

6 Reasons Why Kids Should Practice Yoga by Marlene Schick

“Well, kids are flexible.” This is the primary comment I hear from parents when they find out I, an elementary school teacher for over 25 years, also teach kids yoga. But this is not why kids should practice yoga. And, kids are not necessarily flexible.

Yoga helps kids get to know their body in relation to space. Oftentimes, you can demonstrate and repeat, “Put your toes and heels together for *tadasana*,” but unless you also have the kids look down at their own feet, they often don’t realize what their feet are doing! Instead of looking at a mirror, they are looking at themselves, at first from the *outside*, as when looking at their feet. Later, they look at themselves from the *inside*, when they become more familiar with recognizing how their body is positioned.

Yoga helps kids learn to become more patient with others. New kids join the class all the time, so old-timers must be patient while poses they are already familiar with are taught to the newbies. Kids in class are of a wide age range, a 5-year-old might have his mat next to a 9-year-old. Older does not necessarily mean better in yoga. Kids learn *restraint* as we all get into and go through the poses *together*. No one races on ahead. No one shows off. Yoga is a practice; not a performance.

Yoga helps kids learn to become more patient with themselves. Kids learn to be accepting of themselves, as they are reminded that it is more important to keep your leg straight than to bend just to reach the ground. There is no accomplishment if it costs integrity. The benefits to be gained will be attained when the pose is in alignment. Kids learn that their bodies are different every day. A pose that is easy one day might more challenging on another day. They also realize that consistent practice pays off when they can touch a pose, such as *ardha chandrasana*, after several weeks of falling over.

Yoga helps kids recognize and appreciate differences in themselves and others. Yoga may not be a team sport, but it inspires compassion for one’s self and in turn, compassion for others. One child may find backbends almost effortless while another finds them challenging. That same child might find balancing poses such as *vrksasana* difficult while the other stands on one leg with ease. No hierarchy reigns as everyone realizes areas in which one is weak and requires extra attention and everyone is inspired by the poses which are attained gracefully.

Yoga helps kids calm their bodies and minds. Although poses require enthusiasm and effort, determination and focus, the effect can be clarity and peace. While sports and gymnastics are great, yoga practice offers additional benefits. The discipline of yoga helps the soccer player win with humility and lose with grace.

And YES, Yoga helps kids gain strength and flexibility. Contrary to popular belief, not every kid can touch his or her toes to the back of his or her head. Sustaining *adho mukha svanasana*, downward facing dog, even for a few seconds builds upper arm strength. And no child can resist the “*utkatasana* challenge,” like sitting in an imaginary chair, the longest.