

TEACHING CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES OF YOGA TO CHILDREN

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Abstract: Yoga has a lot to offer 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. This article describes the health needs of children, as well as the benefits of Yoga for children. In addition, the author describes ways by which the teaching of Yoga for children can be more meaningful as experienced in Ananda Ashram at Pondicherry. Benefits of Yoga Sport in stimulating children to take up the practice of Yoga is described along with important Yoga practices for children such as play Yoga, Asanas, Pranayamas, Kriyas, Mudras, relaxation and teaching of Yoga theory. Yogic values need to be introduced to children in order to make them aware and conscious of these wonderful concepts of daily living, which are qualities to be imbibed with joy, and not learnt with fear or compulsion. The parents and teachers can by example show their children the importance of these qualities and when the children see the good examples of their parents and teachers living there principles they will surely follow suit sooner than later.

INTRODUCTION:

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

HOW DOES YOGA HELP CHILDREN?

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.

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. 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.

Children suffering from ADHD (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.

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. 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. Pressure created on the internal organs during various Asanas such as Pawanmuktasana, Karnapidasana and Ardha Matsyendrasana helps tone up the entire abdominal area and all organs therein. This helps in relieving functional abdominal pain, juvenile diabetes mellitus and other hepatic and renal disorders of childhood.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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’. 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.

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. 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.

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 know of Yoga teachers who put the young children in Shirasasana for 5 minutes at the start of every class and the children are then 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 with out 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 regularity in class to motivate the children to continue their practice.
8. Advice 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.

IMPORTANT YOGA PRACTICES FOR CHILDREN:

1. **Play Yoga:** Children can be allowed to watch their parents and siblings do Yoga practices from the young age as this stimulates a keen interest in the child’s mind. When they are ready they can be introduced to basic units of Yoga practices such as Chatus Pada Asanas and Kriya (moving around on all fours) where movement is a key element that helps to enthuse the child to join the Yoga fold. Loosening exercises and the Suryanamaskar are excellent tools for working with small children. Pawanamukta Kriya is an enjoyable introductory practice for small children.
2. **Asanas:** Children find Asanas depicting animals of great interest and so Asanas like Ushtrasana, Shashahasana, Simhasana with Simha Nada, Gardhabakriya with Nada, Mayurasana, Bakasana, Kokilasana, Bhujangasana. Later on more difficult Asanas may be introduced to induce interest and creativity in the children. The complicated Asanas also give the child a sense of achievement and positive self-image. Specific Asanas may also be used for the specific health disorders and these should be done in an individual “one-on-one” setting for maximum benefit. One legged balancing postures such as Vrikshasana and Natarajasana help develop the concentration ability of the children while ‘head below the heart’ postures such as Padahasthasana, Padotannasana, Dharmikasana, Sashangasana. Mehru Asana help induce a healthy flow of blood in the head region and are useful to improve memory and attention span. Shavasana is an excellent remedy for the stress that faces the modern child in the way of unrealistic educational expectations of teachers and parents. Asanas such as Ushtrasana and Bhujangasana are useful in children suffering Bronchial Asthma

as they help to expand the chest in a proper manner. The groups of Asana termed the Hathenas are an excellent group of practices for the benefit of asthmatic children and those suffering any sort of breathing disorder. Of course attention must also be focused on a healthy diet of citrus fruits and avoidance of mucus forming products such as chocolate and modern snacks. For children that need balancing of psychological imbalances the group of poses termed the Loma Viloma is an excellent remedy.

3. **Pranayamas:** Kukkriya Pranayama (dog panting breath) is an all time favorite with children. This is an excellent practice for toning up the abdominal organs and digestion will never be a problem for such children. Mukha Bhastrika (cleaning breath) improves reaction time and thus is useful in all activities of the children including sports. The cooling Pranayamas are very useful in summer camps for the children if they are finding the heat intolerable and in addition to the Savitri and Pranava Pranayamas are beneficial in calming down hyperactive children. Vibhagha Pranayama (sectional breathing) teaches children how to breathe properly and relieves many breath related disorders. Surya Pranayama is useful in the asthmatic child as it helps to relieve the broncho-constriction that is the hallmark of the disease. Children love to make sounds and the Brahmari Pranayama fulfills that need in addition to bringing about a serene calm.
4. **Kriyas:** Children enjoy adventure and if the Shat Karmas are presented as an adventure they readily take them up as a challenge. It is not necessary that they do all of them but the Jala Neti and Kunjal Kriya are useful in those suffering from respiratory disorders. Older children can perform Kapalabhati and Nauli while all children can be taught Trataka as a concentration-improving practice. Modern children suffer numerous eye related problems and Trataka and the Neti are highly beneficial for such children along with a diet rich in Vitamin A and C.
5. **Mudras:** Bhujangini Mudra and Brahma Mudra are helpful as stress relievers in school going children though all children enjoy them for their 'play' value. The Chin, Chinmaya, Adhi and Brahma Mudras are also useful in helping them to learn the sectional breathing in a proper manner. These Mudras also help them understand how the body affects the mind in a somato-psychic manner. Topsy Turvy Mudras such as Viparita Karani are not recommended in children before puberty or at least the age of ten years due to their powerful influence on the gonadal and other endocrine glands. Older children as they go into the adolescence can be taught the Oli Mudras if they are ready as these are wonderful tools for the transmutation of sexual urges into the higher Ojas and Tejas. However they are very powerful practices and must be taught by a competent Guru to the 'well prepared' and 'able' youth.
6. **Relaxation:** Relaxation is a must for modern children who face stress in so many ways. Unrealistic expectations at home, at school and powerful peer pressures virtually drive them mad. Shavasana and various relaxation practices from it can be taught to them. Breath awareness in Shavasana is a basic teaching that must be introduced to them at the earliest. Children must be made to realise that the benefits of all the practices come to them only when they relax at the end of a class. Kaya

Kriya is an excellent body relaxer that helps children relax all aspects of the musculoskeletal system while the Marmanasthanam Kriya keeps them in conscious relaxation. Older children may be taught higher practices such as Yoga Nidra and the Anuloma Viloma Kriyas as required. They must also realise that 'coming out' of the relaxation is as important as the relaxation itself and that there is a way to 'go in' and 'come out' of the relaxation.

7. **Yoga theory:** Children must be exposed to the various Yogic concepts that have guided man towards shaping his life and the interpersonal relationships in his social life. Vasudeiva Kudumbakam (The whole world is one family) is an excellent concept, which helps children to understand that division on the basis of class, creed, religion and geographical distribution are all 'man made' obstructions towards oneness. Pancha Kosha (the concept of our five sheaths or bodies) helps them understand how all their actions, emotions and even thoughts can influence their surroundings. Chaturvidha Purusharthas (the four legitimate goals of life) shows them how to set legitimate goals in their life and then work towards attaining them in the right way, following Dharma to attain Artha (material prosperity), Kama (emotional prosperity) and finally the attainment to the real goal of life, Moksha (spiritual prosperity). The concept of Chatur Ashramas helps them know how, what and when to perform the various activities in life. Concepts such as the Pancha Klesha (Avidya -ignorance, Asmita -ego, Raaga -attraction, Dwesha -repulsion and Abinivesha -urge to live at any cost) help them understand how these psycho-physiological afflictions control their life.

Concepts of Karma Yoga such as Nishkama Karma (selfless action) and Karmasu Koushalam (skill in action) teach them 'to do our best and leave the rest'. Children must be enabled to realise that a great artist, doctor, worker, singer or sportsman can be a Yogi by performing doing their duty to perfection and without care for the rewards of the action, even if they do not practice any Asana or Pranayama. If the children are taught about the concept of Samatvam and the Development of a complete personality who is neither affected by praise nor blame through development of Vairagya (detachment), they will be stimulated to aim to follow such ideals in their life. Such a child is a boon to society and a pleasure to live and work with.

Children must be exposed to the concepts of Yama and Niyama in order to provide a strong moral and ethical foundation for their personal and social life. This will guide their attitudes with regard to the right and wrong in life and in relation to their self, family unit and the entire social system. These are values, which need to be introduced to the youth in order to make them aware and conscious of these wonderful concepts of daily living, which are qualities to be imbibed with joy, and not learnt with fear or compulsion. The parents and teachers can by example show their children the importance of these qualities and when the children see the good examples of their parents and teachers living there principles they will surely follow suit sooner than later.

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