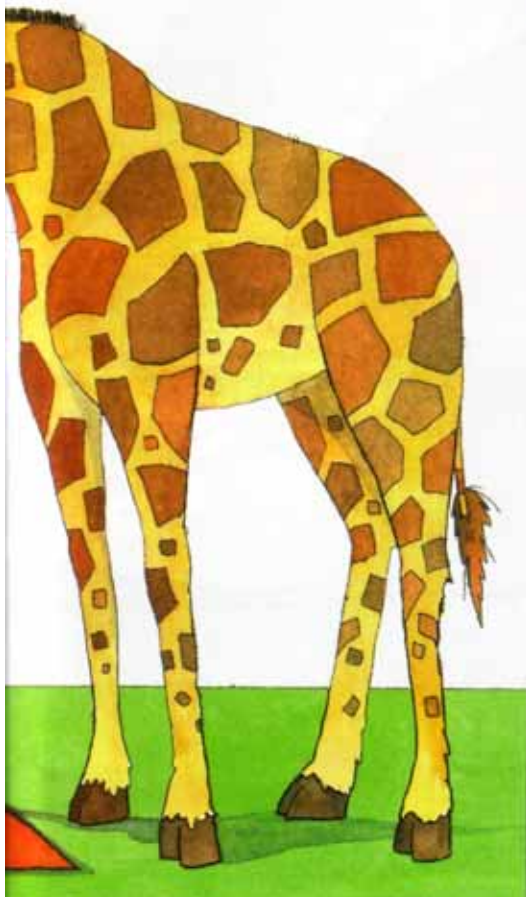
“Yoga aims to create a sense of calm, helping your child respond to life's challenges without overreacting”

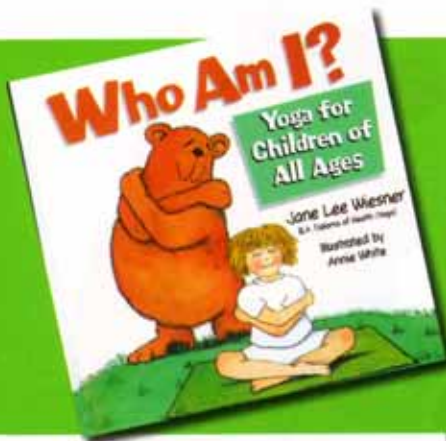
In other words, yoga works with the child's emotional strengths as well as physical stamina. Furthermore, asana practice (yoga poses) and breathing techniques massage the body's internal organs and re-oxygenate the blood leaving the child feeling relaxed (from physical tension) and energised. Yoga tones and nourishes the body and relieves tension in the body and mind.

To understand how tension spreads in the human body, imagine tossing a stone into a still pond and watching hundreds of tiny ripples billow out. The same applies to the human body. When a physical injury or an emotional trauma occurs, the effects spread throughout the whole body. This creates tension in places outside the

original source. Doctors call this 'referred pain'. Yogic physiology calls it blocks in energy flow. It is this life force, energy or Yogic breath (known as Prana in Sanskrit) that we aim to move through the body by practising yoga.

Since good yoga practice aims to strengthen and nourish the body, release the flow of energy and create a sense of joy, peace and calm, it works towards helping your child respond to life's challenges without overreacting. Eminent Biochemist Dr Candice Pert claims that our emotions have a direct bearing on our physical wellbeing. In her book *The Molecules of Emotion*, Dr Pert explains that each emotion has a corresponding physical substrate or chemical representation in





RECOMMENDED READ

Who am I?
Yoga for Children of All Ages
By Jane Lee Wiesner

Who Am I? is a joyous children's book with a large emphasis on play and exploration through the means of yoga. Each posture is described simply, but captures the true essence of each position. Imagination and potential are encouraged, as is the nurturing

of reflection and inner disciple. A great introduction to yoga for parent and child that adds new meaning to a well-written topic. Highly recommended.

(Michelle Anderson Publishing,
NZ\$19.95 or AU\$15.95.
Available from book stores,
or order through the website
www.yogaathome.com.au or via
email: janel@yogaathome.com.au
Vincent Bolletta

the body. So by using techniques that encourage positive emotions, such as yoga, we can heal the whole body.

Children love to pretend. Their world is filled with mystery and magic. They love to be on stage; the centre of attention. Yoga can be one of the most beneficial forms of performance or theatric play a child can have. A good yoga teacher will understand and explore this kind of child's play. When looking for a teacher, make sure they are not too caught up in the quest for physical perfection. Instead, find one who understands that each human being is unique and should be encouraged to develop according to their individual needs. A good yoga teacher will help your child feel attuned with their body and mind. Alternatively, one of the best places to teach your child yoga is at home.

Who Am I? Yoga for Children of All Ages is the first in a series of yoga books suitable for children and adults alike. Written with an emphasis on fun, this light-hearted application of yoga helps the child focus the mind and strengthen the body. *Who Am I?* strives to inspire the child's creativity and promotes good health. The interactive approach of the book allows the parent, teacher or carer and the child to experience the freedom and pleasure that come from creative play. By sharing the fun of yoga practice, you and your child can lighten your hearts, free your minds from worry, lift your spirits and revitalise both body and mind. You can create a sense of joy and peace through yoga at play. 

