

Yoga for Little People

Our young have much to gain from yoga practice. Yoga has been around for centuries and adults have long appreciated its benefits. Now children can share in the joy and confidence that yoga inspires

Most people are not aware that the practice of yoga is based on a science of the mind. The physical aspects were developed to facilitate mental and emotional balance. With this in mind, it is important to understand that although yoga has much to offer us with regard to our general wellbeing, its primary aim is to assist the healthy functioning of the mind. In other words, it helps to improve concentration, awareness, emotional stability and self-esteem.

What can yoga offer your child?

On the physical side, yoga re-oxygenates the blood, massages and cleanses the organs, nourishes the skin, increases lung capacity, induces relaxation, assists the immune system and strengthens and tones the muscles. From a more subtle perspective, yoga helps to increase the child's confidence in mind-body coordination and, by building this

confidence, gives him/her a sense of emotional empowerment. Through practising yoga, children learn that they can rely on their bodies to respond as desired. In other words, they gradually learn how to direct the physical body. They also learn how to calm their own fluctuating thoughts, allowing them to focus and feel more relaxed. Yoga works on the concept that without proper training and attention our thoughts become scattered, causing us to get easily distracted – in a distracted or agitated state we find it hard to be aware and to feel at peace with our surroundings.

Naturally, there are a number of differences between an adult form of yoga practice and a child's practice. For one thing, the child's practice needs to be fun. The focus should be on creative expression and certainly not on perfectionism. Sometimes we adults make the mistake of getting a little too intense about trying to perfect our yoga practice.

This extreme notion of discipline conflicts with the purpose of yoga – to create a harmonious relationship or integration between the body, mind and spirit.

Another important consideration is not to overly emphasise the breath. Children need to develop their awareness of breath control naturally, as it comes through the practice itself. The child's breathing will improve because of their body's natural response to the poses, so there's no need to practise controlled breathing as one would in an adult practice. Nevertheless, I thoroughly recommend using a 'sighing out' or 'huffing' breath (on the exhalation), where appropriate, as it gradually trains the child's lungs to expel all of the old air and creates more room for clean fresh air. Apart from this, 'sighing' or 'huffing' the breath out is just good fun. Remember when teaching youngsters about yoga to stay away from extremes – give them room to shine.



The Cat Pose (Marjari-asana)

The Cat Pose is similar to 'Tiger', without the leg lifts. Instead, just move the spine while breathing in and out – lifting the head and concaving the spine while breathing in and arching the spine and gently allowing the head to drop forward while breathing out.

Calmer kids

One of the main reasons I like to promote children's yoga is because I believe it helps to balance out the influx of visual and auditory impressions we experience in our busy and changing world. Our world is overflowing with sensory seductions – TV, stereos, mobile phones, video games and computer games. Yoga provides a sense of balance so that the child has some quiet time to be reflective and creative. It focuses on building sensory awareness. For instance, sitting quietly in a meditative pose (like the half-lotus) is a nice way for a child to improve his or her posture and to experience a sense of poise (nevertheless, expect this quiet moment to be quite fleeting as children generally don't sit still for too long).

One of the best things that yoga can give your child is a sense of

patience and tolerance. Impatience and intolerance come from not living in the moment. They are the result of living in the past or the future – worrying about what's happened or what's going to happen. Being present is what yoga is all about. For a child, this is a slow, gradual and subtle process. But let's face it, you can't learn to be patient by demanding everything now, so the process is part of the journey.

The yoga poses illustrated with this article, work on building a sense of grounding and stability. Children need to feel that their world is a safe and steady place. This allows them to truly express their joy, because without



Pouncing Tiger (Variation of Marjari-asana)

Start in a hands and knees position. Both the hands and the knees should be around hip-distance apart. The hands and fingers should face forward (fingers spread). The arms are directly under the shoulders and the knees are directly under the hips. Slowly breathe in while moving the head slightly backwards (very gently) and curling the tailbone (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 (leg should be slightly bent). Hold for a moment. Slowly breathe out and all at once: move the head downwards (gently), curl the tailbone under, arch the spine upwards and bring the knee carefully towards the forehead (as far as 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 3 – 5 times. Then rest.

Yoga provides a sense of balance so that the child has some quiet time to be reflective and creative



Lizard (Utthan Pristhasana)

Lie face-down. Rise up onto the elbows with the arms crossed under the chest. Grasp the elbows with the hands. Separate the legs slightly, hip-distance apart. Make sure that the top of the feet are flat on the ground, toes pointing away from the body. Breathe in and raise the torso up so that body is supported by the elbows and the knees. Breathe out and move the buttocks back towards

the feet, taking the chin and the chest towards the floor behind the forearms. Feel the lovely stretch in the concave between the buttocks and the upper body. Hold for a moment, while breathing naturally, then slowly come forward again on an inward breath. Repeat 3 - 5 times. When finished, lie face down, arms along the sides, palms up, head to one side and rest.

fear and insecurity, joy is easy. Joy is a natural state of being for most children but it's very important to remember that this needs to be nurtured for it to continue into adult life. The most wonderful gift a parent can give a child is a loving, safe and secure environment in which to grow. Practising yoga with your child will help him/her to grow up feeling a degree of certainty about a world that can be very overwhelming at times. It will help your child to know and understand his/her own mind - allowing your 'little person' to grow up into a happy and secure adult.

Postures to practice

On a practical note, make sure the child has a non-stick mat for standing poses. It's fine to do floor work on a carpet or rug but when they are required to balance the body it's better to have a surface that won't slip out from under them. Remember to make the practice fun. Seek out a good children's yoga teacher if you can. Always consult your medical practitioner before starting a new physical program. The little girls shown in the pictures are Rebecca Prince (age five in pink) and her sister Phoebe (age one) playing in the background. **NH**

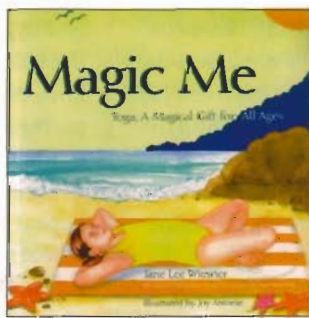
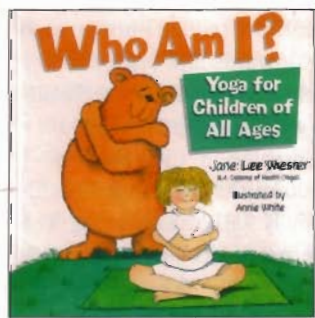
Jane Wiesner has practised yoga for 32 years. A highly qualified yoga instructor she also has certificates in cognitive behaviour therapy, rational emotive behaviour therapy and children's yoga. Email Jane at jane@beingwell.net.au

FREE Bookmark with each book

Yoga

for all ages

Two beautifully illustrated books whose colourful images and underlying themes promote self-esteem and provide a wonderful way for both adult and child to share the joy of exercising. Both are also suitable as yoga reference books with easy to follow instructions.



Mail or Fax to:

Being Well
PO Box 166
Black Rock VIC 3193
Fax: 03 9588 0281

Title	Qty	Price	Total
Who Am I? - Yoga for children of all ages		15.95	
Magic Me - Yoga. A magical gift for all ages		15.95	

Freight & Handling 6.00

Total

Cheque enclosed Visa Mastercard

Card No. _____

Signature _____ Exp. / / _____

First name _____

Surname _____

Address _____

Phone _____ P/Code _____

Fax _____

www.yogaathome.com.au