

Chapter 7

Yoga for Children

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ABSTRACT

Yoga is an ancient mind-body practice originated in India more than 2.000 years ago and is described systematically early on. The research on the psychophysiological benefits of yoga in children has been found to improve concentration, attention, memory, resilience, mood, self-control, academic performance, psychomotor and cardiac functions, as well as metabolic parameters. Consequently, yoga seems to help children with attention problems such as ADHD, and with special needs or during physical rehabilitation. Therefore, yoga might represent an important life skill tool for all children to deal with health issues, cognitive challenges and emotional self-regulation. In this chapter, the supporting evidence of yoga for children will be discussed, as well as the effectiveness of frequency, duration and the issue of age appropriateness. Among many reasons, but specially due to their brain maturity, children's yoga is not a version of yoga for adults, it is a unique practice where children should allow to have fun while they experience the well known health benefits of yoga.

INTRODUCTION

Today's accelerated pace, with pressures coming from every direction, children are much predisposed to experience stress at progressively earlier ages. Excessive or prolonged psychosocial stress in children has been shown to be associated with different diseases (Hagins, Haden, & Daly, 2013) and negative school behaviors (Weist, Paskewitz, Jackson, & Jones, 1998; Rosella & Albrecht, 1993; Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Acker, & Eron, 1995). Negative feelings, self-image issues, family and peer relationship problems, academic concerns, inability to cope with emotions, anxiety and stress are challenges for children nowadays. According to Haden et al. (2014), research tends to focus on particular stressors experienced by children, but it seems that less severe forms of stress are likely to have negative impacts on emotional, cognitive and physical health. Actually, conflicted children are more likely to break rules, experience increased negative affect, report sadness, feel less socially competent and have poorer academic functioning than those who deny interpersonal stressors (Haden et al., 2014). On the other hand, children who are able to self-regulate have a more positive development and are less likely to engage in problem behaviors

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than those who have difficulties regulating their experiences and emotions (Gestdotir & Lerner, 2007; Zimmerman, Phelps, & Lerner, 2007). The ability to cope with stress and anxiety (due to psychosocial demands) and to maintain physical and mental health is priceless in any spheres of an individual's life. Children must be healthy in order to learn, and academic accomplishment has been shown to be related to health status (Ferreira-Vorkapic et al., 2015). Furthermore, increased pressure is exerted on children to succeed in school now than in previous times. Such increased emphasis on education and self-discipline can be challenging. Consequently, there are more psychological problems among young people; many worry excessively, experience sleep problems, hopelessness and stress (Hagins et al., 2013).

But emotional problems are not the only issues children face nowadays. Stressful environments can contribute to other health problems such as obesity. Routine physical activity is often a challenge with reduced physical education in school, more time spent in a car and the increase in sedentary activities, such as playing video games or watching television. This fatal inactivity is unfortunately supplemented by poor eating habits. On the other hand, physical activity promotes a generalized improvement in different health features such as: motor coordination, weight reduction, metabolic parameters and cognitive function (Telles, Singh, Bhadarwaj, Kumar, & Balkrishna, 2013; Ploughman, 2008). It has also been associated with a positive effect on depression, anxiety, mood, self-esteem and higher academic performance in children (Ortega, Ruiz, Castillo, & Sjostrom, 2008). Such findings suggest that in addition to improving physical fitness and cognition, physical activity appears to influence the psycho-social quality of life in children (Telles et al., 2013).

Yoga is an ancient mind-body practice which originated in India more than 2.000 years ago and is described systematically early on (Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, Circa 900 B.C.). Although, according to traditional scriptures, its ultimate goal is to achieve a unified state of consciousness and self-realization, yoga may be used to improve overall health and well-being (Muktibodhananda, 1998). Yoga involves different techniques such as physical postures (*asanas*), controlled breathing (*pranayamas*), deep relaxation (*yoganidra*), and meditation (Muktibodhananda, 1998). These techniques seem to have specific influences on one's psychological state (Telles, Gaur, & Balkrishna, 2009; Telles, Singh, Joshi, & Balkrishna, 2010) and the research on the psychophysiological benefits of yoga and meditation on adults has demonstrated improvements in emotional self-regulation with consequent reductions in depression, stress, anxiety levels (Telles et al., 2009; Telles et al., 2010; Ferreira-Vorkapic & Rangé, 2010; Ferreira-Vorkapic et al., 2015; Chong, Tsunaka, Tsang, Chan, & Cheung, 2011), posttraumatic disorder (Cabral, Meyer, & Ames, 2011), as well as improvements in mood (Khalsa, Shorter, Cope, Wyshak, & Sklar, 2009), quality of life, well-being (Patel, Newstead, & Ferrer, 2012) and weight reduction (Telles et al., 2013). Additionally, yoga improves cognitive abilities and reduces aggression, negativity, fear and feelings of helplessness (Stueck & Gloeckner, 2005). Some studies have also shown that yoga improves motor performance such as steadiness of execution of a physical task (Telles, Hanumanthaiah, Nagarathna, & Nagendra, 1993) and objective measures of the autonomic nervous system known to be associated with the management of fear and anxiety (Udupa, Sathyaprabha, & Thirthalli, 2007).

Yoga practice (or practices that include a component of yoga) appears to help children remain calm and focused, reduce absenteeism from the classroom, and increase performance on the planning of cognitive tasks (Hagen & Nayar, 2014). This ancient practice may help children cope with stress and thus contribute positively to mental health. Telles (2012) states that yoga is a powerful medium for developing the personality of children and making them capable of facing challenges and problems. The author also concludes that yoga improves children's physical and mental well-being (Telles, 2012). Other prominent yoga researchers find that yoga helps students improve resilience, mood and self-regulation

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