

Yoga in Calgary schools helps kids relax, concentrate - even re-energize

BY LISA KADANE, CALGARY HERALD MAY 10, 2010



Photograph by: Dean Bicknell,
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Spotlight

YogaKids instructor Nina Spotswood (yogatula.com) will be teaching a Tools for Schools workshop in the fall for interested teachers (or moms who home school their kids). Contact Nina at yogatula@yahoo.ca. For more on YogaKids, go to yogakids.com.

Sophia Cumming is about to transform into a butterfly. More impressive yet, the Grade 6 Earl Grey Elementary student is going to teach 11 of her peers the butterfly yoga pose at the same time.

"Begin in the 'L' sit position," she says, reading from a YogaKids Tools for Schools flash card.

Gradually, the children, along with yoga instructor Nina Spotswood, take on the shape of colourful flyers -- bent knees and elbows become wings, and index fingers turn into antennae. The kids laugh because it's a bit silly, but they're unconsciously working on improving their posture and flexibility through a simple pose.

The children are gathered in the school gym over lunch as part of Yoga Club. Together, the 11 girls and one boy don T-shirts and stretchy yoga pants, and discard hoodies and the frenetic energy of youth, to breath deeply, go through a series of sun salutations, and learn new poses that teach calm and quiet, cooperation and connection, posture and flexibility. In the quiet of the gym they morph from unbridled tweens into still fun-loving -- but serious and engaged -- junior yogis.

Once considered the domain of stressed-out adults seeking sanctuary, stretching and relaxation, yoga is gaining in popularity among children and starting to make inroads into schools like this one.

"It's pretty new in Canada right now," says Nina Spotswood, a YogaKidsqualified instructor who teaches yoga to kids aged three to 12, including this Yoga Club for grades 4 to 6 at Earl Grey every

Wednesday.

She says yoga is much more entrenched in schools in the United States, but Canada is slowly cottoning on to the trend as its benefits are revealed. Not only does yoga in schools get students moving and fulfil the provincial requirement for 30 minutes of daily physical activity, it helps kids get in touch with themselves and their bodies, and learn stress management techniques. What's more, yoga may also enhance the overall education experience: a 2003 California State University study showed a link between yoga and better learning, improved behaviours and higher self-esteem.

"We can take it into the classroom with us and we can take it home with us. We don't even need a mat for yoga," says Spotswood, a mom to two tweens.

Though the mind-body benefits of yoga are well-known, Spotswood's goal is still lofty: she aspires to get Calgary teachers -- who themselves are stressed out -- on board with instructing yoga.

"A lot of people are a bit scared of yoga if they don't know what it's all about," she says.

Enter YogaKids' Tools for Schools program, a take-away yoga "tool box" for teachers. Initially, Spotswood shows them how to incorporate yoga into their lessons using various poses written on flash cards (much like how Sophia Cumming taught her friends the butterfly pose). The idea is for teachers to then independently use different poses, stretches and exercises to help students relax, focus, sit properly at a desk, visualize academic success or even re-energize (think early afternoon, when that pizza lunch is bringing on the yawns).

The rag doll pose, for example, helps kids relax and release tension. The row your boat pose teaches cooperation because students have to work together to execute it successfully.

"In the classroom you can use the chair and the desk as your props," says Spotswood.

Though they giggle about some of the poses, the Yoga Club members are taking it seriously -- and having some serious fun.

"Stick out your snaky tongue if you want,"

Spotswood calls out during snake pose. Most of them do. They also bark like dogs during downward dog. Small modifications like this make yoga more engaging for youth.

"I really like yoga. It makes me feel relaxed," says Sophia, 11, who started taking yoga lessons a couple years ago after school.

Classmate Megan Pearce, also 11, uses yoga exercises at home to help her calm down when her sister annoys her. She also practices yoga before basketball games or before tests at school, to help her concentrate.

Yoga Club ends with a relaxation exercise. The students lie on their backs as Spotswood instructs them to let the stress drain from their limbs, minds and even jaws.

"Relax and know that what you've done today is really good for your body," says Spotswood.

One girl curls onto her side, eyes closed, as if she's having a catnap. Looks like yoga is definitely

helping her relax.

Watch the Earl Grey Elementary Yoga Club in action online at calgaryherald.com/life

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