



Yoga for Youths

Learning the “downward dog” can help children get down to work in the classroom

BY CHRISTINE LANGLOIS

In three years, Jessica McGregor has seldom missed her Thursday lunch-hour yoga class. “It helps me calm down,” she says. Along with 20 other participants, she quietly enters the darkened room, removes her shoes and socks, then settles on a mat in front of instructor Anju Wadhwa, mirroring her cross-legged pose with thumbs and forefingers touching. After 40 minutes of controlled breathing and challenging poses, Jessica is ready to go back to her day, refreshed.

Eight-year-old Jessica gets to do yoga at lunch because, in 2006,

Wadhwa, a teacher at her Eatonville Junior School in Etobicoke, started a yoga club in the gym.

Wadhwa is part of a burgeoning educational trend in Canada. Recent research is proving what teachers surmised: Practising yoga does indeed help children deal with stress and learn better.

Janet Buckenmeyer, an associate professor of education at Purdue University, surveyed six elementary schools, including one in Canada—Cameron Public School in North York—to assess the effect of yoga taught during the school day. Her 2007 study looked at students from

kindergarten to Grade 5, and their teachers and parents, before and after an eight-week term of twice-weekly yoga classes. Ninety percent of teachers and parents reported that yoga improved academic achievement. And students reported that they felt calmer for tests, better able to concentrate, more confident and more focused.

Wadhwa hears similar comments from her wiry little charges. Khadeja Satari, in Grade 3, says, "I like yoga. It makes me think more in class." And Jessica reports that she uses yoga at home, too: "Sometimes, when I get angry at my brother, it helps me calm down."

Jessica's mother, Brenda, confirms that yoga has been good for her daughter. "Jessica can get very frustrated with her homework when she can't express her thoughts in writing," she says. Brenda reminds her to do her breathing, and it helps. "Now she does it without us even telling her." Brenda helped raise \$700 to buy new yoga mats for the kids, and hopes her younger son, now in senior kindergarten, will sign up for yoga when he hits Grade 1.

Teaching yoga to children is part of a larger trend of teaching contemplative practices, which includes meditation or mindfulness. In 2005 Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, an associate professor of education at The University of

British Columbia, studied the effectiveness of "mindfulness education," a program for students in Grades 4 through 7 that incorporated several activities, including focusing on the breath, in 12 Vancouver-area classrooms. Her research shows that children who did breathing practice for a few minutes three times a day, for nine weeks, showed significant improvements in attention control, aggression, behaviour regulation and social competence.

Today, more than 1,000 educators in British Columbia are trained to offer a 15-lesson program, MindUP, that includes a core practice of mindful breathing three times a day. As well, 21 schools have now completed "whole school training," in which all staff and students are offered instruction. Janice Parry, teacher and lead trainer for MindUP in British Columbia, says the program has grown rapidly by word of mouth because "educators are seeing instant results."

Without centralized statistics, it's tough to gauge how many students across Canada are practising the downward-facing dog and deep breathing at school. However, Donna Freeman, a schoolteacher in St. Albert, Alta., knows from the number of requests she's getting for her services as a yoga instructor—and the increased traffic on her yogainmyschool.com

Online

Are you a warrior-pose devotee or yoga newbie? Share your yoga experiences and check out simple routines to try at home. readersdigest.ca/yoga

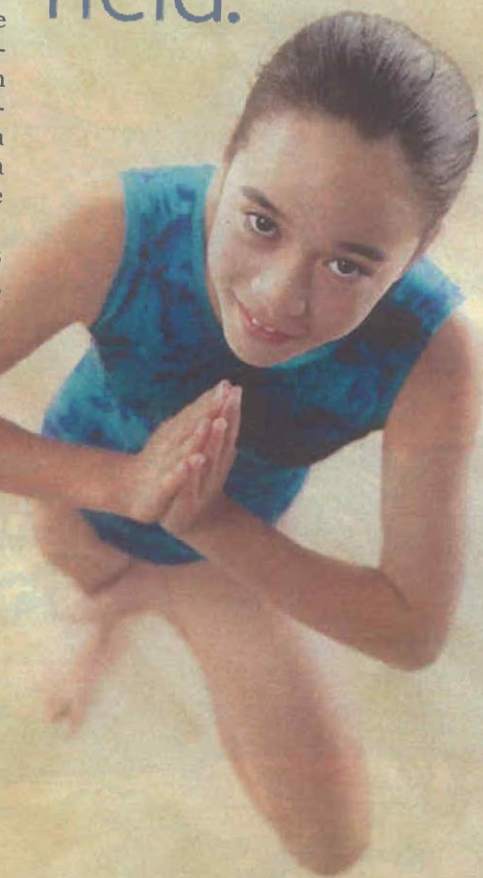
blog—that the numbers are going up quickly. More and more teachers, she says, want to include yoga in their classrooms as part of the daily physical activity (DPA) requirement set by the provincial governments in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. Freeman has recently written a guidebook entitled *Once Upon a Pose* to help teachers plan yoga classes that meet their DPA requirements and curriculum guidelines.

"Yoga is a level playing field," Freeman says. Every child does it to the best of his ability. And teachers appreciate that it's flexible. They can introduce a five-minute breathing exercise to calm a rowdy class, or do a full 30-minute yoga session as a physical-activity class. "The cognitive benefits are huge," she says.

Lorry Colangelo, of Thornhill, has taught yoga in schools for eight years, and currently she teaches it at Bill Crothers Secondary School, a public high school for elite athletes. Her students are very busy with practices and competitions in their various sports and have no trouble focusing, she says. But they do have trouble relaxing, and that's where yoga can help.

Colangelo sees yoga as a powerful life skill that children can take with them into adulthood, and Lisa Pedrini, manager of social responsibility and diversity at the Vancouver School Board, agrees. "Children are learning to focus their attention and to calm themselves—these are two skills that are so important for learning and for life," she says. ■

"Yoga is a level playing field."



© LWA-STEPHEN WELSTEAD/CORBIS