

Yoga and Our Kids Brains

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Yoga is a unique and complete form of training for the body, mind, and spirit. While it is currently going through a phase of expansion, there are populations for whom yoga is not popular. The elderly, the inflexible, the overweight and the hyperactive are groups who often perceive yoga as inaccessible (though they would greatly benefit!).

Years ago, at my kids' elementary school, parents were invited to offer a four week after-school program. I decided to offer yoga to 1st and 2nd graders. I got several books on yoga and meditation for kids to see what others had done. I figured, make it fun, interactive, play games, etc. I called it "Zoo Yoga"--a very attractive offer, IMO. Eight kids signed up. I had a yoga colleague who had a background in special education who offered to do this with me. All systems go! So I thought.

It's not what you plan for that gets you, it's the things you didn't even know that you needed to know... After being in a classroom all day, the last thing kids wanted to be is still. And that's an understatement. It looked more like a two adults trying to manage a tsunami of energy. Beautiful young energy, impossible to contain and almost impossible to direct.

This is in part why kids' yoga programs are not widely offered and come and go.

We made the best of the four weeks. We invented games such as "Yogi Says" (Simon Says), let kids be the leaders. We played Zoo yoga, where we would name animals and plants (lion, tree), have the kids make up postures and also demonstrate the yoga versions. We also did some pairing, but matching kids was not always successful or even safe. The last week, my colleague couldn't attend, so I flew solo. I didn't realize that there is a big difference between an 8:2 and an 8:1 ratio. Now I know.

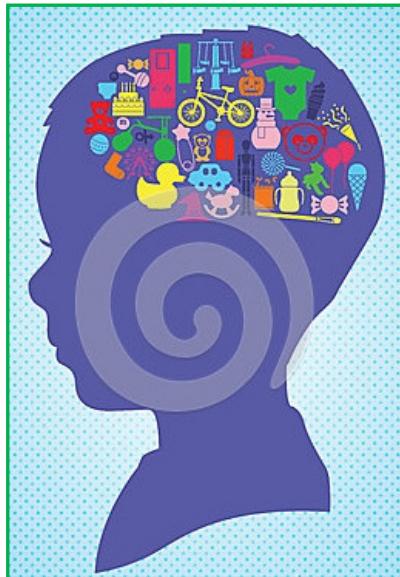
So, if at certain ages and stages yoga "practice" is not a mat and a quiet space for an hour or two, is there a way to practice yoga with our kids? Can we provide them with some of yoga's benefits and some seeds for the future?

Since one of the long-term goals of yoga is to incorporate its philosophy and methodology into our day, we can use this approach to transform the mat a way of life.

1. Let them know that you practice, when, how and why. By practicing despite our busy schedules, we are modeling the balance between work, family, and self-care. The most important message here is that you are investing in your own health. A part of this message: "If I don't take care of myself, why should anyone else?"

2. Have friendly challenges of speed, strength, flexibility and endurance; to connect them with the beauty of the "Korvette" that the Universe has given them, as well as its responsiveness when it is well or poorly treated. The subject of competition with self and others is a valuable discussion.

3. Use and teach Ahimsa, non-violence. One of the five yamas (step 1 of the 8-fold yoga path), non-violence includes reducing the harm of artificial foods and pesticides, electronics, consumption, as well as the explicit and implicit



violence of TV media, shows and movies, and games.

4. Asana, postures. Postures do not have to be static. Moving between postures, such as while rock climbing, can be highly beneficial. Postures can occur spontaneously, while waiting for a table at a restaurant, for example.

5. Pratyahara, withdrawal of the senses. The visual system tends to dominate the other senses. Each sensory system is processed differently by the brain, so by turning off one mode of processing allows other processes to receive more attention and development. How about listening to music or tasting food with the eyes closed?

6. Pranayama, control of breath. Increased awareness and control of breath can help slow down the nervous system, which is often revved during times of stress and anxiety. Learning to slow down and breath is a skill that can last through life.

7. Music, singing and other arts. Our lives are dominated by the technology and hard data, "left-brain" functions. The right brain integrates information into a gestalt, and processes emotion, facial expression, and other non-linguistic communication. Consider music and arts as essential nutrients, not extra-curricular activities that are cut with limited budgets in schools.

8. Connecting. Our connections to others is undergoing a vast revolution with the internet. As our life becomes more electronic-audio-visual every day, we must work on other means of connecting with ourselves, others, and the planet. Gardening, hiking, having pets, going to concerts, social, ecological and spiritual events can help to re-balance the hours in front of blue-light-emitting screens.

9. Sleeping and dreaming. Embue your kids with the mystery of sleep and dreaming, and encourage them to look forward to these activities, rather than serving as a mandatory negative. Model good sleep habits, which will not only help your kid, but will enable you to enjoy the amazingly brief periods we call parenthood and childhood.

10. Make yoga fun. Yoga does not have to be sweat, spandex, and one hour. Games and laughter are essential for a developing nervous system. Explore ways to keep it light and fun while incorporating yoga into everyday life.

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1. This educational material may not be used to influence medical care without supervision by a licensed practitioner.

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Dr. Cheikin's website has related articles and references such as "Autism and Brain Dysfunctions", "Gut-Brain" and others.

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