



PRIMARY POSE

YOGA

Jane Lee Wiesner

How can parents and schoolteachers go about teaching youngsters yoga? Jane Lee Wiesner explains

CAN the magic of yoga create a happy, healthy child? Common sense tells us that for a person to be happy and healthy they need to have emotional strength and physical stamina. Primary teachers strive to help children develop these attributes by continually

enhancing their teaching strategies, just as parents try to learn as much as they can about successful parenting. But teaching the young is not easy. In our world, children can be exposed to the complexities of adult problems at a very early age. I was one such child.

For me, growing up was an arduous journey. My mum had a breakdown after the loss of her husband (my Dad died when I was seven) and I virtually took on the role of the parent in our household. I was the one who put Mum to bed when she drank too much. At seven, I became her protector and nurturer. As a consequence, I found life a lot more serious than the average seven-year-old would. Needless to say, my learning ability was impaired and as a result my self-esteem suffered. When I look back, I can see how desperately I needed to find an inner strength and awareness; a sense of self-worth. But my insecurities made it virtually impossible. Inevitably, my teenage years were wrought with rebellion. And my rebellion led me into perilous situations. When I was 16, I was faced with a choice between drugs and meditation. Thankfully, I chose meditation. For me, yoga was my saviour. It gave me an inner strength and sense of purpose.

As a teacher or parent, you have the chance to help shape young lives. By sharing the joys of yoga with children, you can teach them to develop positive life skills. Guided by your insight and wisdom, they can learn the art of living well by experiencing the benefits of exercise and stress management. How, you ask? Let me explain it this way. All of us have basic needs that must be fulfilled in order to stay alive and maintain optimal health. Yogic theories strive to teach us ways to fulfil these needs. Yoga emphasises quality of life; distinguishing between a difficult existence of worry and insecurity and a life filled with hope, vitality and purpose.

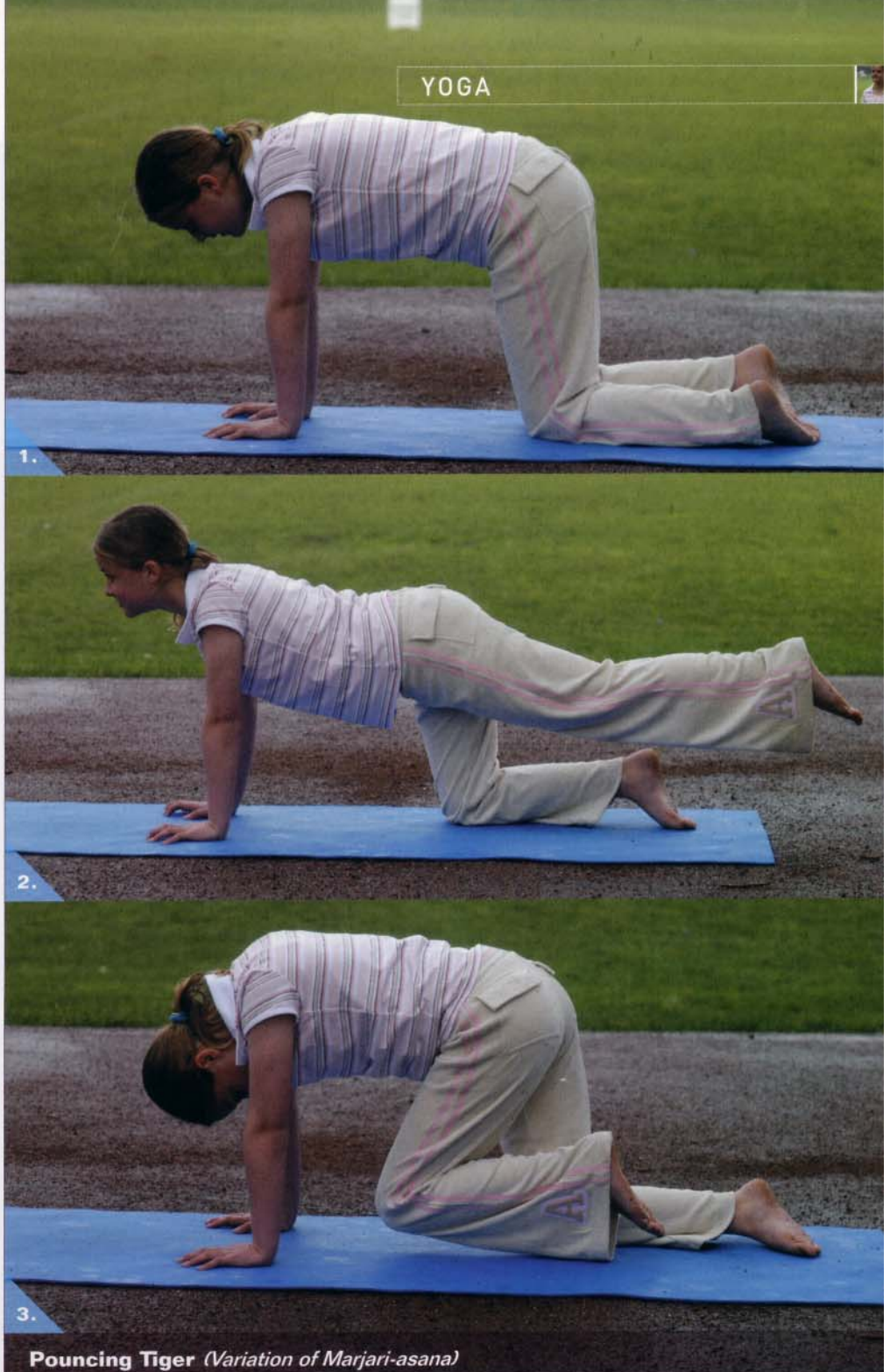
Yoga comes from an ancient custom that dates back thousands of years in the Hindu culture. Yogic tradition is so broad that its limbs reach out in many directions. One branch, Hatha yoga, is defined as 'physical' yoga. In essence, Hatha yoga relates to the movement or flow of energy (life force or *prana*) in the body. For example, through slow and steady movement and accompanying breathing techniques, the flow of *prana* is enhanced and our ability to deal with

stress is heightened. Hatha yoga helps the body to switch from the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system (the fight or flight response) to the parasympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system (the relaxation state) with ease.

We are all primarily energetic beings – we need nutrients and stimulation in order to function properly. The energy and information young people need to thrive can come in many forms. Whether a child develops positive health skills or negative, unhealthy habits comes down to the information they receive and how they interpret that information. Yoga provides a subtle way to introduce a healthy lifestyle to the young, to guide them to positive choices.

Yoga practice works to promote focus. But when teaching yoga to the young, it is important not to be rigid or preoccupied with perfection. Yoga is not about being perfect in the pose, it is about being comfortable and steady in the pose. The more self-assured a person becomes, the more capable and effective they can become in all facets of life. In other words, it's important not to push children to think that they have to be infallible. As Aristotle taught, people become wise and self-confident when they understand that no one is perfect. To me, this is the essence of yoga. It teaches self-acceptance and love while at the same time it builds strength and stamina.

So how do you go about introducing your youngsters to yoga? Firstly, you need to read as much as you can about the subject, remembering that when in doubt, always go softly. Yoga practice is about gradually bringing integrity to the poses, but this doesn't happen immediately. The idea is to stretch and tone the body in simple, easy movements, accentuating a long spine and a relaxed neck and head. The poses should be gentle, not stiff, especially for beginners. Breathing techniques don't need to be emphasised when teaching the young. They can be slowly introduced as the child matures but not in a way that is too controlled. It's important for them not to become



Pouncing Tiger (*Variation of Marjari-asana*)

Start in a hands and knees position. Both the hands and the knees should be hip-distance apart, with the hands and fingers facing forward and the fingers spread. The arms are directly under the shoulders and the knees directly under the hips. Slowly breathe in while moving the head slightly backwards very gently and curling the tail bone (base of the spine) upwards, allowing the spine to concave. At the same time, extend the left leg backwards, lifting the toes upwards towards the ceiling or sky (the leg should be slightly bent). Hold for a moment. Slowly breathe out then all at once: move the head downwards (gently), curl the tail bone under, arch the spine upwards and bring the knee carefully towards the forehead as far as is comfortable. Hold for a moment, breathe in, then breathe out and return the knee to the floor. Repeat slowly with the other leg. The whole process may be repeated three to five times. Rest.

too preoccupied with the breath. It is also essential that children don't get too caught up with logistics – let their breath be natural with the occasional theatrical outward breath for fun. As the child grows, the breath will naturally become more focused.

When teaching children, it is important to remember the ways in which they learn. Psychologist and educational consultant Marcella Reiter explains that we have three modes of learning – visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Some of us learn best by sight, others by hearing and others by touching and feeling. Generally, teachers today apply this concept to their teaching methods. When teaching yoga it is a good idea to do so in a way that explores all of these styles of learning. You could, for example, read my book, *Who Am I?* a couple of times before attempting the poses – either in class or at home. When the child is suitably interested, allow the reading to naturally inspire questions regarding the pictures, then talk the child through the pose and let them experience the movement. After the practice, talk about how they feel. Over time, the child will become more in

tune with their body. It is also a good idea to use affirmations during the practice, for example, "I am as strong as a diamond." Encourage the child to quietly say it aloud. Always remember that even though yoga is a form of exercise, first and foremost when applied to children, it is 'play'.

For further stimulation, the book can be used to identify colours, (ie "Which colour do you see more than others in this picture?") The text can be used to discuss feelings, eg "How do we feel when we are playful? What does brave feel like?" In yoga poses, feelings relate to an action. The warrior pose can inspire a feeling of being brave, proud, strong... When the child makes a connection to the feeling, the feeling can become associated with the pose. As the child grows, this can be a valuable tool at a time when they might feel uncertain or confused – the pose can be used to introduce a sense of peace and strength.

The most important thing to remember, no matter how old the child, is to promote fun, but in a gentle calming way. Happiness is a feeling that sometimes becomes buried under the harshness of expectations. Think of yoga like theatre:

it's a way to create enchantment. The most important thing yoga can teach us is to 'be in the moment'. We all know the saying that life is not a dress rehearsal. And, in our unstable world, the idea of making every minute count has become even more meaningful. Yoga is the 'magic' that can stop the clock. Use it as your magic wand in the classroom or at home. ✨

Jane's book Who Am I, Yoga for Children of All Ages is published by Michelle Anderson Publishing and is available from all good bookshops (ISBN 0 85572 341 6) or by emailing jane@profres.com.au Jane's new yoga book Magic Me is scheduled to be released later this year. She also hopes to release a guide to yoga for teachers in 2005. For more information, visit www.yogaathome.com.au

Important note: doctors' advice should always be sought before taking on any exercise programme. In the case of working with yoga at school, parental permission should also be given.

Chimp – Squat and Rise Pose (Variation of Utthanasana)

Begin the asana by standing with the feet just over hip-distance apart. Turn your toes slightly outwards and straighten the spine. Lift the crown of the head up towards the ceiling (or sky). Slowly bend the knees to a gentle squatting position, keeping the knees in line with the toes. Let the hands and arms dangle down loosely in between the legs. Breathe in through the nostrils and gently bounce up and down. Make a "haa" sound while breathing out through the mouth with each downward bounce. Breathe out a little more with each downward bounce, gently squatting a little further each time. Only go as far down as comfortable. Allow the body to feel relaxed and loose. Breathe in (through the nostrils) and stand up again. Repeat this movement three to five times. Rest.



Maypole or Waist Rotating Pose (Variation of Kati Chakrasana)

Stand with your feet spread slightly over hip-distance apart and parallel, toes pointing outwards slightly. Stretch up tall, lengthening the spine. Lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling (or sky). Relax the shoulders down. Bend the knees slightly and breathe in. Breathe out and gently twist the body to the right, letting the arms wrap loosely around the body. Breathe in and swing the arms in the other direction, twisting towards the other side while breathing out. Swing from side to side in a relaxed and easy movement. Allow the head to turn from side to side gently following each movement. Keep breathing in while moving towards the middle and out as the arms are loosely wrapped around the side. The breath can be exhaled more deeply by making a "haa" sound through the mouth on the exhalation (always breathe in through the nostrils, even when exhaling through the mouth). Keep swinging for at least five counts to each side, then slow the movement down and come back up to a normal standing position. Rest.



Snake (Sarpasana)

Lie face down with the feet together and rest the forehead on the floor. Place the arms around the back of the body and clasp the hands, interlocking the fingers. Breathe in and stretching the arms out towards the feet, lift the head, neck and chest gently off the floor, curling the spine slightly upwards like a snake. Hold for a moment, then breathe out while lowering the body carefully to the floor. Repeat this three to five times, resting in between. To end, sit back on the knees and extend the arms to the front, along the floor. Extend the fingers, arms and spine, feeling the stretch, while pressing the buttocks back towards the feet. Walk the hands back up into a kneeling position while breathing in. Rest.

