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YOGA FOR KIDS

Yoga provides a pathway for kids to flourish in today's stressful world. Loraine Rushton explains.

Imagine a school classroom filled with 25 children or teenagers. What do you see? Is it a calm, happy, and contented group? In today's society, the issues that children are facing are reaching epidemic proportions: childhood obesity, depression, ADD, diabetes, asthma, allergies, and behavioural issues are found in almost every classroom. The statistics are startling and the numbers are growing every year. What can we do? What's the solution? Yoga is certainly one of them!

In a world where stress is common for children as young as nine, where the pace of life is ever increasing, and the pressures and demands on children and teens are accelerating, yoga is providing a place of calm. Sophie, a five year old Melbourne student who was sent to yoga class as a way of helping her emotional

turmoil and tantrums, emerged after the first class saying, "Mummy! I feel sooooo relaxed!" Her parents saw a different child that night at home and have never looked back since. Sarah, a nine year old living in Sydney, who was finding it difficult to connect and communicate, was introduced to yoga by her concerned parents. It took five classes before Sarah spoke in yoga class. Now, three terms on, she is a more confident, stronger, and happier tween whose sense of humour and sense of self emerges week by week. Stephen is 11 and his distraught parents found a private yoga class to deal with his outbursts and mild autism. Within weeks, the difference seen by his family, friends, and teachers at school was pronounced. These are just a few of the stories from classes I have held over the last 15 years.

Yoga is becoming part of life for many children and teens around Australia. There has been a movement to introduce yoga in schools, childcare centres, yoga studios, and community centres over the last decade. What we are seeing are classes that go beyond increasing fitness levels and that are making a huge impact on young people's lives, and providing answers for children, teens, teachers, and parents.

The traditional children's yoga class has changed. Rather than just being based on fun and games, classes are now being designed around the needs of the students. Specific exercises to target issues such as asthma, scoliosis, and obesity, and postures to de-stress or deal with ADD, are commonplace. So too are breathing practices designed to calm, tools to help teach self-control, as well as deep relaxations and meditation to still the mind and provide a place of release and relief.

Personal development exercises are common in classes, as are partner work, journaling, long relaxations, and educational segments where children can learn about their bodies and minds. Classes for children are no longer based on the format of an adult's class or a lesson of games and fun. This new format is working!

One private boys school on Sydney's Northern Beaches began looking for answers after a suicide in the school. (Australia has one of the highest levels of teenage suicide for boys in the world.) I was asked to trial yoga classes with the Year Nine boys. Upon entering the class, as you can imagine, the boys were disruptive, had preconceived notions that yoga was for girls, and either thought they weren't flexible enough to do yoga, or that it was going to be a piece of cake and nap for an hour! However, within minutes of the boys beginning the class, they were taken on a journey of intelligently building a balance of strength and flexibility, and learning an awareness of thought, all within a context of strict guidelines and discipline. Within seven minutes, the boys were silent. Within 40 minutes, they had dropped into a place of calm many had never experienced before.



Private Catholic school includes yoga in the weekly timetable.

At the end of class, every one of those boys neatly rolled up their mat and said thank you and they meant it. Yoga had given them the ability to channel their energy and access a place where their mind and body could be still and quiet for a short time. By the end of the first term, yoga was the favourite sport for the Year Nines and the difference was witnessed by so many teachers that the whole school was introduced to the practice over the next two terms.

It's the same in Victoria and Queensland. Edna Reinhardt, of Over the Moon Studio, has been running yoga classes for boys for years and the class always has a waiting list. Parents have been looking for a place for the boys to channel their energies safely; this includes children with ADD and behavioural issues. The teachers at the local school have noticed a difference in the boys after they begin yoga classes and can tell which students attend yoga. Edna believes, "Yoga is perfect for the boys. It manages their energy in a socially appropriate way and they become more aware of their environment and of the people around them."

Teenage boys have a challenging time at school. If they are not sport oriented and don't excel at sport, they don't fit in and many feel worthless. Yoga provides a place for them where they are all right just as they are, where there is no competition, and where the focus is inward rather than outward. There is no need to prove themselves, although, as Edna noted, "In a way, they are competing with themselves.

They love being challenged physically, in particular, with balancing poses. It stills their minds."

Tammy Pascoe of Yoga NRG on the Sunshine coast teaches yoga for a juvenile justice program. "On one particular occasion, I had an extremely challenging group", says Tammy. "I had tried every asana, every meditation, and every approach I could think of. They were all making fun of yoga and each other – it was the first day the group of all boys (14 year olds) had met and come together. They had been kicked out of school and in trouble with the law. What actually brought stillness and 100 per cent participation was the 'Aum-ing'. At the time I was much surprised as it was one of the boys that suggested, let's just 'Aum.' They found it fun and they turned from swearing and poking fun, to focusing and moments of stillness (no talking!) – quite remarkable." There are so many components to yoga and as Tammy discovered, there is always one aspect that the children can relate to and that leads them to connect to a place deep inside.

Teachers and parents are continually amazed at the effectiveness of one session of yoga. Because of this impact, yoga is making many inroads into schools, daycare centres, after school programs, programs for troubled teens, and groups with special needs. There are no boundaries to where yoga can go and make a difference.

Yoga and its practical applications not only give the children answers, but also guide them through life's challenges.



Teens form a sense of community through yoga.

It's beautiful to see their minds open up to greater awareness and possibilities. Many instructors teach the tools of problem solving and dealing with challenging situations in their yoga class and create new pathways never explored before. It is the greater awareness of self, body, mind, and emotions and the connection to a place deep within that manifests change. The principal of a catholic school in Manly, where I had the privilege of teaching yoga to the entire school, noticed that by the end of the first year, bullying had decreased and a greater sense of stillness had penetrated through the school.

In yoga classes for teenage girls, there is an increase in self-esteem, happiness, and improved relationships. The girls love the relaxation segments and cherish moments where they can simply be themselves, without the need to try and fit in. Personal development exercises are common in yoga classes for teens and partner work leads to a greater connection with others. Some topics that have become an important part of any teenage yoga class are eating disorders, self-harming, and abusive relationships. Teachers are now asking how to learn this in their teacher training courses.

For most children, the yoga class will be the first time they have ever experienced anything so profound and is why they look forward to their yoga class every week. I've been teaching for over seven years at a girls public school in Sydney, where yoga is the favourite sport and always fills up the fastest.

These are some examples of the types of feedback I receive from students:

"I found doing yoga for a term was great for my physical, emotional, and mental health. The movement gave me flexibility, the meditation gave me peace of mind to realise things I had been thinking (negative, positive, and confused?) All of yoga gave me a healthier self-esteem and now I feel great!" – Shannen

"Usually each term I'm quite stressed, but since doing yoga I haven't been stressed at all! It is amazing how calm I feel. I have enjoyed learning about how to control my thoughts. I am much happier from it. Thanks so much!" – Sarah

"Yoga this term really helped me feel less stressed about the things that I used to get so worried and stressed about. It was great. I also felt really relaxed." – Nicola

"It was really relaxing. Calmed me down each week. Made school bearable. Thank you." – Antony

Yoga targets the whole child – this is where the magic and power lies. It benefits them on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level. It's the one place in their world where they are held to their highest potential and they are seen for who they truly are. Yoga provides many answers, benefits, and solutions and is having a more profound impact than any other activity they do.

There are many stories of how yoga can help children. One story that stands out is of a seven year old boy who was brought to my class because he had emotionally shut down after his grandmother passed away. I never knew

this until his last day of class, when his father thanked me for the difference the class had made. I had only seen the beautiful little soul that he was and how much he loved yoga. But yoga had allowed a child of such a young age come to terms with something as huge as grief and come back to shining who he was, out into the world once more.

Over the years, many stories stand out. There is the girl with cerebral palsy, who loved yoga so much that the school allowed her to stay in the yoga class for the entire year and not change to other sports. There are the schools that send the challenging students to my yoga class because it is the one place where they settle down and behave. There is the six year old with leukaemia, who came to yoga with her tubes still attached because she didn't want to miss the class. There is the boy who stopped being bullied halfway through term, because of the confidence he gained in the yoga class and how the others interacted with him. There is the teenage girl who had been leaking blood from her kidneys for years and it cleared up in weeks after starting yoga; the boy with Asperger's disorder who found yoga to be the one place he could relax and let go. There are the many Year 12 students who found relief every week during one of the most stressful times in their lives.

The majority of calls I now receive are from concerned parents looking for help with their child's behaviour, their stress and anxiety, or their physical challenges. So, the message is starting to spread – yoga can make a difference in these areas.

Dee Reynolds of Funky Fit Kids has introduced yoga to six kindergartens and childcare centres in Adelaide this year. "The feedback from kindergarten directors and primary teachers has been overwhelmingly positive", says Dee. "Some teachers can't believe the stillness in the room at the end of the session, and the way the yoga transforms the behaviour of the children. Allowing the children to explore their creativity and imagination in the poses is a wonderful way to encourage the children to feel like they can accomplish

something amazing, therefore building confidence.”

Edna sums it up perfectly, “Relaxation used to be a nice, short part of the class – an add-on if there was time; but now the children ask for it. They are under more pressure and are more stressed now and want to find a way to deal with that.” This is the key. Children and teens, parents and schools, are now looking for ways to tackle the ever increasing problems they are facing daily at home and in the classroom – stress, behavioural and emotional issues, ADD, asthma, obesity, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Yoga seems to have the answer.

When teaching yoga to disadvantaged teens, Tammy noticed that teaching Relaxation Pose (Shavasana) and mindfulness techniques helped to create more response than initially introducing asana. She found that once they discovered the tools for calming and

relaxing their bodies and minds, they would ask for more every week. Tammy notes that many yoga teachers find it difficult to teach challenging classes and special needs groups. They require special training. This message resonates with Edna as well who says, “Teaching children is a specialised area and is just as complex as teaching adults.” Indeed, as children’s yoga teachers, we not only have to be trained yoga teachers, but also able to hold the energy of a class, be enthusiastic, inspiring, and deal with the many situations that arise when teaching children and teens. Training courses on teaching yoga to children and teens are becoming very specialised, incorporating teaching the skills of yoga therapy, classroom management, engaging and educating large groups, and how to create lessons that are meaningful. Such lessons cater to the physical, emotional, and mental needs of every child, and the message and impact is far reaching. I’ve been particularly inspired by the desire, passion, commitment, and dedication

to making a difference in the lives of children by those who participated in the Zenergy Yoga For Kids training courses this year.

Teaching yoga to children from a young age helps set them up for life. Physically, we can set their foundation and give them tools to navigate life’s waters. Edna sums it up perfectly, “Yoga for children is incredibly important. We are teaching kids how to manage life.” Wouldn’t we all have loved that guidance when we were young!

Loraine Rushton is the founder of Zenergy Yoga. She has over 15 years of experience in teaching yoga to children and has over 10,000 hours of teaching children of all ages. She currently runs training courses on How to Teach Yoga to Children and Teens in Australia and throughout the world. She can be contacted at info@zenergyyoga.com www.zenergyyoga.com



KIDS TEACHER TRAINING COURSES

Designed and delivered by international children's yoga expert, Loraine Rushton



FOUNDATION & ADVANCED COURSES

AT THESE COURSES YOU WILL LEARN:

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- The skills to be a good, engaging and inspiring Kids Yoga teacher
- Teaching and designing classes that leave each and every child feeling happy, empowered, and believing in themselves.
- The privilege and opportunity of touching the lives and making a difference for children

YOGA THERAPY FOR KIDS.

AT THIS COURSE YOU WILL LEARN:

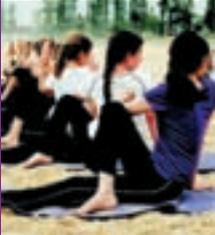
- An understanding of Yoga Therapy and how it works
- The specific yoga corrective exercises for the top 10 issues being faced by children and teens today: ADD, ASTHMA, DIABETES, COLDS, CONCENTRATION, STRESS, BACK ISSUES, DIGESTION, WEIGHT, DEPRESSION
- How to deal with each condition on a physical, mental and emotional level.



WHAT SETS ZENERGY KIDS TEACHER TRAINING APART?

The Zenergy teacher training courses were developed with nearly 20 years of experience and over 10,000 hours of classroom time, teaching 1,000s of children of all ages.

The founder of Zenergy, Loraine Rushton, was instrumental in bringing yoga into the Australian School System and is the featured yoga teacher in ABC television's "Yoga For Children? DVD.



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