

Yoga for Children

by

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We tell children to think before acting, count to ten, or sit in time-out. All of these behaviors are an attempt to calm emotions. There is a much more effective way to teach children to modify their emotional responses and to physiologically calm or enliven the body. The breath is the only place in the body where the voluntary and involuntary systems can meet. The breath can profoundly affect the autonomic nervous system. This was first documented through the research of Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard Medical School and explained in his book, The Relaxation Response, published in 1975. Dr. Benson continues today to lead research into its efficacy in counteracting the harmful effects of stress. In the East, the power of the breath has been known to, and practiced by, yogis for centuries before Dr. Benson's work. Children can easily and delightfully learn breath awareness and breathing techniques through yoga.

Brahmari (the Bee) is a practice that mimics the sound of a buzzing bee. Begin by sitting erect in a chair so that the chest and abdomen are "open". Imagine that you are a bee in a beautiful garden. (Take the time to allow the children to fully image the bee, the garden, color, time of day, smells, sounds, etc.) Simply observe the bee as you do the following:

- Close the lips throughout the practice, but leave the mouth cavity open in the back, in the area of the throat.
- Breathe in fully.
- As you breath out, simply make the sound of a buzzing bee, as you exhale through the nostrils. Pushing in at the upper abdomen, while allowing the chest to remain relatively still, accomplishes the exhalation.
- Be aware of the vibration in the throat, the mouth, the cheeks, and the lips. You will hear the sound from within.
- After the buzzing exhalation, then silently inhale through the nostrils, leaving the lips closed, and allowing the lower ribs to flare out slightly.
- Again, be aware of the feel and listen to the sound.
- Do this practice aloud for about two minutes, then practice silently for about two minutes, making no external sound and not allowing the vocal cords to vibrate. Just imagine internally that you are hearing the sound.

Benefits and effects:

- The body is relaxed.
- The breath is automatically smooth, slow, and with no jerks or pauses.
- The mind remains alert, calm, gently focused and free from chatter.
- Any student who wishes to calm his emotions in order to make wise decisions can do this practice silently.

Brahmari is a wonderful activity for pre-test or pre-game jitters, for preparing the mind to focus, and for bringing children back their senses if they get too "wild".

Peace Breath, from the YogaKids curriculum, is a favorite of the children who have been in my classes. The children come to the room happy, scattered, playful, upset and quarreling, tired, you-name-it. To begin our yoga session, we sit on the floor in a circle, held hands together and raise them above our heads with a full in-breath. As the hands are slowly lowered, the out-breath sings a soft, long “peace”. They are then magically quiet and ready for the lesson. The children love the peace breath and ask for it. Who doesn’t like to feel calm and centered?

Postures in yoga mimic animals, plants and natural features. That’s a natural for children! Choose animals that live in your area and ask the children to imitate that animal through posturing. Do any of those animals ever stand on one leg? In Florida, we have Flamingos and Blue Heron. When a child imitates a balanced bird, the ability to focus is strengthened. Balance and focus go together. If you can’t think of a balancing animal in your area, be a **tree**. Use the following directions to prepare for all balance postures.

- Stand like a **mountain** with feet pointed straight ahead and directly under the hips. The shoulders are directly above the hips, arms raised above the shoulders. This takes some doing for some children because they have little body awareness. Take time for them to reflect.
- Move the navel over the left foot and ask them what happened to the weight-shift on the feet. It frees up the right foot.
- Focus on a tree if you are in a room with a window or focus on something that does not move in the room.
- Lift the right foot and place it on the inner left leg.
- The left leg is the trunk. The arms are the branches.
- What kind of tree are they? Where are they growing? Who lives in their branches? How deep are the roots? Can the wind blow the branches while the trunk stays firm?

Benefits:

- Enhances balance of mind/body, coordinating bi-lateral functioning.
- Increases ability to focus attention and clear the mind.
- Strengthens standing leg.

Some children are nearly always on “output” (talking, grasping, moving) and rarely on “input” (listening, watching, processing new information). Balance postures are a wonderful activity to begin training such children to be aware of their internal functioning, to bring attention and information in as well as directing it outward. Balance is not easy for them so notice slight gains as they occur.