

Kids get health benefit from yoga

April 23 2009, By Megha Satyanarayana

When Alayna Kurek panicked one day about forgotten homework, the 9-year-old stunned her school counselor by using a yoga breathing technique to calm down.

That stress-relief method is a reason Sherri Kurek said she takes her two children, Alayna and Olivia, 7, to classes for kids at the [Yoga Studio of Shelby](#).

"It's the one thing they stick with," said Kurek, an in-home transcriptionist from Shelby Township, Mich.

Alayna gets exercise, going from downward-facing dog position to cobra to frog. And her improved confidence shows when she teaches her classmates how to pretzel up, Kurek said.

Karen Lutz, who teaches child yoga classes at Providence Hospital in Novi, Mich., said, "A 4-year-old -- they have a short attention span. They really don't care where their feet are." But as younger yogis mature, she said, "They want to know, 'Where do my feet go?'"

University of Michigan pediatrician Dolores Mendelow says yoga, if done properly, is a suitable alternative to tumbling and team sports for getting stressed-out, sedentary children socializing, exercising and building discipline.

"It requires practice, patience and accepting of self-limitations," she said.

Second-grader Mya Sornig, 8, practiced a new sun salutation recently in Jane Schwab's class at Yoga Studio of Shelby. In a circle with the Kurek sisters and studio owner Lisa Tokarz's two children, Schwab, a retired schoolteacher and certified yoga instructor, said, "Lift your left toe like you're warming your toes in the sun."

Mya pushed her left leg into the air, and wobbled, which mom Jennifer Sornig of Sterling Heights, said is a reason to trek to the studio. A physical therapist, she knows a strong abdomen can stave off back and posture problems.

A preliminary study of pediatric health benefits of yoga, published in 2008, finds motor skills and concentration improvements, on top of better posture and breathing.

At Providence Hospital, yoga is integrated into strength-building exercises for children with Down syndrome and cerebral palsy, who often lack muscle tone and breathe weakly. Parents help, said therapist Annmarie Dempsey.

"The younger kids, with most yoga poses, we try to find a name that relates to the pose to make it fun," she said.

Yoga stretching and body alignment can create a better athlete, said Michigan State University strength coach Mike Vorkapich. Players use back and arm movements to improve strokes and pitches, he said.

Listening improves too, said Jennifer Hayes, an MSU yoga teacher. She sometimes teaches without demonstrating postures. She hears this all the time: "Wow, this is harder than I thought."

YOGA PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN

Yoga Ed is a national company that develops yoga-based programs for children in schools or extracurricular settings. They offer certification for instructors and provide a directory by state. www.yogaed.com

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