

Yoga in Schools

Yoga teachers, parents, and educators team up to bring yoga to elementary schoolchildren.

By Jodi Mardesich

Although kids' yoga has been catching on in studios over the past few years, not all families have the means to send their children to classes at \$15-\$20 a pop. Another venue is growing, however: More and more public and private schools are welcoming yoga and integrating it into the curriculum.



"Most kids don't have nannies, or parents who aren't working, who can drive them to yoga class after school," says Leah Kalish, director of Yoga Ed., a Los Angeles-based yoga-education training company. "When it's offered at school, it's a huge relief, even for people of resource. Let it be part of their basic education."

Yoga isn't becoming part of the national elementary school curriculum any time soon. But it is showing up in physical education programs, recess and break-period activities, and even classrooms, integrated into topics including mathematics, art, and science.

Three organizations—YogaKids, of Long Beach, Indiana; Yoga Ed., of Los Angeles; and Yoga'd Up, of London—have launched training programs that educate yoga teachers and school teachers in the U.S. and the U.K. on how to adapt their teaching to appeal to the short attention spans and special needs of young children. These programs also help yoga teachers get established in school systems, get funding for their programs, and, in some cases, go on to become educators who train the teachers who will ultimately integrate yoga into the classroom.

Yoga as a Learning Tool

All three programs use movement as an integrative method for learning. "When you give [kids] yoga poses, use visualization, and allow them to move their bodies, their whole learning ability goes up several notches," says Marsha Wenig, founder of YogaKids. Yoga Ed.'s Kalish agrees that children learn best by doing. "When you teach kids, it's not about telling them—it's about creating experiences for them where they connect the dots, and create new dots."

"The YogaKids program helps children learn how to control their energy so that they can focus and concentrate better," adds Amy Haysman, coordinator of the program. "It teaches breathing techniques and poses that help them think more clearly." For example, bunny breath, short inhalations through the nose and a long exhale through

the mouth, can energize kids who need to get focused in order to take a test. Haysman has been hired by schools in Georgia to incorporate yoga into academic classes and physical education programs. In one program, called "Reading Comes Alive with Yoga," teachers take a book, picture, or story and practice yoga poses associated with animals or objects in the story. "It helps the kids feel like they're not passively listening. It's interactive," Haysman says.

The Opportunity: Marketing to School Teachers

The market for teaching yoga to children is largely untapped. As yoga has caught on with adults, the number of yoga teachers has mushroomed. According to Yoga Alliance, there were a few more than 2,000 registered yoga teachers in the U.S. five years ago. Today there are more than 14,000. By contrast, relatively few are trained to teach children's yoga in schools.

This year, however, YogaKids has trained 51 teacher-educators nationwide, who have taught another 50 teachers in the "Tools for Schools" program, according to Haysman. YogaEd has trained about 200 teachers nationwide, Kalish says. So far, most of Yoga Ed.'s teacher trainees have come through the ranks of the public education system, largely due to a federal Physical Education Program (PEP) grant worth about \$750,000. But Kalish believes there is ample opportunity for yoga teachers to become trained and then offer training to school teachers. Yoga'd Up, aimed at 8-12 year olds, has trained about 200 teachers since its May launch, according to founder Fenella Lindsell. Based in the U.K., Yoga'd Up is an offshoot of YogaBugs, a program for children aged 2-7 that has trained 900 teachers in the U.K. and Ireland.

Teaching yoga in schools is a way for yoga teachers to expand their reach—and their income. Pay for these ventures varies widely, and most depend on the initiative of the yoga teacher. Some teachers find funding for their efforts through grants, which they need to write themselves. Others work with parents who donate money to make yoga available in their children's schools. Some schools, having seen the benefits yoga can offer their students, have raised money to have their teachers trained. One school in Coral Gables, Florida, for example, funded 10 teachers to receive YogaKids training, according to Wenig.

Pay for teaching in schools usually amounts to more than teaching in a studio, according to Haysman, who has taught yoga in schools for five years and codeveloped YogaKids' "Tools for Schools" program. "In a studio, teachers usually get \$40 per class, while in a school I've gotten all the way up to \$75 for 45 minutes," she explains. Once the school's PTA paid her \$200 just to participate in a job fair.

"We're also starting to see after-school yoga clubs popping up," Haysman says. An Atlanta school is raising money for its after-school club by charging \$10 per child, per class. With 30 children participating, the teacher gets paid \$150 per class, while the school uses its share of the fees for props and other programs.

Getting Started and Continuing

Wenig started teaching in schools by volunteering at her own children's school. "I never

imagined seeing a training or certification program evolve," she says. She recommends pro bono work as a way to get a foot in the door. In addition, training gives teachers credibility, as do lesson plans—such measurements of expertise follow a format that makes sense to school administrators.

The business plan based on teacher training for schoolteachers appears to have profit potential as well. Earlier this year, a venture capitalist offered €200,000 to Yoga'd Up founders Fenella Lindsell and Lara Goodbody, in exchange for 30 percent of their business. Lindsell and Goodbody chose not to sell, but they are optimistic that they will find investors to help them to bring their program to the United States.

Modifying Your Methodology

The introduction of yoga into schools has not come without some controversy, however. When Yoga Ed. founder Tara Guber introduced the program to a school in Aspen, Colorado, school officials and fundamentalist parents opposed having yoga in their children's school, claiming it to be a religion.

As a solution to this potential misunderstanding, Yoga Ed. came up with new terms for concepts their opponents deemed religious—*time-in* instead of *meditation*, and *oneness* instead of *samadhi*. "We sing, but we don't chant," says Yoga Ed.'s Kalish. "We never use the word *spirit*, we use *breath, body, mind, silence, space, understanding*. To teach in the school, we have to be very, very careful about not stepping across any lines that make it spiritual in any way."

Wenig says she has met some resistance (one editorial in the local paper claimed that "Yoga leads children to the devil"), but she can count those instances on one hand. And for Lynda Meeder, a school counselor for the past five years, the YogaKids program has been an invaluable tool. Most children's first introduction to Meeder is through the yoga she brings to classrooms. Children with problems at school or home come into her office, and they already know her, and already have tools to solve their problems. If they are dealing with anger, for example, she'll ask how they can calm down. "They know the answer immediately. They're using yoga at home in conflict resolution with siblings," Meeder says. "At an early age, kids can develop these skills they're learning through yoga."

Meeder isn't the only one who notices that yoga makes a difference; kids and teachers love it, too. "It brings a sense of calm to the classroom," Meeder says. "Kids are so stressed out. They tell me this is the one time they have to relax."

For more information on yoga training for school teachers, visit www.yogakids.com, yogadup.com, and www.yogaed.com.

Jodi Mardesich lives and teaches yoga in Rincón, Puerto Rico.

Return to http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/2189