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Yoga has benefits for kids

Meghan Diemel Published 11:00 p.m. CT Sept. 26, 2014 | Updated 2:28 p.m. CT Sept. 27, 2014



(Photo: Graham Washatka/For Post-Crescent Media)

The school year is off to a fast start — and so are club meetings, athletic practices and weekend tournaments. The pace of life seemingly increases with each passing season, and just as many adults turn to activities like yoga to regain focus and improve their mental and emotional health, children also can benefit from yoga.

Jan Marnocha, sixth-grade teacher at Jefferson Elementary School in Appleton, started incorporating yoga into her classroom two years ago.

"I'll use isolated poses as 'brain breaks,'" Marnocha said. "I personally don't like the kids to sit for longer than 20 minutes. After 20 minutes they start to zone out. So to get them up and do a couple balance poses or do a short sequence of some sort is how I use yoga intermittently throughout the day. In core subjects, if it ties into the curriculum, I might get them up and make them do triangle pose, for example, if we're studying geometry.

"With teaching it to the sixth-graders, I do keep it almost like an adult yoga class. We do playful things, but I teach to them more like teenagers or tweens."

There's much more to yoga than sitting in strange pretzel poses, said Dr. Ann Jones, pediatrician with ThedaCare.

"It has a lot to do with breathing and being aware of your body and being present in the moment with your body," Jones said. "As much as children can understand learning to calm themselves when they're feeling stressed or angry, if they can use some of those breathing techniques, some of those yoga techniques in their daily life, that's where it can help from an emotional standpoint. If children who are having behavioral or self-regulation issues learn to regulate themselves through yoga or meditation, it can be very helpful to them."

Jill Gault, co-owner and children's program coordinator at Empower Yoga in Appleton, was inspired to add a complete schedule of children's yoga classes at the studio through her own experience as a public school teacher.

"I've been teaching Spanish and French for 25 years or so and more than anything, I see the demands and the requirement for kids," Gault said. "Their schedules are jam-packed with the things they're involved in and the expectations of the school. At the high-school level, there's more and more testing required and the pressures of college courses. I think in all of that, there has to be a balance because I'm seeing a lot of kids losing sleep, and they're not eating right. They don't understand how to access that place of balance within themselves, and I think that they're being pushed more externally than intrinsically.

"I think our culture is so driven as a society, and technology is just driving it forward faster. I think it's time we started to implement something where kids have a tool that they can resort to, to help with this."

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Jones, who has taken yoga classes with her two daughters, ages 12 and 14, said there isn't really an age limit for when a child can begin yoga.

"Toddlers are very flexible," she said. "Even in the toddler age group they can start to learn poses and learning to calm themselves by taking deep breaths. As far as an official yoga class, maybe not until they're 3 or 4, but I think you can do some movements in toddlers for sure."

Physically, yoga helps maintain that early life flexibility, Jones said.

"They can also learn balance and core strength, which can help them prevent injuries in other sports as well."

Marnocha not only uses poses throughout the day in her classroom, but she also holds a 30-minute yoga class each week for her students. It's from that class that she sees the most benefit, with students reporting better concentration after the class, less anxiety afterward and feeling more energized.

"By using a contemplative practice like yoga, you see the students do have improved cognitive functioning where they can concentrate better," she said. "And I feel like if they can concentrate, they can retain and understand things better. There is also improved emotional regulation. I talk about that a lot. I'll do breathing exercises with the kids so if something starts to escalate, we all take a deep breath to get them to pause to think before they act."

"Looking at those two things, it can improve their academic achievement, if they can be successful with their cognitive thinking and emotional reactions. A lot of times if they can get that in balance then they're going to see academic success."

— Meghan Diemel: pcfeatures@postcrescent.com

Yoga classes for kids

Yoga classes are offered throughout the Fox Valley for children at locations including:

Empower Yoga: 103 W. College Ave., Appleton; 920-850-9396, www.empowerappleton.com/childrens_classes

Lotus Yoga: 611 N. Lynndale Drive, Appleton; 920-540-8112, <http://lotuspoweryoga.com>

Pure Vida Yoga: 2416 West Nordale Drive, Appleton; 920-851-1084, <http://puravidayogallc.com/classes>

YMCA of the Fox Cities: 920-739-6135, www.ymcafoxcities.org

Yoga Circle: Julie Vosters offers classes (for 12 years plus) hosted through Appleton Parks and Recreation Department, www.julievosters.com/classes/details.php

Forever Young Family Yoga: W6328 Lilac Lane, Greenville; 414-803-2224, www.fyfyoga.com

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