

An Introduction to *Yoga Calm for Children*

An excerpt from *Yoga Calm for Children: Educating the Heart, Mind, and Body* by Lynea Gillen, MS, and Jim Gillen, RYT The children tumble into the room, full of energy and enthusiasm. They look around, making sure everything is in its place. Yes, the teacher is here. The music is playing and the mats are being laid out in the same careful way that they are every week.

The kids take off their shoes, then rush to play Mat Tag as they wait for the others to arrive. Then, on "five, four, three, two, one," they are all in their places on their mats, lying on their backs with their hands on their stomachs. Their breaths make their bellies rise up and down - little mountains, rising and falling.

Ah, stillness. After a full day of school, they now have a chance to rest, to turn inward, to listen to the rhythms of their own bodies. Then they roll forward and back a few times, ending seated in a cross-legged position with their hands together at their hearts. They breathe in, then take their hands up over their heads. As they exhale, they slowly extend their arms out to the sides and back to their hearts. It's like a beautiful dance, how their arms and their breaths move together. A thoughtful peace falls over the room.

After a few rounds, they shut their eyes and imagine someone or something to whom they would like to send their heart-thoughts. As they inhale and bring their arms over their heads, they hold the image of that person in their minds, and as they exhale and their arms go out to the sides, they send that person the thoughts from their hearts. The magic deepens. The movement slows down. Their intention behind their movements is obvious.

After three more breaths, they share. Joe says, "I sent my thoughts to my brother in Iraq."

"I'm sorry," says Heather. "I'll send your brother heart-thoughts next time."

"Me, too," says Juan. "That would be hard. I hope he doesn't get hurt."

Joe nods and says, "Me, too. I send him power every single day because he is very important to me."

Another student, Steven, shares that he has sent his thoughts to his friend Juan, who sits next to him. Juan's big, brown eyes widen with surprise. He looks at Steven and then down at the ground as he thanks him. A few moments later, Juan asks if we can do Volcano Breath one more time. We do, and Juan sends his kind thoughts to Steven. Steven looks him in the eye and thanks him.

A few more students share their thoughts and feelings. Then we move into a more physical practice, the students standing at the front of their mats in Mountain, a simple yoga pose. They feel the strength in their bodies. With their feet anchored to the ground and their heads lifting toward the sky, they imagine themselves as strong as mountains. They close their eyes and think of someone in their lives who they want to be strong for.

"My little sister," says Heather.

"My mom," Steven says.

"My iguana," says Freddie.

"My brother," Joe adds.

Fueled by their intention to be strong for those they love - their parents, siblings, pets; their friends and other family members - we move into a linked series of yoga poses that strengthens and stretches the whole body.

After a few rounds, individual students step to the front mat and lead the others in the flow. They remind each other to stay strong. They compliment one another, listen to one another, and move in unison toward greater physical, emotional, and mental strength.

Next we play Trust Walk and Sensory Adventure, a game designed to develop personal awareness, sensitivity, and trust. The children laugh, surprise each other, and have the chance to be light and playful. They love the opportunity to play with their teacher. Everyone is learning.

Toward the end of class, the students do a few gentle twists and more Belly Breathing to calm their bodies again. We finish with a relaxation process - in this case, a guided story that includes characters and places requested by the students. These are woven into the story to help develop imagination and integrate the children's class experiences.

Joe asks to have his brother in the story, while Juan asks for a fire-breathing dragon. Freddie wants his iguana there. As the teacher begins the tale, she tells the children that they will each find a special gift in the story, or meet a friend who has an important note for them. The students lie rapt in attention, each waiting for their image to form. Afterward, they share their thoughts and feelings.

"My brother was there, and he told me that he missed me," Joe says.

"How did that feel?" the teacher asks.

"Good," he says and smiles.

When children are given the opportunity to come to stillness and share from their hearts, beautiful things begin to happen. They cultivate their own compassion and sensitivity and begin caring deeply for one another. In our Yoga Calm classes, we are reminded over and over again of the inherent goodness in children. And we become acutely aware of our responsibility as adults to protect, guide, and develop that goodness.

Our Story

The seeds of Yoga Calm were planted in each of us years ago, when we were teens. Jim was 16 when introduced to yoga through his study of the martial arts. An energetic and highly active young man, he found that the practice helped him achieve focus and discipline. At the same age, Lynea discovered yoga at a church camp on the shores of beautiful Lake Tahoe. Having experienced some crucial losses early in life, she found through the practice a place of healing and inner peace.

When we met in an African dance class in 1995, we were each excited to have found a partner who shared our love of yoga and set out to pursue our practice together. At the time, Jim had just left the business world for a more fulfilling job that blended his lifelong interests in sports, science, and the outdoors: directing a National Science Foundation environmental education program for children. Lynea had been working with children of all ages for years, as an educator in a variety of settings and then as a counselor in the public schools. As she continued this work that she still does today, Jim decided to act on our shared desire to bring yoga to others. He built our studio, Still Moving Yoga, and began teaching full time.

Yoga Calm sprouted at the beginning of the new millennium, appropriately enough, when the "behavior classroom" at Lynea's school was moved into the building where she worked. The group consisted of twelve boys, all of whom had extreme behavioral issues that made it impossible for them to manage in regular classrooms. Some had been diagnosed with severe ADHD, while others had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Autism. Some came from traumatic backgrounds. As their counselor, Lynea observed how hard it was for them to sit in group and share. She felt they needed opportunities to manage and direct their strong feelings and impulses - like those of the young boy she saw one day crouch under a table in a fetal position, screaming, "Help me! Can anyone please help me?!" This child's obvious pain touched her deeply. She wanted to help him find peace in his small body. She could see the trauma he physically held, how his instinct to protect himself drove him under the table - a common way for wounded children to self-soothe.

Through her own yoga and counseling, Lynea had learned to listen to the body and the heart to find a path toward healing. When the body opens, emotions can be released, and the body and heart grow strong together. She wanted to help the students find such. She believed that a practice that was both physically and emotionally supportive could help these boys and others like them.

Daily, Lynea would come home with stories of such children. We would have long talks about the students and how we could use yoga to help them learn the things that have helped us in our individual journeys toward healing and inner peace. Lynea began to incorporate physical yoga activities into her work with the kids, reporting on the effects each evening. Jim, as a self-described ADHD adult, was a good listener and creative in developing games and activities. Occasionally, he'd come out to the school, and together, we'd try out these activities with the kids. The student's loved Jim's playful nature,

strength, and enthusiasm as he showed them new poses - "yoga tricks," as they called them.

Still, it wasn't easy. In fact, teaching yoga to behavior-disordered children started out as a nightmare. The kids didn't listen. They fought over the mats. They whined that it was too hard. At one point, Lynea wanted to just give up, but thanks to the encouragement and support of the behavior class' teacher, Carla Austin, we kept on. And after a while, we began to see a change in the students. They started to show greater ability to be still. They began to show compassion and support for one another. Some students would come in to practice yoga during their lunch recess. Something was beginning to shift.

It took time to learn how to effectively and successfully blend the two practices of physical yoga and social/emotional skills-building. Some days, the yoga would stimulate a great deal of emotion, and the group would spend most of their time processing their feelings. Other days, the students wanted only to do physical poses, and little emotion was addressed. Lynea began to trust the group process and began to find ways to direct the poses so students were able to maintain a sense of control when emotions emerged. Over time, the community of the classroom grew. The students gradually became more skilled at directing their own emotion and helping one another through it. Lynea recalls one day when they asked to do a series of poses in complete silence and insisted that this meant that she had to stay quiet, as well. It was a beautiful experience, watching them all move together. They had come a long way.

Challenges Facing Children Today

When the fragile beauty of children's open hearts and minds are presented to us, we understand how important it is to provide them with a safe and supportive environment, the tools for self-discovery, and the skills they will need to maneuver successfully through life. Unfortunately, not everyone in our culture holds children's lives sacred. As counselors, teachers and parents, we regularly encounter the negative effects of shattered and chaotic environments. It is painful to sit with a child who has been sexually molested or physically abused. It is maddening to see and hear about the violent media that adults create and sell, perpetuating a climate of fear and hostility.

Counselors for children are often asked some interesting questions: You're doing support groups for kids? Isn't that a little young to start psychoanalyzing them? What kind of issues can a five year old child have? The answers silence those who ask such things: the children have been removed from their home and are in foster care; her father died in a car accident; his little brother died from AIDS.

Tragedy can come at any age. When it does, it is vital to have a community of support and the skills necessary to move through the pain.

Often overlooked because it seems so commonplace now, divorce is another traumatic source of emotional loss for children. With over half of marriages ending in divorce and the number of single-parent households doubling since 1960, divorce is second only to

death as a significant stressor in children's lives. The emotional cost is profound, with affected children losing, on average, a grade year and a half of academics. And while the federal government spends billions of dollars trying to improve individual math and reading scores, with modest results, up to 30% of students are dropping out of high school in what's been painted as a portrait of emotional disengagement.

The disengagement is also a physical one, with the percentage of students in daily PE classes declining from 42% in 1991 to 33% in 2005. This has happened as schools have cut back or eliminated gym to squeeze in more time for core academics and the strict demands of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. This flies in the face of research showing that higher levels of fitness are associated with higher academic achievement, enhanced self-esteem, and reduced feelings of depression and anxiety. Instead, the imbalanced focus on academics has left in its wake merely modest academic results, as well as obesity rates that, since 1980, have doubled for children and tripled for teens.

Contributing to the health, academic, and emotional stressors facing children are the rising levels of electronic media consumption - violent media, especially. According to one study, by the age of 18, the average teen has spent nearly 16,000 hours in front of the television - compared to just 13,000 hours in the classroom - viewing thousands of violent acts in the process. Indeed, and sadly, violence is a big part of such media's appeal - and its insidiousness. Increased viewing of television and video games has been linked to increases in obesity and anti-social behavior, loss of quality sleep and the accompanying increase of health problems, and decreases in reading scores. Meanwhile, with ever more external stimulation, children's imaginations languish.

The Need for Balanced Education

Of course the focus on academic learning is important, but something is clearly wrong when it comes at the expense of children's emotional and physical well-being. The truth is, for children to truly thrive, all aspects must be addressed. And when they are, they are mutually supportive. We see this, for instance, in the well-documented benefits of physical activity on fitness, learning and emotional health. And new research shows what we have intuitively known for years: that the reduction of stress and the development of social/emotional skills and a sense of well-being have corresponding health and academic benefits. Consider the following:

A growing body of literature suggests that a deliberate and comprehensive approach to teaching children social and emotional skills can raise their grades and test scores, bolster their enthusiasm for learning, reduce behavior problems, and enhance the brain's cognitive functions.

Because the emotional centers of the brain are very connected to the thinking and learning centers of the brain, we know that people who are better able to control their emotions and moods are more effective learners.

Academic achievement among eighth grade students could be better predicted from knowing the children's social competence five years earlier than from knowing their third grade academic achievement.

Pro-social behaviors exhibited by students in the classroom were found to be better predictors of academic achievement than were their standardized test scores.

School interventions that increase social and emotional competence result in higher achievement levels, although the reverse is not true (i.e. academic enrichment does not increase social responsibility).

Studies dating back to the 1960's show that high anxiety cripples test-taking and academic performance.

In challenging times, new opportunities for growth arise. School inclusion, cultural diversity, technology, changing family structures, environmental changes, and the like are driving Western civilization toward a new awareness of our interconnectedness and the importance of holistic solutions. At issue is the need to reduce children's stress while balancing academics with more support and training in physical and emotional health.

Yoga Calm

To address this need for a balanced approach, Yoga Calm melds the traditional hatha yoga practices of mindfulness, physical poses, and nervous system regulation with social/emotional skills development and emotional support and guidance. The yoga helps them become more aware of their bodies, how to treat them well and make healthy life choices. The cognitive skills develop mental strength, positive self-concepts, and imagination. The social/emotional training and guidance allows them to tell their stories, feel and express their emotions, and learn to give and receive support.

By this kind of integrated approach, the whole child is served, educators become more effective, and schools become more efficient at addressing competing curriculum demands.

Additionally, Yoga Calm's focus on principles instead of procedures provides opportunities for children with different capabilities to participate together in the same classroom. This simultaneously empowers both students and teachers to creatively respond to what is needed in the present moment. Yoga Calm principles aim to equip children with the skills, self-understanding, and self-confidence they need to thrive in the modern world.

This integrated and principle-based approach also supports the health and wellness of school staff-providing them opportunities to participate in yoga, stress-reduction and wellness activities. The meaning of the word yoga is to "unite," and Yoga Calm's goal is

to support the complete health and wellness of children as well as their teachers, families and communities.

It is from the support our community that we have developed the games and activities described herein to help children find a positive path in life. And as our teachers gave to us, so we give. We recognize the beauty and promise of children, and are committed to drawing out their unique gifts and thus being true to the Latin root of the word "education": educere, meaning "to lead out."

This book is our gift and an offering of hope and support to children and to those who work to protect and enhance their lives.