

Yoga can help cultivate confident, happy little children, says Jane Lee Wiesner, in that it helps them deal with their feelings and emotional stress

WHAT motivates a child's behaviour? As parents, if we had the quick answer, it would solve many of our problems. Wanting our children to be happy and well adjusted is the goal of every good parent. From the moment our child is born, we undoubtedly spend countless hours worrying about their wellbeing. For a small child, happiness is such a spontaneous thing. But what happens to our kids as

they grow older? What causes them to become moody and irritable?

Psychologist Sigmund Freud claims that human behaviour is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the desire to avoid pain. So, pleasurable experiences condition us to be happy whereas painful experiences, if left unresolved, can become a negative influence on our behaviour. Interestingly, the Eastern

philosopher Patanjali, author of *The Yoga Sutras*, agrees with Freud. Primarily, both of these great thinkers link our ability to find pleasure, in other words to be happy, to two things: positive self-talk (on a conscious and unconscious level), and the free flow of psychic energy within the body and mind.

According to Freud and Patanjali, this energy, although given different names,

YOGA

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THE JOY CHILD

ASANA

Duck (squat and rise pose)

Begin the pose by standing with your feet just over hip-width apart. Turn the toes outwards (towards the side). With hands relaxed, interlock your fingers and let them hang down in front of you (palms facing upwards). Breathe in then straighten the spine. Lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling. Breathe out and slowly bend the knees to a semi-squatting position, keeping your knees in line with your toes. Breathe in and stand up again. Repeat this movement 3 to 5 times, bending a little bit further each time until coming into a full squat, if possible.

Benefits: Improves the flow of the *prana*, helps circulation and strengthens the ankles, knees, thighs and back. Builds strength in the pelvis and uterus.

Awareness: Balance.

Chakra: Muladhara (base of the spine).





must flow through the body freely if optimal health is to be achieved. This vital energy, known as *prana* in yogic philosophy, is moved through the body by the breath. Yogic tradition teaches that the unrestricted, free flow of this energy is necessary to dissolve physical and emotional tension. Therefore, yoga is a brilliant method of promoting good health and wellbeing because it incorporates positive self-talk (in the form of affirmations and visualisation techniques) and physical expression (movement accompanied by the breath).

Both Freud and Patanjali argue that ultimately, our sense of pleasure comes from feeling good about ourselves. When we consider that, apart from medical conditions or chemical imbalances, depression is fed by a lack of self-esteem, we can see how important it is to help our children build a strong sense of self-worth.

Child psychology is a complex and sophisticated field of study. Most of us would love to have some of the knowledge and experience that it conveys. But alas, we are just mums and dads, trying to do the best we can for our kids. And unfortunately, there's no quick cure for depression. Furthermore, if depression is caused by chemical imbalance or genetic conditions, then medication may be the only answer. But if the depression, or behaviour problems, are the result of emotional issues, then yoga can provide

ASANA

Bear

Sit in an easy cross-legged position. Lengthen the spine, lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling and elongate the neck. Without hunching the shoulders, cross the arms at chest height and wrap them around the body in a gentle hugging movement. Breathe in. Breathe out and walk the fingertips around the body towards the spine. This is a good stretch for the shoulder blades. Breathe in and

relax the arms. Repeat 5 times.

Benefits: Opens the shoulder blades and relieves tension in the spine. Massages the heart and lungs.

Contraindications: Avoid if suffering from shoulder conditions or knee problems.

Awareness: A feeling of love and security.

Chakra: Anahata (heart).

a proactive approach. Through yogic techniques and philosophy, you can teach your child to become better equipped to deal with life's emotional hurdles.

In other words, yoga can help you help your kids. Yoga is a physical, emotional and mental journey. If taught well, it enhances qualities such as discipline, self-acceptance, self-esteem, concentration, focus, physical strength, dignity, poise and serenity. At this point you're probably wondering how your scattered five-year-old might possibly ever become serene. Yoga isn't about magic. It is about the steady building of inner and outer strength, and the resistance to negative influences. So, the excitable child grows up learning to harness their sense of pleasure and joy. And the behavioural problems associated with low self-esteem are replaced by the reassurance of a strong self-image.

If we were all taught at a young age how to deal with our feelings productively, life would be so much easier. But coping with emotional upheavals doesn't always have to be about a 'talking' cure. Sometimes, exerting ourselves physically can work just as well. Anger is better out than in. For example, a more strenuous asana (yoga pose) practised purposefully with strong inward and outward breaths and a powerful physical movement, expending all hints of aggression, can be extremely liberating on an emotional level. This is very beneficial as, according to Freud, negative behaviour is often the result of

frustration arising from pent-up hostility.

Furthermore, with yoga, the child benefits from learning to distinguish between tension and release in the body. Alternatively, the practice of relaxation and visualisation techniques can help a child to 'let go' and surrender, both physically and emotionally. Watch a child. The first thing they will do when they're angry or upset is hold their breath. Yoga teaches breath control and release. Over a period of time, the ability to use the breath effectively can become a natural part of the child's physical and emotional make-up.

In essence, yoga for kids is simply about deepening the child's capacity for joy; reinforcing life's pleasure and dissolving life's pain. We are not magicians. Even when we provide all of the things we think our children need to grow up happy and healthy we may still face an uphill battle to help them find a sense of self-love. Let's face it, as they grow up they will be confronted with a multitude of environmental influences that we just can't control. But through the practice of yoga, your child can learn some 'life skills' that will undoubtedly help them survive the pain and hopefully find life a wonderful pleasure.

The three asanas on these pages place an emphasis on grounding, security and expression. These three areas are useful in counteracting emotional stress and the behavioural problems associated with stress.

THE CHAKRAS

RED

Stability, groundedness

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 give 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.

GREEN

Love

The Heart Chakra (Anahata) is located at the area of the spine level with the heart. It is associated with air. The qualities experienced at the heart

level are lightness, airiness, mobility and gentleness. Hence comes the term 'having the vapours' when someone is smitten, light-headed and giddy with love. The Heart chakra is associated with the sense of touch. Touch is experienced and represented by relationships. We say we are 'in touch' or 'out of touch', which is really to say that we have 'more' or 'less' of our heart in the relationship. Imbalance of this chakra causes depression, sadness and confusion.

BLUE

Will, communication

The Throat Chakra (Visuddha) is found at the area of the spine level with the throat. This chakra is associated with ether. Ether is the basis from which each element arises. Sound is the sense associated with this chakra. Silence has been described as a 'noiseless sound'. When one experiences this sound of silence, one recognises this etheric element in the self. The throat is the bridge between 'thought' (at the centre of the eyebrow) and the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. All of the four elements can be reflected

through the voice. The voice can be heavy and earthy, ripe and watery, soft and airy, warm and ethereal. In fact, we can learn much from studying the voice in ourselves and in others. Imbalance in this area causes difficulty in communication and expression.

Always remember to consult your doctor before beginning any health programme. An important part of yoga practice is to take responsibility for your own health and wellbeing. This sense of personal power and intuition with regard to health and fitness 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.

If you have any further questions regarding these poses there are many books on the subject and many trained yoga teachers who can assist you to learn more. Or you can find out more about Yoga for kids by reading *Who Am I? Yoga for Children of all Ages* by Jane Lee Wiesner, published by Michelle Anderson Publishing. The book is available from all good bookshops or via the website www.yogaathome.com.au

Important points to remember

- All yoga postures should be performed slowly, on a firm, even foundation. The best way to practise yoga is in bare feet on a (non-slip) yoga mat, wearing comfortable, loose-fitting clothing.
- Always listen to your own body. Close the eyes for a moment before each practice and consider how you are feeling.
- Read the instructions thoroughly before attempting the pose.
- The yoga postures shown on these pages are suitable for children and adults. Naturally, children should always be supervised by an adult.
- The movements in yoga practice should be comfortable, steady and fluid-like; each asana (yoga pose) flowing gently from one to the next.
- The practice of yoga should never cause any pain. If experiencing any discomfort, discontinue the practice immediately and move on to something else.
- During the practice, breathe deeply in and out of the nostrils (the nose has a sensitive filtration system in contrast to the throat which allows bacteria to enter the body).
- Breathe in when opening and moving away from the body – breathe out when closing in and moving towards the body.
- Rest for a moment between each asana. Also rest for a full 30 seconds between each series of asanas.
- Most important of all is the use of common sense when practising any form of exercise. In essence, one of the main aims of yoga is to learn to listen to your own body and to become more intuitive with regard to your health, wellbeing and energy level.

ASANA

Bee (humming breath)

Sit in an easy cross-legged position with the hands resting on the knees. Keeping your spine straight, lift the top of the head towards the ceiling and elongate the neck. Relax the shoulders down. Bring the hands up and block the ears with the pointer fingers. Close the eyes. Relax the whole body. Make sure the jaw is

relaxed. Breathe in slowly. Breathe out slowly and make a smooth, continuous humming sound (the mouth is closed and the teeth are slightly apart). Repeat 5 times.

Benefits: Relieves stress and alleviates physical tension. Helps alleviate insomnia and anxiety. Good for reducing blood pressure. Has a harmonising effect by heightening the level of vibration within the

body. Stimulates wellbeing. Helps eliminate throat ailments and assists the body's natural healing processes. Good for the nervous system.

Contraindications: Avoid if the ear, nose and throat areas are inflamed. Can be done sitting on a chair for anyone with knee problems.

Awareness: Sound or vibration.

Chakra: Visuddha (throat).

