

Yoga for Mind, Body, Soul, and School

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Abstract:

Yoga has been taught and practiced for centuries, and the practice provides many positive outcomes. The nature of yoga has long been debated: Is it a religion? Should it be kept out of the school system? Despite these disagreements, yoga is not a religion; it is a philosophy, which began in India 5,000 years ago. Yoga sometimes incorporates tenets of other philosophies, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, but it is not necessary to study those practices in order to practice or study yoga. It is also not necessary to surrender one's own religious beliefs to practice yoga.

Yoga requires very little equipment and space. All one really needs is a body, mind, and soul. Many "asanas" or poses can be done seated in a classroom chair or standing at a desk. Students and teachers can practice together and receive the benefits of yoga in as little as ten minutes each day. Teachers can learn ten basic poses at a half-day workshop or professional development day. Every age group, race, and body type can practice yoga and breathing techniques. The benefits are similar for every person.

My students have said many great things about the practice of yoga in school. They have called it, "relaxing & enjoying," "renewing and rejuvenating," "spiritual, a great way to stay in shape with your body and mind," "calming, it helps you get in touch with yourself," "it brings inner peace," "it is a good way to connect body and mind and be on top of your game."

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Full text:

Providing the right tools for our youth can be rewarding and challenging. My intention in this article is to outline a solid foundation for providing yoga in the school setting. Like a ripple in a pond, yoga has the potential to spread through the education system uniting the body, mind, and soul.

Yoga has been taught and practiced for centuries, and the practice provides many positive outcomes. The nature of yoga has long been debated: Is it a religion? Should it be kept out of the school system? Despite these disagreements, yoga is not a religion; it is a philosophy, which began in India 5,000 years ago. Yoga sometimes incorporates tenets of other philosophies, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, but it is not necessary to study those practices in order to practice or study yoga. It is also not necessary to surrender one's own religious beliefs to practice yoga.

Yoga has fast become a new fad in North American society. A new fitness regimen usually includes classes such as power yoga, iron yoga, yoga for abs, and so forth. In the rush to incorporate the health benefits, we sometimes forget to form this union of the body, mind, and soul and have become accustomed to focusing on one aspect, rather than the whole. A similar tendency can be seen in the school setting generally as we teachers often focus on teaching the mind separate from the body.

For example, in a typical high school setting, each of the four periods is 75 minutes long and, in many classes, students are not able to leave the class, eat, or take a break. Their break time is usually only the five minutes between the bell and their next 75 minutes period. Then, those teachers trained to teach the bodies often focus on just that. Imagine a physical education teacher in the elementary setting with a full course load and no preparation time, with only enough time to get the kids active without following through with the why, when, how. After grade 9 in Ontario, physical education is not mandatory. There may be no school time for any physical education at all!

The practice of yoga exercises body and mind. Forming a union between the body, mind, and soul will help each state function on a higher level. Working and training the body (the physical level) will stretch the mind and facilitate blood flow to the brain, which can help students focus and learn at a faster rate. This training of the body can also help ground the soul, making possible inner peace through the physical action of movement.

Working and training the mind through breathing and setting goals (the psychological level) will focus the body and help develop self-discipline and confidence. This work also helps focus the body on the task at hand. Yoga can lengthen the soul through breathing, which can help students create a positive inner dialog. Working and training the soul will in turn strengthen the body and calm the mind. This helps students become confident, self-directed learners.

There are great benefits to yoga in the school setting for both educators and students. These include: strengthening core muscle groups, improving circulation, stretching the spine, and releasing tension. Physiological benefits include increased blood flow to the brain and glands, which aids the learning process. Yoga also improves digestion by compressing and massaging internal organs, which in turn releases pent up toxins from the body. Psychological benefits include increased focus, calming the body and mind, and grounding students in the present moment. Taken together, yoga can effectively ground, focus, calm, stretch, lengthen, and strengthen all aspects of the self.

Yoga requires very little equipment and space. All one really needs is a body, mind, and soul. Many "asanas" or poses can be done seated in a classroom chair or standing at a desk. Students and teachers can practice together and receive the benefits of yoga in as little as ten minutes each day. Teachers can

learn ten basic poses at a half-day workshop or professional development day. Every age group, race, and body type can practice yoga and breathing techniques. The benefits are similar for every person.

Students love to move. Different movement develops at different stages of growth but when a child is taught to move with confidence, the child moves forever. Yoga is a way to teach every student how to move with confidence. It also teaches students how to inwardly focus their attention through connecting with their own breathing patterns. This can be a very effective technique that students can use in or out of the classroom. Connections with our breathing patterns tend to calm the mind and body, which can be very beneficial in times of stress.

Imagine grade 12 students in their first semester; there is lots of pressure to get the grades for acceptance into a postsecondary school. Yoga has the potential to calm their mind and body to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed and to give them useful physical and psychological coping strategies.

Yoga also has the potential to revitalize the body and mind. For example, picture a math or science class in the last period of the day. Students are often tired, hungry, and drained. An uplifting breathing exercise with some poses can help them to regain focus as the final bell approaches. This simple connection with yoga can really make a difference in a student's life. This includes benefits for the body (strength and body image), mind (academic focus), and soul (attention inward).

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Teachers thrive in a learning environment. We understand how the cognitive mind works, and we are often challenged to teach 30 cognitive minds, giving each one individualized attention. This is very difficult. Yoga can help teachers draw the student's attention inward and focus attention on what really matters in their learning environment at the present moment. It can also help teachers to release tension and stress built up over the course of a regular school day. The 2009 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth stated that children who are more physically active also do better academically. Similarly, yoga increases blood flow to the brain and glands for easier access to the cognitive mind, which has real practical benefits for learning in all subjects. Yoga is very practical and is a great fit in the school system.

Most provinces have a mandated allotted time for daily physical activity (except in high schools as noted earlier). This normally takes the form of two 15-minute

blocks. Why not try some effective Yoga techniques? There is no better time to unite the body, mind, and soul.

Have you had success implementing yoga or similar techniques in your school? Please write us and tell us all about it!

Sidebar

Yoga the potential to calm their mind and body to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed and to give them useful physical and psychological coping strategies.

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