

Cobra In The Classroom

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Written by Abby Wills

Can Yoga Help Kids And Teens Learn?

Have you ever found yourself wishing that the practice of Yoga were available to you as a child or teen in school? Fortunately, many kids and young people today will look back on their school days and recall learning down and facing dog and/or breath of fire.

The benefits gained through regular Yoga practice are increasingly well-documented and reported in the mainstream media: From enhanced strength and flexibility to mental clarity and self-connection, we know that Yoga enriches our lives in abundant ways. Yet can Yoga help us learn as well? The answer strengthens the case for cobra in the classroom: There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that Yoga-based programs in schools can aid students by cultivating the qualities associated with successful learning.



Cobra In The Classroom

Yoga has been present in the private school sector and afterschool programs in Los Angeles for more than a decade. Recently, the movement to integrate Yoga into public school curriculum has grown tremendously. Shana Meyerson, founder of [miniyogis® Yoga for Kids](#) said, "When I started taking Yoga into the schools about ten years ago most of them laughed at the idea. Now, you'd be hard-pressed to find a school in Los Angeles that isn't offering Yoga to children," says Meyerson.

New Roads School in Santa Monica is one example. They have offered Yoga as part of the psycho-physical education curriculum since opening its doors fifteen years ago. "Having practiced Yoga for so many years, it was clear to me that the benefit to kids would be enormous," says Head of School David Bryan. "So much of what we ask young people to do in conventional PE classes asks kids to speed up and takes them 'outside of themselves' – into a ball, a goal, a hoop. But Yoga asks them to go inside, to center themselves, to slow down and coordinate their minds and bodies. It is a natural fit for a school setting. And the kids really come to appreciate it," Bryan says.

Yoga practice certainly fits the bill for physical education (PE) standards, but with PE programs being cut all over the place, how else can Yoga serve a school's needs and find sustainability in the system? If the well-known physical and mental benefits of Yoga are not enough, leading educators along with scientists are currently researching and revealing the social, emotional and cognitive advantages of contemplative practices such as Yoga. In October, 2009, the Dalai Lama's nonprofit Mind and Life Institute gathered some of the world's foremost neuroscientists to sit on panels with nationally recognized educators to discuss the current state of education and the changes needed to support effective education programs. "We must prepare teachers to create classroom communities that support mindfulness," said Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University. "Teachers need to learn to be in relationship. Teachers need skills to help children see their role in building an empathetic society," Darling-Hammond continued. Founder of the Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman, echoed these sentiments in her statement, "You can have the fanciest classrooms and abundant resources, but if children don't feel loved, you are doing them harm."

Can Yoga practice offer the kinds of skills needed to help create a culture of care and kindness in schools? Richard Davidson, Director of the Lab for Affective Neuroscience and the Waisman Lab for Brain Imaging and Behavior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, during the dialogue stated that research shows meditation practice induces or stimulates processes of neuroplasticity, the changes in the brain which are often as a response to experience or training. "Short-term training in cultivating compassion leads to altruistic behavior," says Davidson. What does this all mean in terms of learning? According to Davidson, "Negative emotions interfere with our ability to keep information in mind." Studies show that adults who engage in meditation practice enjoy more skilled emotional regulation, including the ability to return to baseline. Yoga teachers experienced in working with children note the positive effects of the practice on emotional intelligence.

Danay DiVirgilio, founder of YogaBuddies, says that through Yoga practice students "develop an ability to recognize their emotions. These new skills have a positive impact on the way the children think and interact at home and at school." The connections between learning and emotional regulation were researched and documented in the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) movement which emerged in the 1980s in response to challenges adolescents face including substance abuse, schoolyard violence and peer pressure, according to Dr. Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence*. The SEL movement, comprised of educators and scholars from diverse fields including psychology and neuroscience, has made great strides in recognizing how effective SEL programs work to close the achievement gap. In a talk on SEL on The George Lucas Foundation's *Edutopia* site, Daniel Goleman identified the core components of effective Social and Emotional Learning programs as: self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, impulse control and sound social decision-making. This is helpful information for advocates of school Yoga programs who know from experience that Yoga practice can help kids develop the hallmarks of social and emotional intelligence. Practicing Yoga deepens self-awareness and enhances our ability for self-care, both fundamental aspects of SEL.

Research results reinforce that Social and Emotional Learning programs improve academic achievement. Concurrently, there is a growing body of evidence confirming the numerous social and emotional benefits of mindfulness and meditation. If we want to connect the dots between SEL learning programs, Yoga (including meditation) and mindfulness practices in a way that appeals to school administrators, teachers, parents and legislators, we might do well to follow the lead of creative experts such as Susan Kaiser-Greenland, author of *The Mindful Child*, who has committed to a secular approach in providing meditation techniques to children and teens under the umbrella of “mindfulness.” In 2007, UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) conducted a pilot study on Kaiser-Greenland’s Innerkids program. This decidedly secular program, located in Los Angeles, taught mindfulness exercises to forty-eight pre-kindergarten students over an eight-week period of time. Results showed improvement in executive function in the brain; one of the associated tasks of executive function is to govern our ability to moderate behavior. The outcomes of the Innerkids program are relevant to schools’ needs. While some of the traditional practices Kaiser-Greenland draws from are culturally connected to Eastern traditions, including Buddhism, she has chosen to include only the universal components of the practices. At the heart of her program is mindfulness.

Yoga practitioners know that an authentic practice necessarily includes mindfulness. One could argue that movement without mindfulness is not Yoga. Furthermore, many, if not most, Yoga programs for schools include a dedicated element of mindfulness practice in the form of meditations, reflections, and even developmentally-appropriate mindful games. In this process, there is frequently an emphasis on drawing out the essence of Yoga practice while setting aside aspects that can create conflict in the public school forum including Sanskrit words related to deities. Rather than “watering down” the Yoga, as critics have feared, these Yoga practices taught in schools have become more refined, distilled and relevant to Western lifestyle. Leah Kalish, founder of Yoga Playgrounds, points out that in order for Yoga teachers to successfully implement programs in schools, “it [Yoga] has to be relevant to [students] and their lives; Yoga has to empower them in ways they recognize.” Perhaps Kalish and Kaiser-Greenland are onto something; the more clear we are about what is actually being offered to schools in Yoga programs, the more the programs will be valued.



Photo: Courtesy of Leah Kalish and Yoga Playgrounds

There is great power in truly naming what is. Simply saying “Yoga” may not be enough information for some constituents in the school system to support. In fact, for some folks, the word “Yoga” holds a threatening connotation and there are loads of misunderstandings about what Yoga practice really entails. This can be seen in modern-day assumptions, including Yoga is a religion or a cult, or a person must already be flexible to do Yoga. In other historical periods, yogis were seen as sorcerers or magicians. The question then becomes: How do we elevate our field to become a viable solution to the problems schools currently face?

According to Leah Kalish, to reach the next level of sustainability in school-based Yoga programs, there is a need for “more teacher training and support over a longer period of time, such that teachers truly embody what they teach, and Yoga principles can become part of the school culture.” Currently, there are a few dozen teacher training programs in the US geared toward Yoga teachers who want to teach in children and teens in school settings. These trainings range from one-day workshops to 130-hour comprehensive certification programs. The settings for these trainings range as well, from Yoga studios to schools, with varying degrees of time interacting with groups of kids.

“I think it’s important for Yoga teachers who want to teach in schools to spend some time in today’s schools,” says Annie Buckley, long-time youth Yoga educator and author of *The Kids Yoga Deck*. “I think the biggest mistake people make in approaching any kind of education reform is to buy into the negative thinking that schools are somehow failed or bad and that this new fill-in-the-blank program will fix things. In light of this, it is imperative for a Yoga teacher to draw on compassion and try to understand the place where she will teach.”

In addition to understanding schools, Yoga teachers working with kids would benefit from understanding child development and how students learn. One of the roles of Yoga teachers in schools is to articulate the value of Yoga as it relates to all types of learning, including physical, mental, social and emotional intelligences. For true education reform and for benefitting students in all areas of their education, it’s not enough to provide fun, adventurous Yoga sessions in a classroom setting. The positive effects resulting from implementing Yoga programs in schools run much deeper. For greatest buy-in from family and teachers, among other reasons, it’s important that the benefits of Yoga and mindfulness practices are communicated clearly if we desire sustainable integration of Yoga in schools.

How Yoga Benefits More Effective Learning

Chronic stress inhibits learning. Restful yogic practices, such as savasana (relaxation) and pranayama (breath techniques), can invoke the relaxation responses in the autonomic nervous system, allowing learning to progress more effectively

Postures such as eagle pose and twisting triangle are cross-median movements that help to coordinate communication between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. This can aid in improved reading and spelling skills.

Balance poses improve concentration and focus.

Mindfulness helps to alleviate unhelpful negative emotions that hinder memory function.

Increase resilience and decrease reaction time.

The overall benefits of Yoga programs in schools are too numerous to list here. Krishna Kaur, founder of Y.O.G.A for Youth, powerfully states, "I know without a doubt that Yoga is the antidote to the fear and violence that engulfs our world right now. Our youth are affected as much or more than the adults and it shows up in their addictions to drugs, alcohol, sex and violence. It doesn't matter if our youth are from affluent communities or the inner cities, they are prone to react to the frequency of fear and violence that is so much a part of our daily existence. They are searching for meaning in their lives and Yoga can provide that for them. Yoga and meditation gives them tools to connect with their power and peace from within."

Krishna and her nonprofit organization Y.O.G.A. for Youth have brought Yoga programs and Yoga teachers to young people in schools, afterschool programs and detention centers for fifteen years.

Another veteran advocate of Yoga in schools, Yoga Ed Founder Tara Guber says, "Yoga is a powerful life skill that children can take with them into adulthood. As a result of being exposed to Yoga in school, children are learning to focus their attention and to calm themselves; these are two skills that are vitally important for learning and for life." Yoga Ed currently estimates that their programs are currently in place at over 200 schools across thirty states.

With so many valuable benefits, why don't we see more schools embracing Yoga as part of their curricula? The answer from most people who have worked in this field is money. As school budgets decline and teachers are being laid off in record numbers, school administrators often view Yoga as a luxury beyond their consideration. The paradox seems obvious. At just the time when schools need the powerful stress relieving practices of Yoga most, there is a hesitance to invest in the face of drastic budget cuts.

Johannes Fisslinger, founder of Yoga Month, may have found a partial solution to help schools integrate Yoga programming even in this financial crisis. Fisslinger developed a campaign titled Yoga Recess to provide classroom teachers with free, developmentally appropriate yoga DVDs. The program is offering DVDs from Yoga Playgrounds, Shanti Generation and their self-titled Yoga Recess. So far, Yoga Recess has received nearly 5,000 requests for free DVDs from teachers across the country. Now, the challenge is to motivate the Yoga community to make donations to fill these requests.

Funding Recess

In a fundraising effort, music producer and composer Frank Fitzpatrick and his nonprofit organization EarthTones has partnered with the Yoga Recess campaign. Proceeds from Fitzpatrick's compilation album, Yoga Revolution, featuring artists including Michael Franti, Sarah McLachlan, Sting, Seal, Guru Singh, Wah!, Krishna Das, Donna De Lory, Snatam Kaur, Peter Gabriel and Angelique Kidjo, benefits Yoga Recess.



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No doubt, the innovative, inspired leaders of the school Yoga movement will continue to engage in the slow, hard work of integrating the transformative power of Yoga into the classroom. Beyond Los Angeles, across the nation, other groups are doing similar work with much success. As parents and Yoga practitioners develop a deeper understanding of the immediate and long-term benefits of school Yoga programs, they will be able to advocate effectively for Yoga programs in their communities' schools. More public support is needed to take this movement to the next level.

Support Yoga in Schools:

Speak with parents in your community about the benefits of Yoga in schools.

Share research data on the effects of yoga with school administrators.

Invite a school teacher to attend a Yoga class.

Donate to Yoga Recess to provide immediate Yoga programming in classrooms: yoga-recess.org

Support an organization dedicated to bringing Yoga into schools:

Updog Downdog Yoga: updogdowndogyoga.com

Y.O.G.A. for Youth: yogaforyouth.com

Shanti Generation: shantigeneration.com

Yoga Playgrounds: yogaplaygrounds.com

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Note: LA YOGA will be including a list of teacher training programs for kids in the September issue. If you have or know of a program that teaches teachers how to facilitate Yoga for kids, please let us know at: edit@jayogamagazine.com by July 23.

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