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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.



Children stretch out on their mats for the Dragonfly posture.

example and in some cases assist the child in the posture. By taking part in the activities, staff can also develop the confidence they need to start leading the programme. Staff could be encouraged to join a regular adult yoga class to deepen their knowledge and understanding of yoga whilst broadening their repertoire of postures.

Staff should be invited to develop their own ideas and approaches to add into the programme. For example, staff at the Grimsby school had introduced the idea of “hero posture”, giving children the choice of a hero, such as Batman, Catwoman or Superman, and the choice of a song to accompany the posture.

Impact on pupils

When I returned to the school after a few months, staff reported that most children were engaged in the programme and enjoying their yoga sessions. Staff were using yoga to help pupils meet their individual targets in terms of social and communication skills, as well as physical achievement. For example, some children took turns at taking on the role of leader in the “sun game” activity, leading classmates through a series of postures in an exact order. Pupils noted some of the benefits they felt:

“I use my loud clear voice to give instructions” (communication skills).

“I have the confidence to lead the group” (social skills).

“I enjoy the physical challenge” (physical skills).

Similarly, pupil comments revealed how yoga games and relaxation time helped them develop social skills:

“I realise that I cannot always be chosen.”

“I am waiting to take my turn.”

“I can sit still and listen to instructions.”

“I am trying to be quiet during relaxation.”

Who can benefit?

Clearly, the majority of pupils were benefiting from and enjoying their regular yoga sessions. It took some pupils between three to six sessions for them to become engaged with the programme, while for others this was a more immediate process. The true test of the efficacy of the project, though, was to assess the degree of engagement and participation from pupils who are generally resistant to physical (or any) activities, both new and established.

One such pupil, Barry, had progressed from only watching activities to sitting in a chair independently and joining in some of the activities. Similarly, over

Pupils are encouraged to see yoga skills as life skills

six sessions, Darren progressed from refusing to remove his shoes or sit on a chair to taking off his shoes, showing that he wanted to be chosen by sitting on his chair and joining in the relaxation.

Looking forward

Some students are now beginning to look beyond the initial yoga programme towards longer-term goals. Staff have been encouraged to progress gradually from chairs to mats for some of the more able, older classes. Where appropriate, increasingly challenging postures have been introduced, along with some simple yoga breathing techniques. New games that further develop social and physical skills are being explored. Pupils are encouraged to see yoga skills as life skills.

Staff are also continuing to grow in confidence as they develop more skills and understanding and introduce new elements into the lessons.

The example of this school clearly shows that yoga, delivered in this way, can make a significant contribution towards helping pupils achieve personal targets and develop their physical and social abilities. **SEN**

Further information

Michael Chissick runs Yoga at School and has been teaching yoga in education for 18 years. He is the author of *Frog's Breathtaking Speech* and *Ladybird's Remarkable Relaxation*:
www.yogaatschool.org.uk

Since this article was published Michael has three more books out there: *Seahorse's Magical Sun Sequences*, *Sitting on a Chicken – The Best Ever 52 Yoga Games to play in School* & *Yoga for Children and Young people with Autism*