



YOGA FOR CHILDREN

By Valerie Faneco, September 2009

Why is yoga good for children?

Yoga has long been hailed as one of India's most precious gifts to the world. In ancient India yoga lessons would begin in childhood, and there are many reasons for this. It set the foundation for a lifetime of good habits in personal hygiene, self-care and discipline. To initiate children from a young age would strengthen them physically, emotionally, and mentally, which in turn would help them face the challenges of life ahead.

Yoga is more than three thousand years old yet surprisingly few activities are more relevant to the needs of our children today. This is mainly because it works on developing concentration. When throughout a typical school day there is a rapid succession of study, activity, information and images, the essential quality cultivated in yoga is the ability to bring the attention on a single object and maintain it there for a period of time without being distracted.

Many kids are overflowing with energy. Yoga teaches them to release this energy in a channelled, controlled manner. Physical benefits include developing strength and improved flexibility in muscles and joints. It stimulates growth and promotes a healthy digestive function. Poor posture can be improved; cases of structural misalignments such as scoliosis have also improved with regular yoga practice. There are good results with yoga therapy in the management of behavioural disorders and psycho-motor conditions.

As they grow children need to develop qualities such as strength and flexibility, confidence and balance. Sports certainly work very on the body, but that alone is not enough. It is also important to become strong and supple on the mental and emotional levels as well, which is where yoga can help, thanks to its holistic approach.

One of the several definitions of yoga is: "to be able to do what one was not able to do before". Children can feel a sense of achievement in attaining an objective. Here is an example: a nine year old girl was very confident and outgoing and had been practising yoga for three years. She could do many difficult postures and was very flexible. Yet she was afraid of doing a headstand, which several other kids could do, even those less experienced and less flexible than her. She really wanted to learn but in her own words was "afraid of being upside down". Slowly, over time, using other inverted postures in preparation, I helped her into an assisted headstand, and eventually she was able to do it safely on her own. The satisfaction of doing the posture was nothing compared to the joy and confidence she felt from overcoming her fear.

There is a healthy lesson for children to learn from yoga practice. In reaching for something we may have to do some effort, but we must also make sure that our efforts are done in the right way and yield encouraging results along the way. Should this not be the case, a change of plan is necessary. And what better way to learn this than from experience?

Children versus adult classes:

Children's classes are conducted quite differently from adult lessons. First of all, children are taught in groups, unlike adults who in the Indian tradition are taught individually. The teacher should always have specific training in teaching kids. Ideally an older child or a teenager with experience should take the lead with younger ones. But this is not always possible!

Children yoga classes at CHI:

The class is shorter than an adult class (half an hour or forty-five minutes). We work mainly on the body, thus using many postures done sometimes in sequences (vinyasa), some of which are repeated (the sun salutation for example), but also with the regular introduction of new postures in various positions to help sustain the children's attention. The younger the children, the less important it is to insist on perfection in



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yoga postures: there is no point in asking a four-year old to keep her feet together or her arms straight! However, the older the children, the more refined the postural practice becomes, with the aim of attaining perfection in form (śikṣana) during the teenage years if still healthy and if practice has been regular since childhood.

While breathing techniques are not formally taught to young children, sounds or songs are used to make them work on their breath in an indirect manner. Fortunately yoga postures sometimes have colourful or intriguing names which make for some fun stories to be told about them. Many yoga postures are also named after animals and most young kids find it endlessly amusing to hiss like a snake or bark like a dog.

At times the class will be built around a central theme such as "Birds" or "A hunting scene". Most themes are related to nature. In classes with age variations the older ones can help the younger ones, thus instilling a sense of responsibility and camaraderie.

There is usually a quiet period at the end of class and parents can be surprised when they hear that their usually bouncy 5 year old is able to lie down in the "corpse" position for two minutes.

Often it is asked how old a child should be to start yoga. The late Professor T. Krishnamacharya, arguably the most respected yoga teacher of modern times, used to say: "if a child can get dressed by himself, he is ready".

** Children yoga classes at Chi's green room:
Saturdays 11:00 – 11:45 am (bookings essentials)*