

namaste, kid

Adults aren't the only ones who are stressed. Find out how yoga can help calm little minds. **BY LISA EVANS**

EVERY DAY, FOUR-YEAR-OLD YASMINA Seyfaie rolls out her mini yoga mat and folds her body into animal shapes alongside her mom, Eliane Bejjani, in their Mississauga, Ont., home. It all started when Yasmina was a year and a half and began mimicking poses Bejjani was showing her husband to help with his lower back pain. "Now, every morning we wake up and she says, 'Mommy, let's go do yoga,'" says Bejjani. In addition to being a bonding activity, Bejjani says yoga has taught her daughter patience and discipline. "Any time she's having a tantrum or is upset or crying, I tell her to take deep breaths in and out, just like she does in yoga."

Yoga for kids is becoming increasingly common, popping up in physical education programs and daycares and being added to the repertoire of yoga studios. While the physical benefits—improving flexibility, strength and coordination—are certainly part of its charm, yoga is increasingly used as a relaxation technique to help anxious kids combat the stresses of everyday life. A study at Harvard Medical School showed yoga was a beneficial tool supporting adolescent mental health.

Toronto-based child and adolescent psychiatrist M. Lee Freedman says she has seen an increase in stress-related conditions in children over the past 10 years.

"Kids need better coping skills today because they have more to deal with than in the past," says Freedman, who blames this phenomenon on social issues like more stress on families, information overload, reduced downtime caused by the overscheduling of activities and greater pressure to succeed academically. "There has been a devaluing of quiet time and an overvaluing of productive time to the point where people are doing way more and living less in the moment."



CORBIS

PHOTO: CORBIS ILLUSTRATIONS: ALEX MATHERS

W
stress
kids
such
ache
brain
of em
that
still
conn
when
pract
they
thei
affec
C
Tem
kids
Toro
class
laun
after
party
"play
was t
1997
grou
lives
in ar
Re
alteri
daug



While both adults and kids internalize stress, Freedman says it often manifests in kids physically, resulting in health issues such as insomnia, stomach aches, headaches and mood swings. "The parts of their brain that are responsible for the regulation of emotions and processing all of the things that are necessary for managing stress are still developing," she says. Yoga helps kids connect with their bodies and recognize when they're anxious. "When children are practising any kind of mind-body activity, they're noticing how their mind is affecting their body, and how their body is affecting their mind."

Certified Iyengar yoga instructor Temmi Ungerman Sears pioneered the kids' yoga movement in Canada. Her Toronto studio was the first to offer yoga classes to children as young as five. Sears launched the YogaBuds for Kids program after throwing a yoga-themed birthday party for her son, Jeremy, who had been "playing yoga" with her from the time he was two. Since launching the program in 1997, Sears says she's seen first-hand the grounding effects of yoga in children's lives. "It gives them a feeling of stability in an unstable world," she says.

Raquel Cader has seen the positive mood-altering effects of yoga in her 12-year-old daughter, Natalie, who has been attending

classes for five years. "Sometimes it's like dropping off one kid at the beginning of class and picking up a different one," she says. "She's more relaxed and her perspective is often changed."

Cader hopes yoga will provide Natalie with relaxation tactics she can use when faced with difficult situations that might otherwise send her into panic mode. "I kind of think of it as a 'control-alt-delete' for the mind," says Cader.

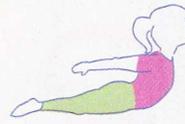
Sears says many of her young students have used the techniques they've learned in yoga in times of stress. "I've had children tell me that before a test they'll chant the 'om.' It calms them down and brings them into a focused place."

The non-competitive nature of yoga also helps foster a sense of acceptance among kids and their peers. "There's no playoff tournament," says Cader.

Of course, there are also the physical benefits of yoga to consider. From easing muscle tension and improving circulation and flexibility to juicing joints that can get stiff from sitting in school or in front of the TV, yoga is a powerful tool for boosting your children's overall well-being. And with fun names for positions derived from nature and animals, it almost seems that this ancient practice was tailor-made for kids. ■

pose-y animals

No time to get to a yoga class? Here are some fun classic moves you can do with your kids.



SNAKE

- Lying face down with your legs, feet and belly on the floor, arms behind your back, hands clasped and fingers interlocked, lift your chest and hiss like a snake.



FLAMINGO

- Begin standing with your feet together.
- Extend your arms out like wings, fold forward and kick your left leg straight behind you.
- Return your leg to the ground and arms to your side and repeat with your opposite leg.
- Squawk and flap your wings, but stay balanced!



CAMEL

- Lean on your knees, with your feet hip-width apart.
- Place your hands on your hips and take a deep breath.
- While exhaling, arch your back while holding your hips and thighs upright.
- Lean back and place your hands on your heels, allowing your head to fall back.



FROG

- Stand with your feet hip-width apart.
- Bend at the knees to a squat and place hands between your feet.
- Rock your weight slightly forward and pop up, coming off your hands and feet while making a ribbit sound.



BUTTERFLY POSE

- Sitting on the ground, bend your knees and bring your feet together.
- Wrap your hands around your feet and press your knees toward the floor.
- Flap your "wings" by lifting and lowering your legs.



RECLINED BUTTERFLY POSE

- With your legs in butterfly pose and your arms stretched out at your sides, place a rolled blanket on the floor under your upper back and lie down on it. This opens your chest so your heart and lungs receive more oxygen and slows down your heart rate, which helps drop your body temperature and quiets your mind.