

Yoga for Kids teaches skills for life

by Kim Childs

Many adults know that yoga can help them to manage stress and feel more comfortable in their own skin. These benefits can also help children at home and in school, as teachers and parents are discovering through an increasing number of kids' yoga classes across the country.

"I am told consistently by parents that their kids are reminding them to breathe, to relax in moments of stress," says Mariam Gates, who teaches yoga to children throughout the Boston area. "Kids know clearly what stress looks and, more importantly, feels like from a pre-verbal age, so they also understand when they are given tools and practices to respond beyond their conditioned response of fight or flight." Those tools include traditional yoga breathing and relaxation techniques that some children use to prepare for standardized tests and doctor visits. Gates says she also uses affirmations in her classes to empower children when they face their fears.

"One of my students uses 'I can do this' whenever she is trying something more difficult," says Gates. "Everything from threading a needle that is not going through to speaking in front of a large group, 'I can do this, I can do this,' is what her mother hears her say." Of course, kids would not return to yoga classes if they weren't fun, and that's why most teachers mix mindfulness with playfulness. At Inner Space yoga studio in Brookline, Massachusetts, Carolyn Clark leads children in games like "Yogini Says" (a la Simon



Says) and "Yogi, yogi, yogini!" (a la Duck, Duck, Goose). Clark teaches yoga postures like cobra, cat and downward dog by weaving them into adventure stories that the kids help to create.

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"My job is to allow them to express who they are, not tell them what to be," says Clark. "It's about discovering the joy and design of your own body." Four-year-old Clemmie Hawkins is a regular in Clark's class who says she likes the mermaid pose because she gets to flap her feet. She also likes the class "Because we get to make up poses," like the rose, which she demonstrates for visitors (body straight like a stem, arms overhead like a blooming rose).

Jimmy Rock, 4, is a newcomer to Clark's class who initially stands apart from the more gregarious children, easing his way in by "helping" the teacher to make announcements and count in the poses. His mom enrolled him in the class to help him bond with other children. Jimmy says he likes making

number poses with his body, zero being his current favorite.

Kyra Strasberg's daughter takes yoga with Gates. She says the classes tap her 4-year-old child's imagination in a way that school did not.

"She actually struggled quite a bit in school this year and we realized it was not the right place for her," Strasberg says. "But in yoga, she is showing a different level of focus and ability to be a part of a group. She tells me that the resting at the end is her favorite part because she can hear her heart. This is from a kid who can never be still!"

Yoga can also be used therapeutically among children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), autism and other special needs. Some yoga teachers offer private sessions for more direct intervention.

The fact that all children can learn behavior management skills from yoga is not lost on school administrators. Kay Wiggins teaches yoga in physical education and after-school programs in Arkansas' Highland School District. She says the word is spreading to other classrooms that yoga can teach kids how to relax and connect with inner wisdom.

"The Phys Ed teachers are blown away by the cooperative behavior of even the 'worst' kids," says Wiggins. "I've had several inquiries from teachers about offering a yoga class for them, along with an in-service class that would teach them how to employ some of the calming techniques in their classrooms."

Wiggins says that her services are also in demand among the children themselves, who are registering for her classes in large numbers.

"They are very intuitive, and seem to know instinctively that yoga is good for them," Wiggins says. "I believe we all know what's good for us, it's just a matter of putting it into practice in our lives."

Kim Childs is a writer, musician and certified Kripalu Yoga teacher. She teaches yoga to people of all ages in the Boston area. Visit KimChilds.com.