

Yoga for kids

What is yoga?

- Yoga is form of exercise, which originated thousands of years ago in India. The word yoga means 'union' which refers to the coordination of breath, body and mind. It is a fun and non-competitive activity that can be modified for a wide range of people and abilities and can be customized to work on specific skills such as balance, strength, and flexibility.
- There are many types of yoga. Two, which are commonly used with children with visual impairment, are Hatha, and Kundalini.
- Hatha is based on a group of positions that are paired with breathing exercises to increase flexibility, strength and balance.
- Kundalini yoga includes body and hand positions, music, singing and breathing exercises. The Kundalini program referred to here was developed for children by Shakta Khalsa (1998) with a focus on the use of sound and movement as vehicles for learning self-awareness and increasing self-control.

How does yoga help the student with visual impairments?

- A child with visual impairments benefit from this system of exercise because it generally occurs within his personal space, and provides opportunities for him to move his body in ways he may not have experienced before.
- Yoga supports inclusion with sighted peers.
- Yoga benefits many areas including:
 - Improved energy and concentration
 - Improved strength
 - Improved flexibility
 - Body concepts and body awareness
 - Spatial awareness/positional concepts
 - Improved balance and coordination
 - Left/right concepts
 - Crossing midline (motor development on both sides of the body)

What is yoga class like?

A Yoga class can consist of a single student and teacher, or a larger group. If a larger group is planned be sure to include other adults or competent students to assist individual students in assuming poses and following the teacher's instructions. Work with the other adults before starting the class to clarify roles as models, prompters, and shadows. Come to a consensus of what type and how much prompting is expected and how it will be phased out. It is important to be clear about how the adults will interact with the students. Whenever possible, the adults should have an opportunity to practice the poses themselves before the classes begin.

Getting ready for Yoga class:

- Yoga class takes place in a quiet location with dim lighting.
- Each student has a mat she uses as her yoga space.

- The student removes her shoes (then places them beside or behind the mat) and sits (crossed-legged) in a circle formed by all of the student's mats
- Class begins with deep breathing and a welcome song.
- Next is the routine of postures, songs and breathing.
- Last is relaxation, in which the children lie on their backs and listen to a few minutes of calming music.

Teaching strategies and modifications for children with visual impairments

- Control both artificial and natural lighting for students with low vision. Some students may need extra lighting when learning the movements but can have lower lighting after they have mastered the exercises. Be mindful of glare coming through windows, which may affect the student with photophobia. Either seat the student with her back to the window or close the curtains/blinds.
- If possible, let each student handle his own mat, including storing and retrieving the mat from a set location, and also learning to roll and unroll the mat.
- Some students may need to sit and listen during several sessions to become familiar with the language and expectation before being ready to actively participate.
- The teacher can help the student learn positions by gently guiding his hands while describing the body parts and movement.
- The teacher can decrease assistance by giving occasional touch and/or verbal prompts. Encourage the student to control her own body and movements as she becomes familiar with the routine. The movements may not be perfect for some students, but most can make progress within their abilities.
- Modeling the postures or showing pictures of the position may be helpful for students with low vision.
- For certain postures, it may be helpful for the student to touch the position of the instructor's arm, head or leg to understand body position (this strategy can be especially effective for students with tactile sensitivity).
- Some students have difficulty sitting up straight while sitting cross-legged. These students may benefit from sitting on the edge of a pillow or in a chair, or the narrow edge of a wedge cushion.
- If the student is seated in a chair, a pillow can be placed behind his back vertically along the spine to promote 'open' upright posture.
- A student who uses a wheelchair, can stay seated in the wheelchair or can lie down on the mat. Many exercises can be adapted to use only the arms, and the student can be gently assisted to move other parts of the body. *Note: Consult with the student's physical or occupational therapist to ensure safety of movements.*
- For students with limited attention, who are new to yoga, four or five activities may be enough to begin the practice. Gradually add more songs and poses as the students show growing interest and attention.
- Yoga is a great opportunity to use the student's communication medium such as Braille, tactile symbols, object symbols, pictures, or print. A list of the different exercises is given to the student in her medium. This enables the student to follow the sequence of songs and postures during the routine and/or to communicate to her classmates what is next.

Yoga postures and activities

The following are some positions and activities to do with students during a yoga routine:

Balloon Breathing

The student begins in the ready position (sitting cross-legged with straight back and the hands together at chest level). The student pretends he is blowing a balloon taking deep breaths in and blowing it out loud and strong.

Angel Breathing

The student begins in the ready position with hands in front of chest with fingers interlaced and resting underneath chin. Inhale, lift elbows up and head back. Exhale through mouth and slowly bring elbows together and head level.

Rock and Roll

From sitting position, the student brings legs, bending their knees, up to chest and wraps his arms around the legs. The student rocks back and forth along the length of his spine rolling up to sitting position and back to the base of the neck.

Butterfly (Children's Yoga Songs and Meditations CD, track 2, "Fly like a Butterfly")

The student begins in sitting position with the soles of the feet together. The student gently moves knees up and down to look like butterfly wings. While sitting in a chair student can "clap" knees together or can use arms to mimic butterfly wings.

Dinosaur Walk (Children's Yoga Songs and Meditations CD, track 5, "Dinosaur Walk")

From sitting position: The student puts hands on knees or under knees to help lift them. Using an exaggerated movement, lift one leg and at a time and then stomp the foot back down.

From standing position: The student bends forward and holds ankles (or knees) and walks in place like a big heavy dinosaur.

With a group: Everyone forms a line with hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them. As the music plays, each student makes big dinosaur steps to the music, lifting his knees as close as possible to his elbows. The line moves forward in a circular pattern and then reverses during the second part of song. (Picture)

The Elephant (Children's Yoga Songs and Meditations CD, track 3, "The Elephant")

From sitting position: The student extends arms in front of the body with elbows straight and hands clasped together. The student then slowly moves her arms side-to-side with arms extended (swinging the trunk); then stretches arms high in the air following the song cue. Finish the song with a loud "elephant" sound.

From standing position: The student extends arms in front with elbows straight and clasps hands together, and bends forward with arms hanging down making a slow side-to-side movement (swinging the “trunk”). Then she stretches her arms high in the air following the song cue. Finish the song with a sound “elephant” sound.

Tree

With partner: With one hand on a partner’s shoulder, the student lifts one foot and places it on the inside of opposite calf or thigh (avoid pressing foot on knee). The students then raises the free arm straight up pointing towards the ceiling. Hold for a count of 5 to 10 and then change sides.

Without partner: Balance on one foot, lift opposite foot and place it on the inside of opposite calf or thigh (avoid pressing foot on knee). Either place hands on hips or raise arms straight up towards the ceiling. Hold for a count of 5 to 10 and then change sides.

“Choo-Choo” Breath

The student is sitting in starting position with arms bent at elbow and fists resting under chin. He “punches” alternating arms out in front while making a “choo” sound on the exhale.

Yogini (Radiant Child Music- Happy CD, track #2, Yogini Went to Sea)

The student is sitting in starting position (can also be done standing). The song involves sequencing of movements as they are sung.

Yogini went to sea, sea, sea (hand to forehead or on head)

Yogini went to chai, chai, chai, (hands tapping shoulders on ‘same side’ or crossing arms to touch opposite shoulders)

Yogini went to knee knee, knee (hands touch knees on ‘same side’ or crossing arms to touch opposite knees)

Yogini went to ouachua (hand on stomach making a circular or patting motion)

Partner Forward Bend

Two students sit back to back (the instructor can replace one of the students the first few times) with arms and legs straight and holding hands above their heads. As one partner leans forward, the other one reclines back, holding for 5 seconds. The students return to center and change directions.

Cobra (The Snake)

The student lies on his stomach with arms bent and hands placed palm-down under shoulders. On an exhale, the he pushes his hands against the floor, lifting his chest and head, trying to straighten his arms. Some students may have to lift using forearms.

Mountain (Downward Dog)

The student starts on hands and knees and pushes her hips into the air until her arms and legs straighten resting on her feet and hands (looking like and

inverted “V”). Due to tight muscles, some students may not be able to straighten knees.

Sa Ta Na Ma (Children’s Yoga Songs and Meditations CD, track #12)

This activity helps the students with isolated finger movements during a calming, repetitive song. The student sits in starting position with hands resting on his knees and palms turned upward. Each syllable of the song is paired with a fingertip being touched with the thumb. Sa= pointer finger, Ta=middle finger, Na=ring finger, Ma=pinkie finger.

Relaxation

The student lies on her back with arms and legs straight. The teacher may dim the lights and select a relaxing song/music to play for 3 or 4 minutes. Some children benefit from having a weighted blanket or regular blanket draped over them during the relaxation period.

References

1. Children’s yoga songs and meditations (CD)by Shakta Kaur Khalsa
www.childrensyoga.com
2. “I Can’t Believe it’s Yoga for Kids!” by Lisa Trivell
3. “Better Together” by Linda Hagood (TSBVI)
4. “Fly Like a Butterfly” Yoga for Children by Shakta Kaur Kahalsa
5. “Kundalini Yoga” by Shakta Kaur Khalsa