

## NEVER TOO YOUNG FOR YOGA

### Kids benefit from the activity and calm of movement

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The children are resting peacefully, their little heads plopped down upon the plush carpet.

But their bodies are scrunched up — their torsos folded over their knees, their arms tucked between their legs.

Maybe this is how contortionists sleep.

Or maybe it's just yoga for kids.

In this case, the children at First Unitarian Church of Toledo are demonstrating a yoga pose called "sleeping mouse." The moment of crumpled tranquility soon passes and the group moves on to the next pose.

Hyper, wiggly kids may not seem a natural fit for the meditative calm of yoga, an ancient system of exercises for the mind and body, but certified instructor Katie Ingersoll who leads this class said in some ways it's actually easier to work with kids.

"Babies do 30 to 40 yoga poses even before they're born. I found baby pictures of me and I was doing yoga poses," she said. "[Kids] don't have this preprogramming of 'I'm not flexible. I can't do yoga,'" "

With 16.5 million people in the United States practicing yoga, according to a 2005 study by the magazine *Yoga Journal*, it was only a matter of time before kids got into the mix.

"In the last couple of years, we've really seen an increase in terms of kids yoga classes," said Dayna Macy, communications director of *Yoga Journal*, which is based in San Francisco.

"I think that the increase in yoga for kids is to help them cope with stress," she explained. "It also helps them with sleep issues, it helps with conflict resolution, and it's a lot of fun."

Marsha Wenig, co-founder of YogaKids International, based in Indiana, knows there is plenty of interest out there. She's written *YogaKids: Educating the Whole Child Through Yoga* (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2003), sold about 300,000 instructional videos and DVDs, and trained thousands of instructors.

Her philosophy is to take traditional yoga poses and concepts and make them fun and accessible.

"You can teach yoga to children like they're little adults, but I don't think that's what turns the kids on to yoga as a lifestyle," she said.

Kids practicing yoga tend to be more playful than adults, who often arrive more serious and meditative, according to Michele Baran a certified yoga instructor at Lotus Yoga Center in Sylvania Township.

"It's just more fun and energetic," she said.

Certified yoga instructor Jenn McCullough started classes for Toledo-area youngsters several years ago with participants as young as 3 and has altered her teaching style accordingly.



Yoga instructor Katei Ingersoll, center, leads Ruthie Hernandez, front, and Margaret Strickler in a pose during kids' yoga classes at the First Unitarian Church. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

“We take all of the yoga poses that you see adults doing, and they’re modified for kids or we use special names for them to make them more accessible,” she said.

“The biggest difference in the classes is that we have to change gears pretty quickly with the kids,” she continued. “The children learn to be still, then we have movement, then there’s an activity that encourages them to be still and focused, and then we get silly.”



Estelle Casper, 7, front, works on the warrior stance as yoga instructor Jenn McCullough watches in a children’s class at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

In one hour-long session, they might go from a calming “bell meditation,” which requires them to raise a hand when they can no longer hear a bell’s fading tone, to a high-energy version of Red Light Green Light that involves doing a yoga pose at every stop.

At Ms. Ingersoll’s class one morning, the group warmed up by grabbing marbles from the floor with their toes and wriggling through a hula hoop while their hands were linked together.

Then she placed numerous stuffed animals on the floor, each associated with a particular pose. The kids delighted in trying exercises named after the squirrel, bat, deer, jelly fish, and more.

First Unitarian Church offers the classes as part of its effort to introduce kids to spiritual and religious practices from around the world. The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word, yuj, which means to join.

“The kids love it,” said the Rev. Lynn Kerr, the church’s minister of lifespan religious education. “They are very interested in the positions and what they’re called and what they might do for people.”

Even after they go home, the lessons remain. Advocates say it can help with sports and flexibility, as well as schoolwork and concentration.

Angelina Casile, 9, who takes yoga with Ms. Ingersoll, said she likes to do the down-facing dog and the cobra poses on her own because “it makes my back feel better and I can move a little faster.”

That’s exactly the kind of thing that makes Ms. Wenig, of YogaKids, so optimistic.

“You can integrate yoga into any part of a child’s day at any age,” she said. “That’s the great gift.”

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