**YOGA FOR HEALTH IN CHILDREN**

By

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INTRODUCTION:

"Children are the wealth of tomorrow- take care of them if you wish to have a strong India” ---Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

The health of children has become a matter of great concern all over the world and the WHO, UNO as well as UNESCO have been stressing the importance of developing the potential that is there in our greatest resource-the children of the world. The art and science of Yoga has a lot to offer for the children in terms of their health as well as complete well being. Yoga offers us a tool by which we can provide a safe and healthy future for our beloved children. Yoga is both preventive as well as therapeutic for health problems that face children and is also rehabilitative in many situations. It is also important to understand the special needs of the children when teaching them Yoga and methods to create interest in them for this great jewel of our cultural heritage.

Yoga helps children cultivate conscious awareness and increases self-awareness and self-confidence. It teaches children to be gentle with themselves and others and develops focus and concentration. It also develops balance and mental equilibrium along with discipline and a love of learning. It improves performance in all areas of life, including schoolwork and relieves stress while providing a greater sense of general well-being. A regular practice of Yoga increases flexibility, coordination, and strength of the children and assists in the performance of sports activities.
HEALTH NEEDS OF CHILDREN:

Children are a unique segment of our population and have very specific health needs. It is pitiable that more than 40% of deaths are seen in the child population under the age of 5 years. Childhood is the age of both physical and mental growth and also has stressful periods such as puberty and adolescence that affect the health of the growing child and youth.

Some of the important health problems facing the child population are:

1. Growth and endocrine disorders
2. Infectious diseases
3. Handicaps
   a. Physical handicaps
   b. Neurological handicaps
   c. Sensory handicaps
   d. Social handicaps
4. Congenital disorders
5. Chronic diseases of the respiratory tract and heart
6. Neurological disorders
7. Liver and renal disorders
8. Psychological disorders
9. Skin diseases
10. Children also need an outlet for their creativity and abundant energy and if this youthful energy isn’t canalized properly it may result in various socially deviant behaviors such as truancy and juvenile delinquency.

BENEFITS OF YOGA FOR CHILDREN:

1. Prevention is better than cure: The practice of Yoga from early childhood helps prevent numerous disorders and even if the disorders or disease does occur at a later stage of life, the child would have the knowledge as well as the wherewithal to apply the practice necessary to control, limit or cure the
health problem. Improved immunity is a well documented benefit of Yoga practice and this strengthened immunity in addition to the Yogic hygiene and cleanliness developed through practice of Yama and Niyama helps prevent numerous infections from settling down in the child’s system.

2. At the physical level Asanas, Kriyas, Mudras and Pranayama stabilize and balance the energies of the children and thus contribute to a proper usage of this energy. This is important as otherwise the energies of the child get used up in trivial and unhealthy pursuits of modern life.

3. Yoga helps to develop all systems of the human body (cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, eliminative, endocrine, nervous and musculoskeletal) thus strengthening, cleansing and purifying the body so that it is brought under our conscious will. Various disorders such as Asthma and Diabetes can be controlled by a regular practice of Yoga.

4. Children suffering from ATHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) as well as mental retardation and other mental disabilities can be helped by a practice of the Asanas and Pranayamas that help develop better coordination, concentration, mental calmness as well as attention span. In children having epilepsy, Yoga helps to reduce the duration and frequency as well as the severity of the attack. Yoga has also been shown to reduce anxiety and aggressive behaviour in children.

5. In Yoga, all possible body positions are explored and the body is exercised standing, sitting, lying down (front, side and back) and even upside down! This creates an acute awareness of the entire body, strengthens the body systems and develops flexibility of the body.

6. Yoga is isometric and internal. It is a contest between our inherent inertia and the power of the will. Parts of the body are pitted against one another and a unique harmony of body, mind and breath is developed. This internal struggle when handled successfully deepens the consciousness of not only the working of the body but also of the mind and emotions.

7. Pressure created on the internal organs during various Asanas such as Pavanamuktasana, Karnapidasana and Ardha Matsyendrasana helps tone up the entire abdominal area and all organs therein. This helps in relieving
8. Yoga seeks balance, which is lacking in most other sporting activity. A tennis player may develop the muscles of the dominant arm but the rest of the body is neglected. Through Yoga all aspects of the body are cultivated equally. Flexibility, balance, control, strength and endurance are all developed by the concept of Loma Viloma, which means to balance the opposites. For example, if we bend forward then we must bend backward also. If we perform a practice on the right side then we must balance it by performing it on the left side also. Children suffering handicaps benefit from these types of balanced practices that help them to improve and sometimes regain lost power and function of the affected body part. Polio affected limbs as well as paralyzed limbs can be benefited immensely as Yoga is able to give a sense of direction in this regard.

9. In the science of Yoga, body movement and breath must be synchronized. The body is lifted on the incoming breath and lowered on the outgoing breath. Bhastrikas or the ‘bellows breath’ activate the solar plexus, which is an energy reservoir, as well as strengthen the diaphragm thus producing strength, vitality and endurance. Pranayamas such as Mukh Bhastrika stimulate the internal cleansing of toxins. Breath is directly related to the energy levels, life span, quality of emotions, state of mind and the clarity and subtlety of thoughts. This use of breath power with the body can bring about revolutionary effects on the performance of the child and improve their state of mind, emotions and all round health. Concentration, memory and attention span are all improved thus leading to improved academic performance in slow learners.

10. Pranayama has been shown to improve lung function, heart function, cognition and helps develop an integrated personality. Pranayamas also help in improving memory and attention span as well as in reducing the stress levels.

11. Children are prone to glandular imbalance and Yoga stimulates and strengthens the endocrine system and it counteracts the body stiffness, changes in skin tone and hair, which are common problems due to glandular
imbalance. Proper and proportional growth and development are helped by the Yoga practise that utilised all body parts equally. Yoga has a homeostatic influence on the psycho-neuro-immuno-endocrine system and thus both the hypo as well as the hyper functioning of the system is controlled and equilibrium is attained. This fosters positive and anabolic growth in the children so that the genetic potential can be attained in fullness of time.

12. The inculcation of Yogic values such as Yama and Niyama can go a long way in preventing numerous problems that will face the children as they mature and grow into young adults. Social life becomes much better and more pleasant when the children learn the values of Yama and Niyama. Such children will also influence their elders by stimulating them to have a second look at their decadent life styles and try to change for the better. The Yamas when practiced provide much mental solace and ethical strength to the children in the face of numerous competitions while the Niyamas produce the stoic qualities necessary for high-tension situations. Children brought up with a deep and intuitive understanding of the Yoga qualities will never become asocial or anti social beings and will have a positive self image of themselves. They will be able to relate to the society in an apt manner and foster humane attitudes. Substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and other social disorders that plague modern youth can be prevented as well as controlled through the inculcation of these values in childhood as well as in educational institutions.

13. Yogic concepts such as ‘non attachment to the fruits of one’s labour’ and ‘equal mindedness in victory and defeat’ are important attitudes in life and when children learn such values from an impressionable age they are then free from anxiety and can be confident that they have done their best at all times. Such persons have a much better chance of success than one who looks upon the competition as a life and death situation. Only a ‘quiet mind’ and ‘controlled body’ can produce real ‘skill in action’.

14. The whole philosophy of Yoga can constitute a ‘touch stone’ for children who find themselves lost when the spotlight dims or shifts its focus to another child.

15. Yoga has a lot to offer to children through the field of relaxation. In the real world, there is a lot of PUSH, PUSH and PUSH. There is very little room for
relaxation in the arena. Yoga teaches us that there has to be balance. The concept is known as ‘Spanda-Nishpanda’ or ‘exertion-relaxation-exertion-relaxation’ in an alternating rhythm. The art of relaxation as taught in Yoga can provide a counterfoil to the extreme stress of competitive pressures, fostering mental, emotional and physical health.

16. A more conscious and aware outlook of the whole phenomenon of human life on earth will make the child a more valuable member of the human social unit.

17. Finally they may be unable to continue other sporting activities throughout their life but can definitely continue the practice of Yoga till a very ripe age that they will attain through living Yoga!

**TEACHING YOGA TO CHILDREN**

Many children get ‘put off’ by Yoga when they encounter Yoga teachers who don’t know the needs of children and try to treat them as ‘mini adults’. The following points are important when trying to introduce the Yoga to this age group.

1. Yoga is fun. This is the feeling children should have when they enter a Yoga class. Yoga games, play Yoga, simple animal poses and animal movements as well as an opportunity to make animal sounds as in the Simha Nada or Gardhabakriya are very important to create and sustain interest in the children.

2. Yoga must be presented in a wholistic manner and essay as well as elocution presentations on Yoga must be encouraged to stimulate interest in the ‘concepts of Yoga’

3. Fancy dress as well as drawing and art events based on Yoga also help stimulate their creativity and their understanding of Yoga is deepened.

4. Emphasis should be on movement initially and the worst thing to do is to put them in an Asana for too long a time at the beginning. I have witnessed a Yoga teacher at a school putting the children in Shirshasana for 5 minutes at the start of every class and the children were totally put off on Yoga for life.
5. The correlation between breath and movement must be emphasized. This will also help the children to occupy their mind in the present as well as balance their emotional and mental instabilities.

6. Adequate relaxation at the end of the class is a must as that is the time of the class that they get the maximum benefits of all the practices. Rewards should be given for the children who can stay in the relaxation without moving etc to give them a goal that they can strive to attain.

7. A ‘carrot’ approach is to be followed by offering small rewards for discipline, performance as well as regularity in class to motivate the children to continue their practice.

8. Advise on diet and avoidance of the pitfalls of modern vices must be explained in a jovial manner to help them inculcate the values in their daily life.

9. Periodic discussions with the parents are important to gauge the response of the child to the Yoga class. Any difficulties can be clarified and home practice checked.

10. An attitude of helping parents and elders through the concept of Karma Yoga should be encouraged to build a happy family.

11. Parents should be encouraged to take up a practice of Yoga as then the Yoga family can practice together and this emotional and psychical bonding will go a long way in fostering wonderful relations at home. A happy home makes a happy child.

12. Importance of prayer and the power of the Mantra can be taught to the children at the appropriate time, as this will give them emotional and mental strength.

13. We must never forget that the antenatal period of the mother is an important contributor to the child health. We must strive to bring the young ‘mothers-to-be’ into the Yoga fold as a healthy baby is spawned from a healthy mother. Lord Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita that he will ensure that Yogis are produced from the wombs of their Yogi-mothers. This is another reason why young girls must be stimulated to take up a
practice of Yoga as it may help to prevent many genetic and congenital disorders in their offspring as well as help them have a safe delivery.

**YOGA SPORT AS A TOOL TO REACH CHILDREN:**

Yoga in its wholistic sense can never be competitive, and there exists no objective measurement by which one person can be declared more Yogic than another. Therefore the term “competitive Yoga” is a paradox and has no real meaning. However the proficiency of the Sadhaka can be compared with that of another in the performance of the Asanas, Kriyas, Mudras, Pranayamas and the Shat Karmas. Yogasana (Yoga Sport) competitions are a ‘fact’ in today’s Yoga world and are mushrooming up in all directions. When conducted efficiently and when the competitors approach them with the right Yogic attitude of ‘Nishkama Karma’, i.e., selfless action, then the Yogasana competitions have a lot to offer. They stimulate the young minds and give them an outlet for the competitive spirit, drive and energy. The youngsters learn to take the ‘win’ with the same equanimity (Samabhava) as the ‘loss’. They learn to accept that on any given day someone else may be better than them. They learn to accept the ‘highs’ with the ‘lows’ and realize that proper planning, dedicated and disciplined practice and enthusiastic participation is more important than the result. The youngsters are stimulated to intense practice and thus develop amazing body skills, which they may not develop otherwise. The competitions provide a meeting point for the youngsters to meet and interact positively with others having similar interests. Formation of a group of similar minded children can reinforce the individual’s practice whenever it slackens due to any reason. Positive ‘peer pressure’ creates a back up to counter any inertia that may hinder the practitioner in their Sadhana. Due to competition, the child is shaken out of the complacency that tends to creep in when the practice of Yoga becomes a habit as monotonous as the brushing of teeth in the morning. They make sure that they don’t miss their practice and put in extra energy and time to keep in shape. The competitive edge sharpens and focuses the body awareness, thus fostering greater accuracy and perfection that in turn stimulates the real Yogic growth.
REFERENCES:


