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MIND GAMES



Yoga can enhance your child's ability to concentrate and find clarity in challenging situations. Jane Lee Wiesner explains the philosophy behind this theory and presents a yoga routine to aid focused attention

Photographs: Gerald Shacklock
Model: Jessica Taylor
Clothing: Reebok

EVERY parent wants their child to be happy. But what constitutes happiness? Being self-assured perhaps? Being able to feel a sense of self-worth? According to the philosophy of yoga, happiness and wellbeing are one. Yoga aims to promote a sense of inner strength and a feeling of personal power. Rather than being unduly influenced by your surroundings in order to find happiness, you become confident and happy through your own inner wisdom.

So how can this ancient philosophy help your child? By giving them something that no amount of money or status can – a love and acceptance of the self.

One of the first steps on the road to self-esteem and personal power is learning how to concentrate. Concentration means focus and focus means clarity and clarity means wisdom. Without concentration our thoughts tend to be scattered and erratic. When we are unable to concentrate we can become subject to irrational thoughts and emotional upheavals.

In fact, one of the biggest blocks to concentration is emotional turmoil. I was very young when my father died and I found that this loss and my inner conflict over feeling different from other children blocked my ability to concentrate. Hence, as a small child, I felt unable to think clearly. My power was lost to disharmony, fear and confusion. If I'd had the tools that yoga offers back then, I believe my path to inner peace would have been much easier.

Without going too far into the subtle

influences of yogic philosophy, there are some basic principles that need to be understood in order to learn what yoga can do to help your child's concentration and focus. Firstly, biology shows us that the body's ability to function mentally and physically depends on the healthy workings of the spinal cord and nervous system. Yogic physiology works in much the same way. Energy fields called nadis are

or prana must be clear and unblocked.

Particular asanas (yoga poses) can be used to balance different areas in the body, and to encourage a free flow of energy throughout the body. Yoga poses also have many psychological benefits, such as creating or enhancing feelings of strength, stability and confidence.


Most of the asanas recommended to improve concentration are centred

“Yoga has many psychological benefits. It enhances feelings of strength, stability and confidence”

connected to centres of energy, the chakras. These chakras are connected by a channel of energy which runs along the spine called the kundalini. They are at the base of the spine and go through to the crown of the head. The healthy function of the body and mind relates to these core areas of the body. Restrictions, such as emotional problems or muscular tension or disease, have a great bearing on the flow of the body's subtle energy which is known in Sanskrit as prana.

Yogic tradition teaches that prana is moved through the body with the breath. This is why breathing is such an important part of yoga practice. Yoga works through a combination of movement and the breath. For you and your child to experience a sense of peace and clarity of mind this flow of energy

around releasing the flow of energy in the chakras, particularly the base chakra (a point related to feeling grounded and stable) and the third-eye chakra (which relates to thought and intuition). On the following pages, you will find a description of two asanas that work to strengthen and balance the energy flow in the base and third-eye chakras.

Always remember to consult your doctor before beginning any exercise programme. An important part of yoga practice is to take responsibility for your own health and wellbeing. This sense of personal power and intuition is something that parents can help their children develop as they grow. We all want the best for our children. And the best way to help them is to teach them ways to help themselves. 

MOUNTAIN (Tadasana)

Stand tall with your feet together, heels and toes touching. The toes are spread to provide a strong foundation for the stance. The weight of the body is evenly distributed over both feet and the arms are extended down by the sides, slightly away from the body. Palms are facing the body and the fingers are slightly energised. The position is poised and strong, not rigid. Find a focus point at eye level. Feel a stretch throughout the body – grounding down through the legs and feet and lifting up through the waist, spine and neck. Lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling. The head is straight and the neck is just a natural extension of the spine. The tummy is gently pulled in and the buttocks are comfortably tucked under. Try not to lock the knees and remember to relax the shoulders. Become aware of the energy flowing through the body. Imagine a piece of string extending through the centre of the body and out through the crown of the head. Imagine this invisible string gently expanding the gap between each vertebra. Breathe easily. Feel a sense of peace and calm. In this pose, the awareness is on balance and the flow of prana or life force throughout the body. Feel the energy grow within. Hold this pose for a few minutes before releasing.

Benefits: A good balancing asana and one that also improves concentration. It strengthens the body and sharpens the mind. This posture helps the individual to become aware of their posture and stance. The even distribution of weight enhances the body's energy flow. It enhances spinal elasticity and combats fatigue. Tadasana provides a foundation for all other standing postures. By coming into contact with the earth and heightening posture awareness, Tadasana assists the body and mind to become centred, focused and aware.

Awareness: Balance and energy flow.

Chakra: Muladhara (base of the spine) and Ajna (third eye).

CHAKRAS

RED**Stability, feeling grounded**

The Root Chakra or Base Chakra (Muladhara) is found at the base of the spine. It represents earth. This chakra governs all that is solid in the body (such as bones and teeth) and is associated with stability, solidarity and having one's feet planted firmly on the ground – feeling grounded and secure. Hence, grounding postures help to relieve anger and fear, and provide a sense of security, safety, peace and surrender. This chakra is also related to smell, explaining the balancing benefits of aromatherapy. This is the lowest level of vibration in the body. It is connected to the process of elimination and is a vital link to qualities such as strength, focus and courage. Imbalance in this area causes aggressive behaviour.

INDIGO**Thought, intuition**

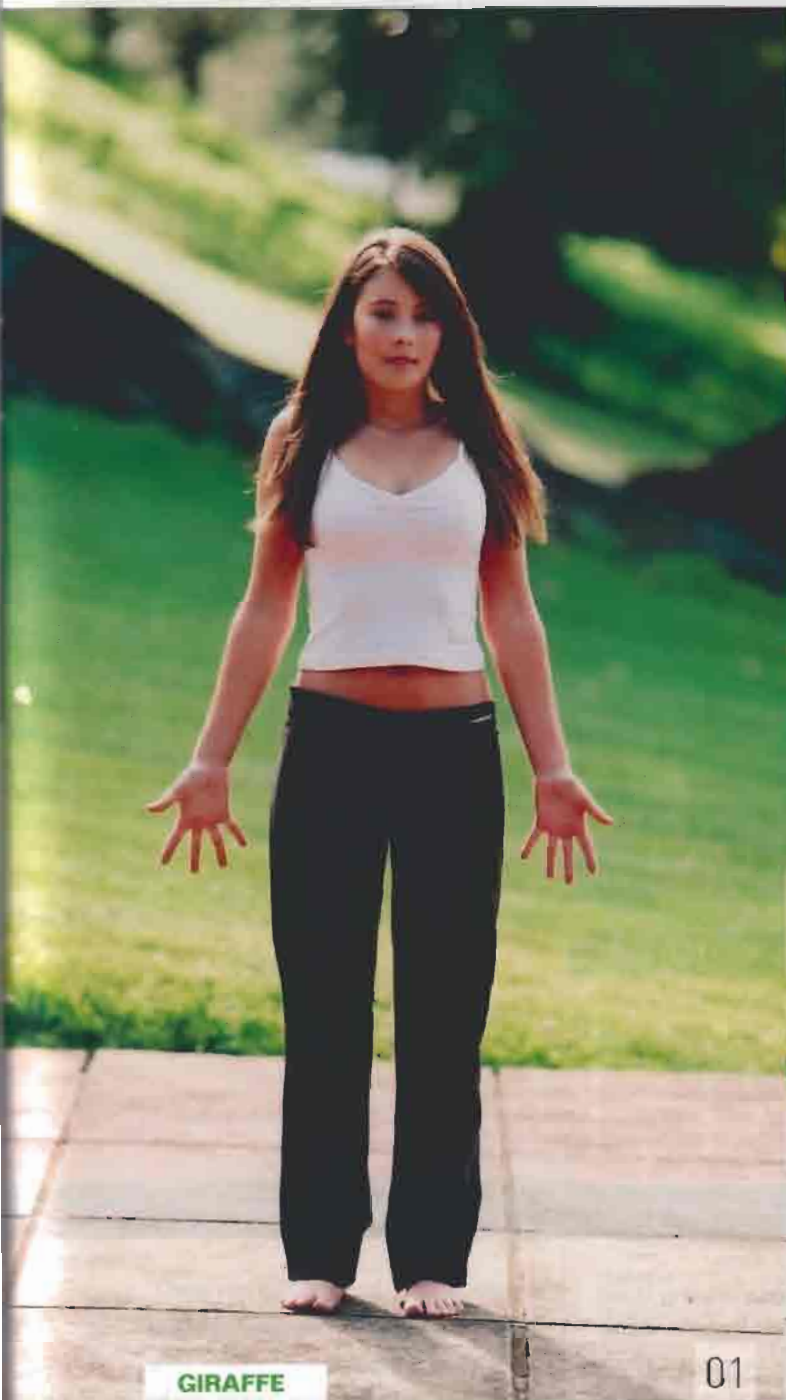
The Third Eye Chakra (Ajna) is located between the eyebrows. It is the seat of the mind, which is referred to as the 'command' centre. This level of consciousness commands one's personality. Balancing this chakra allows us to detach ourselves from negative emotions and to experience pure joy and rationality. On a subtle level, this chakra is sometimes called the site of the universal soul. This area of the body governs the central nervous system. It is at this centre where we can learn to still the modifications of the mind (ripples of thought that unsettle us emotionally) through meditation. Here we can find a sense of oneness, wisdom and self-mastery. Imbalances cause negativity and lack of concentration.

There are many books available on children's yoga and many yoga teachers who can help you learn more. One book to try is Yoga for Children of all Ages, published by Michelle Anderson Publishing. It is available in all good bookshops or via the website www.yogaathome.com.au

We have 10 copies to give away.

Email us at fit@fitnesslife.co.nz with your name, address and phone number.

The first 10 entries received will win.



GIRAFFE

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The Giraffe is a combination of Hasta Utthanasana (raised arm pose), Padahastasana (hand to foot pose) and Tadasana (mountain pose).

Stand with your feet parallel and hip-distance apart. Straighten the spine, elongate the neck and lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling. Look at something directly in front of you that doesn't move. Breathing in, straighten the arms and point the fingers (above left). Raise the arms to the front and upwards towards the ceiling (above right). At the same time, rise up on to the tips of the toes. Stretch the whole body and maintain balance.

Breathing out, lower the arms and come back on to the feet. Repeat slowly for 5-10 rounds.

Benefits: Develops physical and mental balance. Stretches and tones the spine. Strengthens the arms and legs.

Contraindications: Avoid this asana if you experience any balancing problems.

Awareness: Balance and energy flow.

Chakra: Muladhara (base of the spine).