

Beyond the Mat

The Benefits of Yoga for Children

By Robyn Andersen-Hannett

"A mind at peace, a mind focused on not harming others, is stronger than any physical force in the universe."

**– Ginger Gardner,
"Why Every Child Can Benefit from Yoga"**

We can start cultivating peace in the world now by sharing yoga with the children in our lives. There is a complete connection between the practice of yoga and achieving inner peace.

Through yoga practice we give children the means to find tranquility within themselves. Yoga also gives children a wide variety of tools that are applicable in reducing the amount of stress in their highly scheduled lives.

One of the first benefits that enters minds when you say the word "yoga" is flexibility of the body. There is a direct correlation between flexibility of the body and flexibility of the mind. Children come into the world with flexible bodies. This natural flexibility starts to subside at age three if children do not participate in activities that stretch the body.

The physical benefits of a supple body include increased energy level, ability to be active, injury prevention and feeling good. The flexibility of the physical body correlates with the agility of the mind. If we value future generations of individuals who are open-minded, perceptive and tolerant of differences we can foster these virtues through sharing yoga with children.

Children's yoga should be playful; it is an exploration of the body and mind. Children's yoga provides ample opportunities for children to share their creativity and self-expression to assist in opening their minds, bodies and worlds.

Children learn coping skills in yoga they can use in other areas of their lives. Pranayama (breathing exercises) are modified and shared with children. If I could give each child a gift it would be the ability to find peace in themselves through the breath. This is a concept we are constantly coming back to in yoga class.

A mother of a 6-year-old once told me that when her son is upset he uses the "belly-breathing buddy exercise" he learned in toddler yoga class to calm himself. I was so pleased and impressed that four years later



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Wishes become memories. One dream at a time.



Students at Gilsum STEAM Accademy practice creative yoga with Robyn Andersen-Hannett. Photos By Bill Gnade

he was still using the tools from toddler yoga class to calm himself. Imagine a society that could defuse frustration, anger and resentment by bring their awareness to their breath.

Best of all, children's yoga is fun. It is a celebration of each child's strengths, allowing them to shine their own light and inspire those around them. It is an opportunity to connect with the natural world by slithering into cobra pose or playfully shaking their puppy tail in downward dog.

Children are not programmed to hold poses on mats for long periods of time. By adding song, dance and movement to yoga we make it appropriate for children. Children's yoga looks like everything from lively dancing, pose creation and stories brought to life though yoga, to quiet relaxation.

MoCo Arts in Keene launched the Yoga for Peace Project in 2013. The Yoga for Peace Project is made possible by a grant provided by Give Peace a Tri Triathlon. The project brings complementary nonviolence/peace classes to area youth. The peace classes are taught through yoga, dance and movement. The Yoga for Peace Project has brought these classes to eight area schools.

"Yoga for Peace Project has provided our students with tools to find their breath, calm their bodies and cultivate compassion. We continue to use the breathing techniques Robyn taught us. The children have gained skills in self-awareness and self-calming that will lead our students toward independence and support their creative energies and happiness," shared Liza Lowe, director of Wildroots Nature School at Stonewall Farm in Keene.

For more information on the Yoga for Peace Project, nonprofits can contact MoCo Arts at www.moco.org or 603-357-2100 for an application to determined eligibility.

Robyn Andersen-Hannett has been sharing yoga with children for eight years. She can be reached at rahannett@gmail.com.

Benefits of Creative Yoga with Children

- Increases a child's flexibility, strength, coordination and balance.
- Breathing exercises help children relax and focus, helping to build skills to support them in stressful situations.
- Helps develop spatial relationships.
- Encourages cooperation and problem solving.
- Incorporates multiple intelligence and features singing, dancing art and writing stories.
- Builds sense of body awareness, confidence and self-respect.
- Celebrates each child's strengths, letting them shine in their own light and inspiring those around them.

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