



Yoga relaxation helps children to deal with anxiety and tension, therefore reducing stress

Yoga alchemy

Michael Chissick outlines the benefits of yoga and shows how it can be adapted to make it fully inclusive in mainstream schools

Although yoga has multiple educational benefits, the main focus of my work as a specialist children's yoga teacher is on the social and emotional aspects of learning. While improved flexibility, fitness, concentration and calmness are natural outcomes of regular practice, when combined with an emphasis on social and emotional learning, yoga can greatly enhance a child's sense of self-worth.

As schools look for new ways to develop their pupils' well-being and life skills, some are inviting specialist children's yoga teachers to teach pupils as part of the school day. As shown by the two case studies below, there is no reason why yoga can't be fully inclusive.

Physical disabilities

Having spina bifida did not stop Anita, Year 4, from joining in yoga sessions with her peers. I taught her class for three years, during which time her posture and balance improved considerably and her self-confidence soared.

Anita is highly intelligent, articulate and very determined. Normally, she gets around in a wheelchair, but for yoga she transfers to her walking frame and is helped by her learning support assistant during the lesson. She can support herself on one leg using the frame if she holds on with one arm, and support herself

unaided when she sits on the yoga mat.

Individual aims for Anita

- ☒ To include her in all activities.
- ☒ To teach her a variety of yoga postures.
- ☒ To encourage her to balance on one leg without holding the frame.

Inclusivity

While still making sure that every pupil was stretched to reach their potential, I adapted the postures and activities so that Anita could perform them alongside her peers. I also redesigned the sessions and split the lesson into two parts – standing postures followed by sitting or floor

Yoga and autism

A study at the NAS Daldorch House School in Ayrshire has investigated the benefits of yoga for children with autism. Working with six young people aged 11-19 over the course of a year, speech and language therapist Liliias Nicholls conducted the research for her PhD.

Her results indicate that yoga clears the mind, reduces stress and anxiety and helps to ease the strain of constant over-stimulation to the nervous system. Once pupils are calmer and more focused, they are better prepared for academic work.

'A short daily dose of yoga helped this small group of pupils to be ready to learn,' she concludes. 'Used in conjunction with TEACCH, SPELL, Intensive Interaction and other evidence-based interventions, it can be a useful tool for many young people on the spectrum.'

postures – so that she avoided frustrating and time-consuming ups and downs.

Most of the standing postures involve balance, which is great for improving concentration and focus. We adapted the tree posture to encourage her to stand within the walking frame but without using it to support herself. When her determination eventually paid off, everyone applauded her achievement. She particularly enjoyed the sneaky trees game – based on 'grandma's footsteps' – which reinforced the tree posture.

Sitting on the mat, Anita was able to perform twists and any of the seated postures just as well as anyone else. In some of the games that involved moving around the hall, the pupils were given the choice of walking or sliding on their bottoms. Anita found that she could get about by the sliding method.

Sequences

Sequences are highly effective because:

- ☒ they require concentration and coordination
- ☒ they are all-encompassing, involving basic body movements such as forward and back bends, inverted and side stretching
- ☒ children enjoy the flowing body movements
- ☒ they provide a more invigorating way to practise yoga than holding isolated postures.

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.

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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.