

Progressive posturing

Michael Chissick explains how one special school is using yoga to promote pupils' social skills as well as their physical development

In March 2012, children's yoga was introduced to pupils at Cambridge Park Special Needs Academy in Grimsby as part of the integrated weekly timetable. At a training day at the school, staff observed and joined in the sessions as I demonstrated how to teach yoga to whole classes across both primary and secondary sectors. In this article, I will describe the model used for training staff and look at the impact of the project on pupils.

The model can be used by class teachers and teaching assistants with no previous experience of yoga. The structures, activities and postures are simple to learn and safe to teach. The approach is suitable for most children with special needs across all key stages, including children who are in wheelchairs or are unable to stand independently.

A highly structured approach is vital. Initially, children are seated on chairs in a circle rather than on mats. Visual timetables and posture cards are used to keep verbal input to a minimum.

Reinforcement is a key factor in the programme; yoga postures should be repeated over several weeks so that children become more at ease with them and their skills and confidence improve.

By making the programme fun, children are encouraged to get out of their chairs and into the relevant posture. If it continues to be fun, they will want to stay in the posture. Children can also be supported to get involved in the programme and make choices about the activities, for example, by choosing from posture cards dangling from an umbrella.

A sense of achievement is also important for engaging children and yoga is great for helping children to see progress as they develop their skills and understanding.

Benefits of yoga

The benefits of yoga for the body and fitness are many and various, but yoga can also help with children's development, especially for those who can be harder to reach.

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Body control

Posture work can produce marked improvements in flexibility and coordination, as well as contributing towards improving general health.

Social skills

A structured yoga programme can encourage skills such as waiting, listening, speaking, helping each other, taking turns and following rules.

Sensory awareness

The vestibular system tells us if we are moving or still, while our proprioceptive system provides awareness of our body's position in space. In many children with ASD, for example, these systems do not function effectively. Practising yoga postures can help to regulate these dysfunctions.

Yoga in action

It is important that yoga teaching is well-organised and uniform across the school. For example, high-quality posture cards should be used, and each class should have its own resource bag and mobile visual timetable. Yoga should be taught with pace, energy and enthusiasm to ensure that pupils remain engaged.

It is essential for staff to be involved to fully encourage children, lead by



Pupils demonstrate the Proud Horse posture.

Although I normally teach standing sequences, these would have been difficult for Anita. So I adapted them to be performed sitting without losing either the basic body movements or the vitality of the activity. The result engaged the whole class, including Anita.

Relaxation

The pupils learn simple techniques that relax muscles, improve breathing, refresh and invigorate the body, help to relieve anxiety and promote a calmer frame of mind. By arranging supports under her knees, Anita was able to enjoy all of these benefits in comfort lying down.

Outcomes

By adapting postures and planning whole-class activities that included Anita, we achieved our goals. At the same time it was clearly noticeable that:

- ☒ class unity had improved
- ☒ Anita experienced a great sense of success
- ☒ children who normally did not enjoy physical activities were fully engaged
- ☒ the whole class was challenged.

Behavioural issues

Also in Year 4, Sinclair had low self-esteem, was often moody, had a short attention span and was disruptive. He was aggressive to other children and found group work difficult. On the positive side, he enjoyed PE, loved football, was sharp and incredibly flexible.

Individual aims for Sinclair

Working with his class teacher, we decided on the following specific aims:

- ☒ to improve Sinclair's self-esteem
- ☒ to encourage him to become a role model
- ☒ to develop his group communication skills.

To achieve this, we cultivated and built on three positive aspects of his character.

- ☒ Sinclair, the demonstrator.
- ☒ Sinclair, the 'helpful teacher'.
- ☒ Sinclair, the 'star' at school and at home.

Sinclair, the demonstrator

Here was a natural yogi who excelled at posture work. We used him as often as possible, without being unfair to his peers, to demonstrate new postures and reinforce old ones to his class. Before the lesson, his teacher reminded him that he was being given this responsibility, which meant that he had to show responsible behaviour too.



This pose strengthens hand, wrist and shoulder joints and encourages balance and concentration

Sinclair, the 'helpful teacher'

Group work is an essential part of my approach and the children worked in teams of six to perform a specific posture in an interesting way that allowed them to support and connect with each other.

We made it clear that we would reward group skills, such as listening and decision making, with an emphasis on helping each other in a kind and encouraging way. Sinclair's expertise in postures made him a natural leader. In addition, his attention to detail meant that he could spot ways to help other children in his team.

We coached Sinclair on how to adapt an aspect of the posture in an encouraging way

From the start we coached him on how to adapt an aspect of a posture in an encouraging way, which he applied with ease and a gentleness that his teacher had not seen before. Initially, he was keen to be the group spokesperson, but gradually he more readily agreed to let someone else have a turn.



Practising the bow posture builds both strength and flexibility in the back



The tree posture improves posture, balance and concentration, increases the range of motion in the hips, and tones leg, back and chest muscles

Sinclair, the 'star' at school and at home

Sinclair performed challenging postures to the whole school at two achievement assemblies, where he explained how yoga had helped him to be calmer and more focused. Meanwhile, his family eagerly awaited his return from school on yoga days, when he would teach them new postures and play yoga games with his two brothers.

Certificates and stickers

Sinclair worked hard to get the special certificates that were awarded to all children who could show:

- ☒ good listening skills
- ☒ a helpful attitude in group work
- ☒ improved behaviour.

He also earned stickers for being still in calming postures and relaxation, and for improved concentration and good manners.

Outcomes

The combination of our behavioural approach and the yoga helped improve Sinclair's self-esteem. Consequently, his behaviour improved because:

- ☒ he experienced a great sense of success
- ☒ the calming and relaxation aspects of the lesson helped him feel in control
- ☒ he was perceived as an expert by his class and earned their respect
- ☒ he tried hard to overcome his disruptive behaviours in order to win the special certificates and stickers
- ☒ his parents celebrated his success at home and gave lots of genuine praise.

Michael Chissick has taught yoga in primary and special needs school for 20 years and is also a teacher trainer. www.yogaatschool.org.uk

His new illustrated children's yoga storybook, Ladybird's Remarkable Relaxation: How Children (and Frogs, Dogs, Flamingos and Dragons) Can Use Yoga Relaxation to Help Deal with Stress, Grief, Bullying and Lack of Confidence, is published by Singing Dragon. ISBN 9781848191464.