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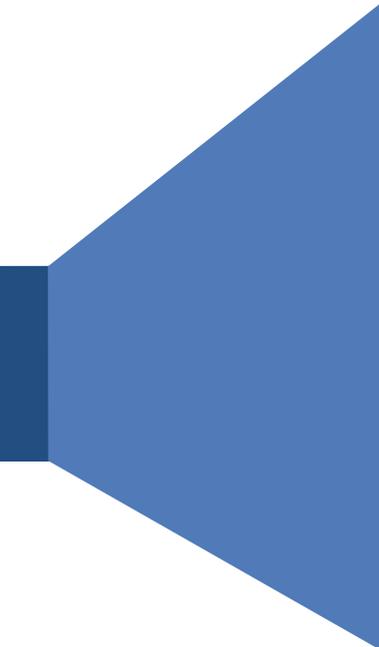
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We celebrate ourselves from the **INSIDE OUT**





Certified Itsy Bitsy Yoga Facilitator and owner of Sweet Pea Yoga, Massachusetts, Alexandra De Collibus believes yoga is an essential life-skill that will help children navigate through social and emotional challenges in school and beyond

Parvathy Jayakrishnan
writeback@scooneews.com

What are some of the key benefits of yoga for children?

The benefits of yoga for children are plentiful. Through practicing yoga, children can develop skills that will serve them emotionally, physically and spiritually throughout their lives. By helping children learn regular meditation, intentional breathing, and a robust 'asana' practice, they are practicing patience and single-minded focus, improving their physical and emotional awareness, and cultivating resilience. As a teacher of children, I look at these as essential life-skills that will help children navigate through social and emotional challenges not only during their school years but later throughout their professional and personal lives. Yoga is something children and adults can practice anywhere—the breathing, the concentration, the way we choose to act or react to situations and conflict, the poses, the meditation, the constant self-discovery and inquisitiveness—it's all portable. No yoga mat, clothing, or special pillow is necessary. Both children

and adults will encounter emotional, social, societal, spiritual, and physical challenges or conflicts. Though the context, the "stakes", and the perspective may be different, both can draw from what they are learning through yoga to help them navigate the waters in a way that feels authentic and honest.

How interactive is your method of teaching kids yoga?

Once in school, children can begin to feel that the things that make them different from their peers (sometimes the very unique qualities that we adults admire and love about them), become things that they don't like about themselves. As a yoga teacher, I try to facilitate a class where children can build up their inner resources and develop a strong sense of self. I always aim to introduce my young students to a variety of simple breathing and relaxation techniques, postures that can make them feel strong, calm, or joyful, and various meditation exercises. For example, after we practice a new meditation technique, I invite them to reflect on what they did or didn't love about it, how it made them feel, whether there were

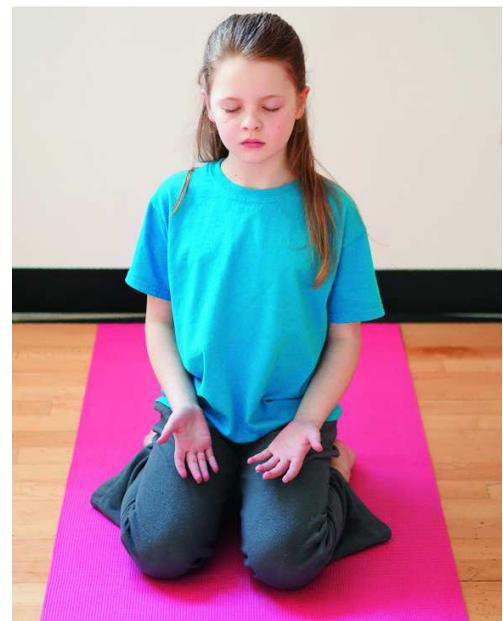
any surprises from the experience, when and how we apply and practice this meditation outside of our yoga classroom. I want my students to learn to trust themselves, their feelings, develop their own experiences. I invite them to think deeply about what it is we are doing—to pay close attention to how their body or mind responds to a particular meditation approach or breathing exercise. How the poses make them feel and why they like them (or don't). In class, I draw attention to how their answers differ in response to a pose or meditation and celebrate that a child's experience with yoga is not one size fits all - what Sarah is experiencing is different from what Arnav felt and there is no expectation that everyone will have the same "answer". Everything I teach in class is chosen as a way to help my students develop their own inner compass by asking them to bring their own attention to how a pose feels, how far to stretch, recognising in themselves when they need to challenge themselves, and learning how to care for themselves through relaxation, meditation, or movement.

What is the response that children generally give to learning a new skill like yoga?

They are thrilled! Kids love learning new things and they enjoy using their body. Although in yoga the goal is to nourish and strengthen ourselves internally, kids are more external by nature so it's not surprising they are most enthusiastic about physical practice of yoga—the 'asana'. I introduce a variety of meditation techniques, concentration exercises, and breathing techniques ('pranayama') in my classes and kids love learning those as well but those things are harder for kids to put into words. So I try to explain the 'why' of these practices in a way that they can understand. I want them to have context for why the breath is so essential to yoga, why the concentration exercises benefit us in our meditation or balancing. I introduce these practices with no prior expectation for what they can do or what they will get the hang of. Kids are always full of surprises—they regularly surprise and thrill themselves with the postures they can do, and they soak up the meditation and relaxation techniques surprisingly well. Not every technique is easy for every child but with enough variety, it seems there is always at least one or two that a child will strongly connect with.

Do the occasional conflict situations arise when dealing with children?

I rarely encounter resistance to learning yoga but of course sometimes a child will grumble when he realizes we are about to practice something they especially struggle with. Though most kids love meditation, it's common there may be a child or two in class who find the practice of sitting still and "watching the breath" very, very difficult because the act of stillness itself is challenging. I just remind them that adults find meditation challenging too and some days we can access that peaceful stillness and some days it's harder. I try to reinforce the idea that we are always changing and growing and we should accept ourselves when we can balance for 30 seconds in 'Vrksasana' (Tree Pose) and also not get frustrated when the next week our 'Vrksasana' can't seem to stop tumbling over. We have some days where things flow for us and other days which can be bumpier. It's normal. When I introduce a more challenging pose such as 'Ardha Chandrasana' (Half Moon Balance), the children seeing the demonstration of this pose for the first time may be nervous - it looks so complicated! They might be fearful of falling out or making a mistake...or feeling embarrassed in front of their peers if they can't do it. I remind them that we call it a yoga "practice" not a yoga "per-



fect" and although there are certain alignment and safety measures we want to take in the pose, the pose is about maintaining the focus and steady breathing and finding a place where we 'feel' great in the pose...it's not how we 'look' in the pose.

I remind them that falling out of a balance is not a mistake - it's an important part of learning the pose better and that it allows our body and brain to work together to figure out the puzzle of how to do the pose.

Would you choose yoga over other sporting activities?

I think it is important to mention that the number one reason parents name for why they are having their child take yoga is because of anxiety and/or stress. It doesn't matter whether the child is five or 12 years old, it's a common theme that many, many children suffer from anxiety and stress. Parents recognize their own stress and they care deeply about helping their child learn skills to help them manage and navigate stressful social, emotional, and/or academic situations. I don't think my students are unique in this regard - I do think what they are experiencing is also common among their peers who I might never see in my classes.

Because anxiety and stress are serious issues for the emotional health of my students, I do take a serious approach to teaching yoga. Our classes are certainly joyful and fun but anxiety is a very real and serious thing and my students deserve to learn effective ways of dealing with it. To this end, I teach a classical approach to yoga by drawing on the thousands of years' old tradition to help us guide our way towards inner peace and a deeper connection to the whole. My students learn both, the Sanskrit names of every pose as well as the common English names, and I aim to give them a strong foundation in yoga from which to grow throughout their lives long after they have graduated from my classes.

In your experience, do kids balance yoga with other sports?

Many of my students also participate in local team sports. At this age (5-14 years) it's very common in the US for children to play on seasonal soccer or softball teams. I also have many students who dance (mostly ballet) several times a week. When sports or dance is a student's primary interest, I might hear from the parent that their child has joined my class because they are trying to address a sports/dance issue - need increased flexibility, or performance anxiety. These families are not looking to replace their child's sport with yoga.

I also have many students who have tried many team or solo sports through the years and they just never enjoy them. These parents might be especially concerned that their child doesn't enjoy physical activity at all and they worry about their child's health or body confidence. In my experience, I have found these less-active students completely thrive in yoga. Yoga removes the competitive, performance nature of sports or dance, and places the focus not on the external but on the internal - nourishing oneself from the inside out. It is a rich environment for a child to grow confident in their body. We celebrate ourselves from the inside out.

Have you tried yoga with children with special needs? Does it benefit them in any way?

This is a great question. I have not taught yoga classes that specifically focus on working with a special needs population. I have seen these classes offered but very rarely in a private class setting (i.e. studio) and it is most common that there is a special needs-focused educator that will attain yoga certification with the aim of integrating yoga into the work she is already doing with her students at a school or private therapy practice. It is not uncommon to have a child or two in my class who may have a special need or a specific condition—these children might be joining class after a year of cancer/chemotherapy treatment, struggle with debilitating panic attacks, have childhood arthritis, have Obsessive-Compulsive disorder, or have autism. In most cases a parent will call me before registering their child to explain what they're looking for in a class for their child and I will explain how our class structure is, what degree children will need to participate, interact, etc. Children with more profound special needs will often benefit from a smaller class size or even a one-on-one setting. My classes typically include 8-12 students and each child would need to be able to participate with a degree of independence. When I share what an hour of my class is like to a parent, they can usually gain a sense of whether it's the right fit for their particular child. If we're unsure, we'll usually agree to a week-by-week basis with regular, honest communication about whether the class is a compatible fit for the child. In cases where my class wasn't the best fit, it's usually pretty clear that the child requires a smaller class size and more individual attention. The issue generally has nothing to do with yoga itself and more to do with class size and perhaps working with a yoga teacher who is also a special needs educator to best tailor the class to the child's needs.



More about Alexandra De Collibus...

Owner of Sweet Pea Yoga in Massachusetts, USA, Alexandra De Collibus is certified in EmPowered Kids Yoga (EPK) and a certified Itsy Bitsy Yoga Facilitator (CIBYF). She developed Sweet Pea Kids Yoga for children for ages 5-14 years, where children attend class in a group of their peers without a parent. She feels strongly about honouring the long tradition of yoga with her students and her classes adhere to a more classical study of Hatha Yoga than most kid's yoga classes in America. She has faith that American children can embrace a classical approach to learning yoga, and she hopes that they will carry on that tradition in a meaningful way. Yoga does not need to be simplified or reinvented as "play" in order for kids to be drawn to learning it and to build a deeply personal connection with the practice, is her staunch belief.