



Star pose

## Teaching Yoga to Children: Natural Spirituality

by Jackie O'Hara

I have been teaching Yoga to children, ages two through thirteen, for about six years. It has been a path full of unexpected discovery for me as I have seen time and again, through hundreds of children, the emergence of a child's natural spontaneous spirituality.

Yoga is a practice of breathing, traditional physical poses, and relaxation or meditation. I feel it is essential to include all of these aspects in my children's classes. Parents of children in the classes always ask me about the poses, because these are the most familiar. But what I have seen with the children is that they enjoy the breathing, poses and relaxation all equally.

It's almost as if the child realizes that the Yoga class is a place where their spirit can shine, that it is not only permitted, but essential. Of course this is a subconscious realization in the youngest of children, but once they let it loose, they fully embrace it.

An example is the peace that begins to form in the group around the third week of class. For the opening and closing ritual of class I always teach a short, quiet song called "Shanti", which means peace in Sanskrit.

The first week the children kind of stare at me because the song has a different tone than the usual preschool sing-song music. The tone is deeply reverent, like a church song. The second week they are still looking at me in a funny way, but joining in. By the third week they are singing it with reverence. Yes, three and four year olds! This caught my attention right away.

Sometimes parents who are not familiar with Yoga will say, "Oh yes, Jane takes dance/skating/gymnastics lessons too." It is important for me to share that their child's Yoga time is different - more than a physical practice. After all, it is body, spirit and mind.

The children are drawn to all three aspects equally. But along with the parents, I also approached Yoga at first with my eye on the postures. The athletic side of my own self was attracted to the challenge of Tree, Dancer or Pigeon Pose. Through the body, my mind and spirit joined into a full Yoga practice over time.

The children, however, "get it" pretty quickly. Within a couple of classes, three and four year olds are sitting eagerly waiting to learn a new posture: Downward Dog, Cat/Cow, Chair, whatever it is, they do it.

Sometimes they become frustrated. I always hear "I can't do it!" when teaching Tree the first week.

One-legged balance can be hard for young children. But their Downward Dogs are natural and inspiring to me.



The Tree

At times in the group, my mind will flash to my own adult Yoga experiences. In certain settings it has taken me weeks to get my mind off the other people in the room, and into my own body. I am too quick to compare my crooked Triangle to the perfect one next to me. Or just as bad, I think my Shoulder Stand is straighter. My time is too precious to be spent comparing myself during class, so I have found that my best and most spiritual Yoga practice is done alone.

The children on the other hand, compare in a factual way: "You're not doing that right!" a four will say to a five. The rebuffed child will usually look around and try again, ever willing to try again to get it right, as young children will.



Downward Dog

But my deepest amazement lies in their interest in breathing exercises and their attraction to relaxation. The children in the first groups I taught showed me how much children need true relaxation time. I would see them wiggling and squirming for a few minutes until they would give in to the music or silence. As the weeks went by, they would relax more and more quickly.

I realized that, like adults, even children are forgetting how to relax. Their limited "down time" is full of either structured and directed activities led by adults or time when adults are busy and the children are involved in electronic and passive activities. I realized children need to be taught to relax just as modern adults need to be taught.

With the older children, I talk straight up about stress, and that breathing and relaxation are also healthy things we need to do, like eating nutritious foods and drinking water. After loosening up with breathing exercises, and having fun with a round of postures, the child is finally ready to let the spirit

float a little with them on the mat.

At first the thought of children needing to be shown how to relax depressed me, but now I feel it is a mission. I always ask my group at the end of the last session, "What was your favorite thing about Yoga?" Yes, many will always say, "The Lion pose!" or "Butterfly!" But I also hear, time after time, year after year, "Relaxation time!"

Jackie O'Hara is a certified Children's Yoga Teacher who also works as Teacher/Director of Wellfleet Montessori Preschool. She has a background as a Child and Family Therapist.

In addition to working with children for years, Jackie has worked as a naturalist and loves the outdoors. She lives in Brewster with her husband, two teenaged sons and Black Lab.

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Namaste!



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