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Flex Time

Your kids will bend over backwards with these fun yoga moves

By Diane Peters

Think yoga and your mind probably conjures up images of blissed-out grown-ups chanting "Om" in an incense-clouded room. But today yoga studios are playing host to a different kind of yogi: children. With their natural flexibility, kids catch on fast to the body-bending moves. It doesn't hurt that most yoga poses, or asanas, have fun animal names that make them easy to remember. But this ancient practice isn't just a game: Yoga is good for children — physically and mentally. That's why teachers, physical therapists and people who help kids with special needs are incorporating yoga into their work, and classes just for kids are popping up across the country.

Yoga makes kids strong and flexible, and helps burn off some of that extra energy. It also teaches them to concentrate, calm down and feel good about themselves. "The primary benefit is enhanced self-esteem. You can't do yoga and not improve at it," says Temmi Ungerman Sears, director of YogaBuds, a family yoga studio in Toronto.

When can kids start doing yoga? Although toddlers can play at it and might want to imitate poses you do, most yoga instructors say only children five and up can really benefit from a structured class. To get them interested and keep their attention, a yoga class should be fun, perhaps incorporating music, storytelling or even crafts. If there's a teacher in your area who takes kids, make sure he or she is certified by the Yoga Alliance and has experience with children.

But before you take your little one out to a class, why not test drive a few asanas at home? If your child is motivated and you're careful (see "Safe Stretch," below), this is a great way to introduce her to yoga, or just to have fun being active. Here are some moves you can try together.

Warm-Ups

Cat stretches

Start on your hands and knees, palms under your shoulders. Exhale and curve your spine up like a frightened cat. Look down. Inhale and push your tummy towards the floor and your bottom in the air. Look up. Repeat several times.

Leg stretches

Sit down with your legs stretched out in front. Reach up with your hands and then reach forward towards your toes. Leading with your chest, try not to curve your back, and hold as long as is comfortable. Repeat.

Neck and shoulder rolls

Sitting or standing, look out over one shoulder and then, with your chin close to your chest, gently roll your head across to the other shoulder. Repeat in the other direction. Roll your shoulders backwards several times, then forwards.

Safe Stretch

Kids can pull muscles if they stretch too deeply, or fall and hurt themselves if they do postures such as handstands or deep back bends without a spotter. But if you use common sense, yoga should be perfectly safe for kids. "There aren't very many risks with yoga," says Shirlee Williams, who runs the kids' program, Yoga Bear, in Toronto. "Kids are flexible and resilient, and they can just have fun with it."

Here's how to prevent injury:

- Make sure kids always warm up.
- "Never push a child into a pose," says Williams. Kids know their limits of strength and flexibility, so listen when they say they don't want to do a back bend, or that a breathing exercise makes them feel light-headed.
- While the jury is still out on whether kids should do poses like a headstand or shoulder stand at all, be sure to spot your kids if they do try these tricky moves. Likewise, if your child is taking a class that includes such postures, make sure the teacher has an assistant.
- Also make sure children never hold their breath while doing yoga. Ideally, they should breathe in and out through their noses.

Tree

Stand on your right foot and imagine you have roots coming out of your foot. Take your left foot and press it into your right leg. You can put it high up at your thigh, or just at your ankle. Put your hands into a V over your head, like the branches of a tree. Hold as long as you can, then do the other side. (If you want, you can hold onto a wall or each other for balance.)

What it does: works on balance and concentration; helps you feel calm.

Downward Dog

Start on your hands and knees. Breathe in, exhale and push your bum up into the air until your legs are straight and your body takes the shape of an upside-down V. Hold it as long as you want. If you like, pretend you are puppies. Wag your tails and bark. Make sure your puppy paws press firmly into the floor.

What it does: gives the whole body a great stretch.

Bear

Get into the dog position, but make sure your legs are gently bent. Start walking around, slow and lumbering, like you're a bear.

What it does: strengthens the arms and legs, and gives kids some cardiovascular exercise.

Snake

Lie on your tummy. Bring your hands right near your shoulders like you're going to do a push-up. Breathe in and, as you exhale, push your chest up, leaving your hips on the ground. Using your arms just a little bit, look up. If you want to make like a snake, make a "sssss" sound.

What it does: strengthens the back and opens the chest. Great for kids with asthma.

Frog

Start in a squat and put your hands on the floor in front of you. Inhale and straighten your legs, bringing your head almost to your knees. Exhale and squat down again. Do this up to ten times. If you like, start from a squat and leapfrog around the room.

What it does: works the heart and legs and stretches the inner thighs.

Warrior

Stand with your feet wide apart and stretch your arms out to the side. Bend your right knee until it makes a 90 degree angle, with the knee directly above the ankle. Keep your body upright and straight and look out over your right arm. Hold for three to five breaths, and then do the other side.

What it does: strengthens the whole body; makes you feel confident.

Tiny Seed

Use this posture whenever you're tired, or to end your yoga session. Kneel on the floor with your bum resting on your heels. You can have your knees right together or apart. Lower your head to the floor as you exhale and place your arms at your sides. Hold until your breath is steady.

What it does: calms you down; gently stretches your lower back.

Lion

Kneel on the floor and put your hands on your knees. Roll your eyes up, stick out your tongue and roar. Inhale and do it again. Roar as many times as you like.

What it does: encourages kids to use the full capacity of their lungs; releases frustration. It's also a fun way to break up the other postures.

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