



## Yoga for Children & Adolescents

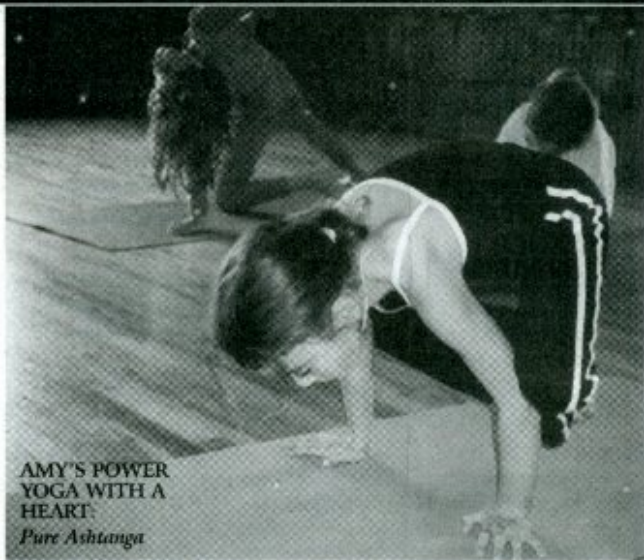
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**Y**OGA PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY AWARE OF THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF YOGA PRACTICE, INCLUDING STRESS-REDUCTION, PHYSICAL BENEFITS (SUCH AS INCREASED FLEXIBILITY, STRENGTH, ENDURANCE, AND BALANCE) AND MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS. Yoga classes for children and adolescents are also becoming more common. Children benefit from yoga in similar ways to adults. Studies have shown that yoga can develop stronger and more flexible bodies, reduce stress, increase concentration, improve mental alertness, increase self-esteem and assertiveness, decrease hyperactivity, anger, and behavioral problems, improve academic/cognitive performance, increase self-discipline, and reduce depression, anxiety, insomnia, and nightmares.

Yoga provides children and adolescents with a holistic education since it integrates and develops the mind, body, breath, and spirit. It is fun and enjoyable for young people because they often like to do new things with their bodies. A healthy body and a relaxed, focused state of mind prepare children and adolescents to learn. Physically-oriented practices such as relaxation and yoga are a natural method of teaching children about their emotions because children regularly manifest their emotional states in a physical manner. Yoga helps young people learn to monitor and work with their energy levels. Yoga can also teach youth to respect and listen to their own bodies, tuning in to their needs and learning from their own inherent wisdom. Yoga is one way to help children and adolescents deal with mental and emotional stress, manage their behavior, and learn cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution. It is a fun and natural way of strengthening children's abilities to concentrate and solve problems. In a world in which there is increasing pressure and anxiety, it is useful to teach young people to respond to and handle stress. Yoga can help calm children down on a mental level and channel their energy on a physical level.

Because there are distinct and cumulative benefits to the various yoga practices, look for a teacher for your children who is certified in a complete and systematic yoga method that includes the full spectrum of traditional yoga practices. At a minimum, this includes instruction in yoga postures, rhythmic breathing practices, deep relaxation, and beginning meditation practices. It may also include practices to enhance concentration, visualizations, mudra (practices to build focus through hand gestures, eye movements, and body postures), mantra (chanting), and other yoga practices. Some yoga classes for children may include yoga-based games, stories and/or the introduction of concepts such as sharing, community, non-violence, and self-esteem.

Although many practices are best taught by an experienced teacher, here are a few simple practices to try with your children.



AMY'S POWER  
YOGA WITH A  
HEART  
*Pure Ashtanga*

Diaphragmatic breathing practices will promote relaxation, healthy breathing, and a calm mind. Begin with Natural Breath. Breathe in and allow the air to come all the way to the bottom of the lungs. Feel the belly area expand like a balloon, giving more room for air inside the lungs. Breathe out and let the belly area flatten as the air is let out. After several rounds, transition to Complete Breath. Breathe in, filling the bottom, middle, and top of the lungs. Fill the lungs with as much air as they can comfortably hold. Breathe very smoothly. Breathe out slowly until all of the air is let out of the lungs. Breathe in and out at the same calm speed. Continue for several breaths. Feel relaxed. Feel the energy flowing to your whole body. Children may enjoy placing their hands or lightweight toys on their stomachs to feel and see how the breath causes their bellies to lower and lift.

Many children find it challenging to be still and quiet. They are naturally more active and benefit greatly from short, flowing sequences of postures. Teaching a child to meditate is likely to involve more active concentration practices than with adults. For example, you could instruct your child to choose an object of concentration. Encourage your child to learn from their experience and from nature. Help your child learn to meditate by suggesting that they see pictures inside their mind's eye. See the ocean. Watch the waves come and go, just like thoughts in the mind come and go. See a river and how the water flows around all blockages in its path. See animals playing and feel their joy. See the wide blue sky. Feel your mind as expansive as the sky.

Slightly older children and adolescents may experience greater ease concentrating and meditating. They can be encouraged to engage in practices that challenge their identification with both the changing outer and inner worlds. You can teach them, for example, to watch thoughts and feelings like they are watching a TV screen or a movie. Let thoughts come in and out of the mind. Notice and explore how there is an inner playground in the mind. Yoga has many benefits for young people and it can also be fun! ▲

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