

Teaching Yoga To Kids

Kids Yoga Overview and Teaching Principles

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Introduction

You are on your way to bringing the benefits of yoga to kids at a time when they may need it most. Teaching yoga to kids is a rewarding experience, as you have the opportunity to witness the changes it brings to kids – both physically and emotionally. Yoga is a great way for children to learn to enjoy movement, to increase body awareness and self-esteem and to begin taking responsibility for their overall health.

Although, some yoga poses are not suitable for children's growing bodies, the general practice of yoga does not have to be watered down for kids. The practice of yoga is a growth process in which each phase is as important as the next.

In teaching yoga postures to kids, we want to make it fun and give kids the opportunity to use their imaginations, while increasing their body awareness. The yoga games outlined in this program emphasize the use of cooperative teamwork, where everyone wins and everyone feels safe. Making fitness fun creates a lifelong love of physical movement.

This program is designed for yoga teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents who practice yoga and want to bring the benefits of yoga to their kids. We look forward to working with you and hearing about your experiences teaching yoga to kids.

Kids and Fitness Today

The Journal of the American Medical Association recently published a study calling the condition of overweight children an epidemic. Overweight is now the most common health problem facing U.S. children. The health problems associated with being overweight have risen significantly for children. Type II diabetes and high blood pressure were once only seen in adult patients, but now have become common problems for overweight kids.

The percentage of children who are overweight has more than doubled over the past 30 years. Although many factors are contributing to this epidemic, kids are becoming more sedentary. In other words, they're sitting around a lot more than they used to. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the average child is watching about 3 hours of television a day. And the average kid spends 5 1/2 hours on all media combined, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Kids need to get enough exercise and yoga is a great way to do this.

So, how much is enough? According to dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), all

children 2 years and older should get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on most, preferably all, days of the week.

In addition to providing more practical advice on how to give your child a healthy, balanced diet, the new dietary guidelines also suggest that kids eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains than in the past.

The current activity recommendations for children, according to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE):

Age	Minimum Daily Activity	Comments
Infant	No specific requirements	Physical activity should encourage motor development
Toddler	1 1/2 hours	30 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)
Preschooler	2 hours	60 minutes planned physical activity AND 60 minutes unstructured physical activity (free play)
School age	1 hour or more	Break up into bouts of 15 minutes or more

One of the best ways to get children to be more active is to limit the amount of time spent in sedentary activities, especially watching TV or playing video games. The AAP recommends that children under the age of 2 years watch no TV at all and that screen time should be limited to no more than 1 to 2 hours a day for children 2 years and older.

The Benefits of Yoga For Kids

Children are natural yogis. Good posture, the ability to breathe deeply and an open attitude toward life are things we are born with. Yoga is a wonderful way to ensure that we don't forget these healthy ways of moving, breathing and being. Below are just a few of the benefits that yoga offers for kids:

Increased Awareness

Yoga enhances our awareness of ourselves and the world around us. This is the original purpose of yoga – to open us up to our higher nature, allowing us to celebrate the divine within ourselves. Yoga gives kids a chance to spend time exploring their inner world, becoming more aware of the signals from their bodies and minds.

Improved Physical Fitness

Yoga is not only the oldest form of exercise in the world, it is also the most available to people of all ages. In recent years there has been much scientific research into the effects of yoga on children's health. Evidence shows that regular yoga practice can keep children healthy by boosting their immune systems and by keeping their muscles, organs and glands functioning at optimum levels. Yoga also helps children to develop strong, flexible bodies, an excellent sense of balance and coordination and a feeling of confidence and grace in their movements. Yoga encourages children to explore their natural flexibility and to become stronger through natural and functional physical movement using their own body weight.

Good Posture

Yoga instills good postural habits in children. It is often common for children these days to carry heavy bags or backpacks to school and to spend long hours sitting at a school desk. These habits can lead to back problems later in life. It's interesting that in India there has been a huge increase in the number of back problems since people began sitting on chairs instead of on the floor. The best way to prevent back problems later in life is to learn good posture at a young age. Practicing yoga is an excellent way to do this – it not only develops the core strength necessary to support the spine and keeps the spine and hips flexible, it also teaches kids to be aware of how they carry their bodies, to correct bad habits as they arise and prevent new ones from forming.

Proper Breathing

Yoga teaches kids how to breathe properly. Kids learn to breathe through their nose and to breathe into the lower part of their lungs first, so their diaphragm pushes down as they inhale and relaxes as they exhale. Yoga also shows kids how to take long, slow, deep breaths to calm down and focus their minds. The breathing exercises in yoga can also help improve lung function and capacity.

Stress Relief

Calming down the nervous system is another critically important role for yoga in children's health. We often subject children to sensory overload from TV, video games, electronic toys and hectic fast-paced lifestyles. Often kids who are chronically over-stimulated have a difficult time concentrating for sustained periods of time. By working with breath and movement, yoga can slow down a child's heart and breathing rate and strengthen the central nervous system. This has a very calming effect on a child's mental and emotional states. Once kids have learned how to be still and quiet, they come to enjoy this feeling and seek it out for themselves. Children often must cope with stress and yoga gives children the tools to cope and feel more calm and whole.

Building Confidence

In yoga, there are no rewards and no punishments, no winners and no losers, no best and no worst. Yoga counteracts the pressure kids can feel when the rest of their lives may place too much emphasis on winning – whether in sports or in school activities. The reward of yoga comes simply from the practice itself. When kids realize that they don't have to compete or perform, they are free to express themselves without fear of judgment or criticism. This freedom helps kids develop a sense of confidence that stays with them into adulthood. The inner confidence that yoga develops is an excellent antidote to the pressure to succeed that children can experience at school.

Developing Concentration and Mindfulness

Regular yoga practice teaches you to become mindful – this is the ability to immerse yourself completely in the moment without becoming distracted. It means you are completely one with whatever you are doing. Mindfulness is the quality that distinguishes a yoga practice from most other types of exercise. Kids benefit greatly from mindfulness – their powers of concentration improve and they develop greater awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Instead of being scattered, they become focused and attentive.

Developmental Stages and Class Formatting

Which yoga poses are suitable for a child and which are not? To answer this question, you must first consider the developmental stages of your students. Children are very different at different stages of development. The yoga postures and yoga games in this program are all labeled with the recommended age group. In this way, you can choose yoga exercises that support children's different levels of maturity and motor skills.

Babies and Toddlers (newborn to 2 ½ years)

Class Length: 45 minutes total (time split between yoga for babies/toddlers and yoga for parents)

Up to about age three or four, parents and children do yoga together. For babies and toddlers, yoga class can be a time of bonding with their parent or caregiver. The focus of a baby/toddler class is on parent/child bonding and on creating an awareness of yoga, rather than on the specific poses. Many post-natal yoga classes include babies in arms, on laps or lying on mats looking up to mom or dad, who is doing down dog over them. Of course, in these classes, a baby isn't really practicing yoga postures themselves, but their parent or caregiver can help them with some simple movements, and can provide an example what it looks like to move mindfully, so that the baby develops an appreciation and familiarity with movement that can last a lifetime. A parent and baby yoga class also provides a supportive environment for parents to bond with each other and create friendships for outside play groups between their babies and toddlers.

Beyond class time, yoga with babies and toddlers usually works best when it's incorporated as part of daily life. For example, when changing the baby's diaper, parents can gently bicycle baby's legs before finishing up. Taking the hands or feet of a baby and gently stretching and moving their limbs through normal range of motion will help their little muscles develop. Some examples of exercises that can be done with babies include: bicycling legs, gently stretching arms overhead, and letting opposite hand reach towards opposite foot. Of course remind any parent who is interested in doing yoga with their baby or toddler to never force a stretch in their child, but only gently help their child move through natural range of motion. Parents should pay careful attention to their child's reaction – the baby should be pleased with the gentle touch and movement. Any type of exercise in young children should always be a positive experience to create a lifelong love of healthy movement.

Parents can also teach their children some simple names of yoga postures as their children naturally move into certain positions or when they themselves are practicing yoga. For example, if a child is sitting up with knees out to the sides, a parent might remark that they are doing "butterfly." If a parent does down dog, they might encourage their child to crawl underneath them. Young kids usually love to do this, and as the child crawls through, the parent can say they are doing "down dog."

Saying the names of yoga poses helps create a familiarity with yoga that will stay with the child and help them feel more comfortable trying a yoga class as they get older. To learn more about yoga with babies/toddlers, see the “Parent and Baby Yoga” section of the materials.

Preschoolers (age 3-5)

Length of Class = 30-40 minutes

This age is a lot of fun and these kids usually have great imaginations. Their attention spans are short and it can be helpful to still provide parent/child yoga classes at this point. Having their parent or caregiver with them, helps kids this age begin to focus more. It is also very helpful for the frequent bathroom breaks and water breaks that come with this age, as well as helping the kids feel more comfortable in class. Remember, the younger the child, the more active you’ll want to keep the class. Three and four year olds can’t be expected to sit and listen to their breath for very long extended periods of time. Stillness is something that children gradually develop as they grow older. This age group typically loves to keep moving, so don’t try to have them sit still too long – you’ll quickly lose their interest.

Most preschool age kids (3-5 year olds) do best with shorter classes (no longer than 30 minutes). Kids at this age often have shorter attention spans and by keeping your yoga classes shorter in length, they will be more excited about coming back and continuing their yoga practice.

Preschoolers are busy learning how to use space and having fun with all the different ways they can move. Yoga for this age should involve total body movements – movements that involve the whole body, are easily explained and understood, and don’t involve complicated details. Let preschoolers move in ways that feel right for them. Their yoga postures may not look perfect, but don’t worry about preschoolers getting the posture “correct.”

At this age, kids have wonderful imaginations and are big on fantasy. Having them use their imaginations and pretend to be the animals of the postures they try (i.e. cat, frog, lion, etc) is an important part of their yoga experience. Children are eager to learn at this age, but they are also easily distracted. This can cause some frustration for you as the teacher. However, if you repeatedly tell the kids in advance your plans and what is coming next, it can help them move from one activity to the next.

I found that this age loves to sing yoga songs. To make up yoga songs, I just took songs that are already familiar and added my own “yoga” lyrics. The kids enjoy it and it helps them remember certain yoga terms. This is the only age group that really seem to enjoy the yoga songs. Kids a little older than this find the songs kind of dumb. When doing these songs, have kids and their parents stand in a circle, facing each other.

Below are some examples of “yoga” songs.

Ring Around the Yogi (To the tune of Ring Around the Rosy)

(make a circle, holding hands and start by walking to the right)

“Ring Around the Yogi, Namaste my friend,

Inhale (breathe in), Exhale (breath out),

We all feel grand (reach hands up in the air)”

(Repeat 3-4 times, reversing the direction you walk each time)

If You’re Happy and You Know It

“If you’re happy and you know it, stand in “Tree” (can be any simple pose),

If you’re happy and you know it, stand it Tree (kids stand in tree pose)

If you’re happy and you know it and you really want to show it,

If you’re happy and you know it, stand in “Tree”.

(Repeat this verse, substituting “stand in Tree” with other simple poses (i.e.

fold forward, do down dog, sit in chair, do Warrior)

Hokey Pokey Yogi (To the tune of the Hokey Pokey)

“Put your foot in (put your foot into the circle), Put your foot out (move your foot back out)

Put your foot in and you shake it all about (shake your foot)

You do the yogi pokey and you breathe in and out (take a breath)

That’s what it’s all about.”

Boom, Boom, Ain’t It Great to Be Yogis (To the tune of “Boom, Boom, Ain’t it Great to Be Crazy)

“Boom, Boom, ain’t it great to be yogis.

Boom, boom, ain’t it great to be yogis.

We stand in tree (stand in tree), then we balance on our knees (balance on knees)

Boom, boom, ain’t it great to be yogis.

(Repeat – this time saying, “We get in down dog, then roll like a log,”

Think of your own yogi songs based on the tunes that are familiar to kids in your area. Make sure that your songs not only include yogi lyrics, but also give the kids an opportunity to do something and move their bodies.

Early Elementary School Kids (Ages 5-8)

Class length: 40-50 minutes

By this time kids are becoming stronger and gaining more control over their movements. The delicate motor system is now becoming more developed. They learn and follow directions with more ease. They also begin to develop a desire for

variation. For you, this means developing class plans that change from week to week.

Elementary school age kids usually do well with 40-50 minute classes, so you have enough time to warm-up, practice postures, play a yoga game and have some quiet relaxation time.

During this age, kids are growing in strength, coordination and independence every day. Because they can do more each day, it can be hard for them to know when to stop. As their yoga teacher, you must help them find their boundaries. One way to do this is to help kids tune into the feelings in their bodies, so they can notice when they feel a slight stretch and not overstretch, or when they feel a little tired, so they can take a break.

Kids at this age are also learning to cooperate more with each other. Encourage this development by having them work together in groups or in pairs. This is a great time for many of the yoga games suggested in this manual. Like preschoolers, kids at this age like to be active and they have great imaginations, but they are now better able to follow the more complex instructions associated with many of the yoga games.

Upper Elementary School Kids (ages 8-12)

Class Length: 45 minutes – 1 hour

During this age, kids become more interested in the real world, as their fantasy worlds begin to fade. Kids don't want to pretend to be a cook anymore, they want to learn how to make an actual meal. Kids have their own lives at school and through outside activities that are now separate from their home lives, and they are learning to independently care for themselves and are becoming more responsible for themselves. Kids at this age typically want fewer fantasy exercises and are more business-like in class. They want to know how yoga will benefit their life. This age provides an excellent opportunity to explain how specific yoga exercises can benefit them in their daily lives – focusing on how they can use specific breathing exercises to help them relax when they are feeling nervous or anxious and how the stretching and strengthening of certain muscles can help them play specific sports.

This is also the best age to learn good technique. Kids at this age become more dexterous, often more so than adults. Kids can perform a wide variety of movements and follow directions well. Kids at this age often want to perform and may be more competitive. In most sports, this means you have some winners and some losers, but in yoga, everyone can feel they are the best. One way to do this, is to have each child pick one of his or her favorite postures to work on at home, making sure that everyone has a different pick. After a few weeks of practice, you can have a special class in which each kid has a chance to go in front of the group and show what they have been practicing. This allows each child to perform something in front of others

and helps them feel that they have a special talent. Everyone gets to feel that they have improved and that they had the chance to do something that no one else in the group got to do. You should also take time to remind kids that yoga is not a competitive sport – that we all have different bodies and that the focus of yoga is an inner journey, learning to listen to and respect their bodies and learning to enjoy movement for the sake of moving. Another way to take the edge off their need to show what they can do and to be better than the others is to have kids close their eyes during certain exercises. For example in many seated stretching exercises, you can have kids close their eyes, so they can better listen to their bodies and feel the stretch without overdoing it, while also allowing them to stop comparing themselves with the others in the group.

Middle School or Early High School (ages 11-15)

Class Length: 45 minutes – 1 hour (or more)

Many kids in this age group are ready for adult classes.

For middle school and high school kids, you can have classes that are 45 minutes to 1 hour long. Classes for beginners are best kept under an hour, while classes for more experienced students can be up to an hour long (or more in some cases).

Classes for this age group are more similar to adult classes. Use simple, flowing and repetitive poses that are also physically-challenging. Teens and pre-teens are ready for more details, and may need more modifications than adults due to their developing muscle coordination. Rapidly changing bodies can create imbalances in young bodies. Yoga's focus on strengthening and stretching all major muscle groups can help prevent or correct muscular imbalances in the body. For example, as girls begin to develop hips and breasts, it changes how their muscles support the changing weight of their bodies. Yoga can help develop the supporting muscles and maintain balance in their muscles.

Teens and pre-teens are often involved in competitive sports. Sports training, especially for boys, often emphasizes weight lifting to develop their muscles. However, sports training may neglect flexibility training and this oversight can cause muscular imbalances in the body. Maintaining good flexibility also helps prevent injury during sports activities. By increasing elasticity in the muscles, yoga helps prevent injury so that teens can keep doing the sports and activities they love, and with better coordination and focus. Besides improving flexibility, yoga also helps strengthen muscle groups that are sometimes overlooked in sports training. And, sports that require balance, such as martial arts, dance, golf and tennis, benefit greatly from regular yoga practice that emphasizes the development of focus, coordination, and balance.

Teaching Techniques

Like adults, children have days when they feel lively and energetic and days when they feel more quiet and introspective. Do your best to tailor your class to your students' moods. Be flexible and ready to change the structure of the lesson to their needs, even if you had other plans in mind. If you notice your class is coming into class with lots of energy, use that energy to have a more active class and wait to practice more quieting postures towards the end of class.

Whatever type of practice you do, always try to end each session by doing some calming and focusing exercises, and by lying down in Savasana (see relaxation section). This is important to assimilate all of the physical, mental and emotional benefits of doing yoga.

Positive Teaching Techniques

To help kids get the most from your yoga classes, incorporate the following positive teaching techniques:

Help the kids in the group get to know each other. At the start of a new session of classes, you can have students sit in a circle and have each kid say his or her name and maybe some other little fact about themselves, such as their favorite color, favorite sport or favorite food. Including yoga games and partner exercises in yoga class will also help kids get to know each other as the session progresses.

Have a great start. Create a good atmosphere to begin the class. We start with brief breathing exercises to help kids shift gears from what they were doing before coming to yoga class and begin to tune into their breath, their bodies and enjoying the moment.

Eliminate the pressure to perform. Present yoga exercises and games in a warm, open manner. Emphasize the feeling in the pose, not perfecting the pose. Allow kids to start by holding the poses naturally, in the way it feels best in their bodies, rather than worrying so much about how it looks. Encourage kids to appreciate what their bodies can do, rather than focusing on how it looks.

Emphasize the non-competitive nature of yoga. Give children positive attention. Help kids understand that everyone has different strengths and talents. Encourage kids to focus on enjoying the movement of each posture and doing what feels right for them.

Be clear about how you want kids to behave in class. Focus on how you want them to behave rather than how you don't want them to behave. Remind kids that you expect them to be respectful and encouraging to everyone in class. If something happens that you don't like, remind kids how you expect them to act. Encourage kids to monitor their own behavior and let them know how yoga will help them develop their own inner discipline.

Respect children's ideas. Often kids come up with excellent ideas. Being flexible enough to try out children's ideas can make your class much more interesting. Often kids may also mention things that they would like to do during every class. This may not always be possible, so sometimes let them know that this week you would like them to try something new that you think they will really like.

Help kids laugh and have fun (but not laugh at each other). Some days kids feel giggly – anything can make them laugh. If kids are laughing at each other mistakes or clothes, or whatever, it can be hurtful. Instead of giggling to exclude others, help kids turn giggling into a fun game. For example, maybe someone has their hair in an unusual style and everyone starts to laugh. You might say, "It's nice how happy her hairstyle make you feel. Have you seen my funny shirt?" Then give each child a chance to find something funny about themselves, and remind kids to include everyone in their giggling, not to make fun of someone in particular.

Encourage kids to pay attention to you and each other. Giving each other attention shows respect and helps children feel important. It creates a positive atmosphere where everyone can feel heard. The first day of class you can encourage students to pay attention to other kids by looking and smiling at others as they speak.

Make use of kids' energy rather than trying to squelch it. As a teacher of kids yoga, you need a lot of flexibility. This means that you can plan your lessons in principle, but you still must leave space for changes. Sometimes a group will be very talkative and fidgety. You may find that the lesson you planned won't work. Instead, focus on how you can incorporate their extra energy into the class. You may spend more time on an active warm-up sequence and on active yoga games. Also, help kids recognize the change in their usual energy level. Say something like, "I've noticed you all seem to have extra energy today. How does your body feel when you have extra energy."

Principles of Alignment

The following principles of alignment are important to follow to help prevent injury and help your students get the most out of any yoga class:

Bend from the hip/thigh joint. During forward folds, it's important to have your students push their bottoms back and fold forward from their hips – maintaining a flat back as they lower their upper body down.

Standing tall. Notice how your students stand. Many kids stand with their bellies pushed forward (sway back) or with their upper back rounded. Remind kids to lift up through the top of their head as they stand, imagining they are trying to reach the ceiling with the crown of their head, while they press down slightly through their tailbone. You want them to lengthen their spine from their neck down through their tailbone. Learning to stand with a neutral spine early in life will help prevent back problems later in life for your students.

Shoulders back and down. We want to keep the shoulders relaxed and down away from the ears. This avoids tension in the neck and shoulders and keeps the upper back strong.

Head in line with spine. In most postures, it is safest for the neck to keep the head in line with the spine. Try to keep the head in a position that is a natural extension of the spine. This helps prevent any strain in the neck.

Knees in line with toes. When kids have their knees bent, they should be in line with their toes. This will reduce any strain on their knee and ankle joints. In lunges, make sure that students' knees do not move in front of the ankle – the knee should remain directly over the ankle to prevent strain.

Finger and Toes spread wide. Remind kids to distribute weight evenly onto their hands or feet. Have them spread their toes first before placing weight on their feet and notice if their weight is evenly distributed – not too much weight in the toes or heels, or on one side of their feet. This will help balance the use of their muscles.

Increasing mindfulness

Regular yoga practice teaches you to become more mindful, which is the ability to completely immerse yourself in the moment without becoming distracted by outside thoughts – being completely one with whatever you are doing. Mindfulness is the quality that distinguishes a yoga practice from most other types of exercise.

Kids benefit greatly from mindfulness. As kids learn to become more mindful, they improve their concentration and develop a greater awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Instead of being scattered, they become focused and more attentive.

To help kids develop their mindfulness, have them move slowly when practicing individual yoga postures and relaxing breathing exercises. Have them notice how different parts of their bodies feel during specific postures and exercises. Challenge your students to focus on each little movement and feeling in their bodies for just 10 seconds. Then gradually increase this time.

Avoiding Competition

One of the best ways to discourage competition in yoga class is to make each session as fun as possible. Make sure that the kids in your class are safe and won't hurt themselves or others, then concentrate on creating a sense of freedom and enjoyment.

Make it clear that it's not necessary to "get" the pose. It's more important to learn to listen to and respect your body and to work with your body.

Explain to kids the interconnectedness of the world. Have kids look at the clothes they are wearing, the room in which you are practicing yoga and the mats on which you practice. Discuss all the people who went into creating these things. The more kids can understand how we all are connected and all support one another, the more they will value cooperation and the strengths of others, and the less that excessive competition will get in the way.

Safety Considerations

The following safety considerations should be followed for any children's yoga class:

Medical clearance. Children with special needs or a pre-existing medical or musculoskeletal condition should have a medical examination before starting any form of exercise program.

Proper Supervision. Proper supervision is the most important variable in reducing potential injuries.

Matching Student Age with Activities. The activities of a yoga class should be matched to the age, abilities and interests of the child.

Proper Breathing. Children should be taught to breathe properly during exercise.

Thermoregulation. The risk of overheating is much greater in children than in adults, since children have a smaller ratio of weight to body surface area to dissipate heat. Outdoor yoga sessions should be stopped when the relative humidity reaches 90% or when the air temperature exceeds 85 degrees.

Hydration. Children should always be fully hydrated prior to and during exercising. Remind students to bring a water bottle to class and give them breaks to drink some water.

Potential Hazards. Food, gum and jewelry can pose hazards for children during yoga class. Remind kids to take off any jewelry and put away any food or gum before coming to class.

Teaching the Eight Limbs of Yoga to Kids

In the West, yoga is sometimes simply seen as a form of exercise. But yoga is actually an ancient spiritual discipline that is designed to help a person become one with the Infinite. The first formal writings on the doctrine of yoga were the Yoga Sutras written by Patanjali about 2000 years ago. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali said that there are eight aspects, or “limbs” of yoga. In the Sutras, it is stated that if a person practiced each limb of yoga with energy and attention, they would eventually reach a state of complete physical and mental well-being. Ultimately, they would attain the final goal of yoga – which is union with the eternal aspect of themselves and the infinite.

Patanjali’s eight limbs of yoga work on every aspect of our life – social, ethical, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

The eight limbs, as set out by Patanjali, are as follows:

- 1) Learning to live in harmony with others (yama)
- 2) Keeping our body, mind and spirit pure (niyama)
- 3) Practicing physical postures to make the body strong and prepare the body to sit for meditation (asana)
- 4) Breathing properly in order to manage energy (pranayama)
- 5) Bringing our awareness inward, withdrawing our senses from the outside world (pratyahara)
- 6) Focusing our entire attention on a given object (dharana)
- 7) Resting in effortless meditation (dhyana)
- 8) Becoming one with the infinite (samadhi)

A well-rounded yoga class for kids, not only focuses on the physical postures of yoga, but also on the other aspects of the eight limbs of yoga – cooperating with others, respecting ourselves and others, proper breathing and learning to focus our attention and become more aware of the present moment.

This helps develop kids who are not only physically healthy, but also are compassionate, whole and mentally strong and happy.

The Five Principles of Yoga for Kids

Yoga for kids can be broken into five main principles:

1) Proper exercise. This is achieved through yoga postures and yoga games. A well-rounded use of yoga postures work systematically on all parts of the body – stretching and toning all major muscle groups, keeping the spine and joints flexible and improving circulation.

2) Proper breathing. Remind your students to breathe fully and diaphragmatically, making use of all parts of their lungs, improving oxygen intake. Yoga breathing exercises help teach kids how to breathe fully and how to recharge their bodies or calm their mind through the use of their breath.

3) Proper relaxation. Having your students relax in Savasana towards the end of class releases muscular tension and rests the whole system. It also helps their minds become more calm.

4) Positive thinking and meditation. Taking a few moments to practice visualization exercises or to have students simply observe their breath as it moves in and out, can help still the mind and bring about a more positive outlook, letting go of worry and anxiety. Help kids cultivate a sense of gratitude. Give them some time to focus on something that happened that day for which they are grateful.

5) A proper diet. Though diet is not part of your practice in your yoga classes, it's well worth the time to talk to your students about good nutrition – eating a balanced diet with lots of fruits and vegetables. Practicing proper nutrition can help kids have greater resistance to illness, maintain their energy and grow.

Fundamentals of Yoga Education Institute's Kids Yoga

Class Format

Each class, whether it's a class for preschoolers or teenagers, follows this basic format:

- 1) Warm-Up (Warm-up breathing and warm-up exercises)
- 2) Standing (Active) Postures
- 3) Yoga Games or Partner Activities
- 4) Sitting/Lying Postures
- 5) Relaxation, Meditation

Although you don't need to follow this format exactly, it is important to remember to start your class with more action and interaction and leave time towards the end of class for more quiet reflective and rest time. I have found this to work the best for everyone. When kids enter your class, they are generally full of energy, and trying to get them to focus inward at that time is often just a waste of time. After they've had some time to burn off that energy and interact with the other kids, they are more ready to bring their focus inward and learn how to relax their minds and bodies.

Alone and Together Time

When teaching yoga to kids, we emphasize the need for both alone time and together time. The format outlined above allows for both alone and together time. Many kids rarely have the time to explore their inside world – to take the time to check in with their bodies and minds. We give kids this chance during the final four phases of a yoga class. Kids also need time to play and interact with the other kids in the class – being more active. This happens during the warm-up, standing postures and yoga games phases of class.

Non-Judgment of Self and Others

Some kids will be able to “do” each posture more fully than others. It's important to help kids let go of their judgments and expectations of themselves and others by emphasizing the fact that we all have different bodies and that the most important thing is to “feel” the posture, noticing how your body feels in the posture and learning to bring your awareness to your body and to your breath. Learning to let go of outside thoughts and keep your focus narrowed to your body and breath – simply observing without judgment – is one of the greatest outcomes from continued yoga practice. Learning to focus the mind and listen to the body is the what you want to emphasize, rather than perfecting the look of a pose.

Providing a Safe and Positive Environment:

The most important aspect of any kids' yoga class should be the creation of a positive and safe environment. Many kids, especially those who may be overweight, may feel awkward or embarrassed trying new yoga postures. It's important to create an environment where efforts are praised and encouraged and any teasing or criticism is not tolerated. One way to do this is to have kids notice for themselves what they liked or felt they did well in a particular posture (whether it was their breathing or their focus or the way they eased into a posture). Another way to do this is during a partner activity, having each person tell their partner something great they noticed about the way they move.

Always focus on what a child is doing well. Yoga is not the time to be critical or seek perfection. What you focus on tends to expand, so focus on each student's strengths and progress, and most of all have fun with your group.