

Yoga for Teens: A Valuable and Enduring Gift

Ever since I began doing yoga eight years ago, I have tried to instill in my daughters an appreciation for their body and an ability to go inside and calm themselves. One of my favorite sayings has been “You can’t control what happens to you in life, but you can control your reaction to it.” I am not sure where I first heard it, but there is something very empowering in that statement, the knowledge that we can in a very real way control how we approach life. In effect, we can create our own happiness. Yoga provides a great opportunity to teach this life lesson, and teenagers are often a receptive audience because they are trying to cope with life’s increasing demands on them.

A regular yoga practice can provide many physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits for teens. Yoga’s focus on the body, mind, and breath awareness helps strengthen muscles and improve flexibility, promotes relaxation and reduces stress, and boosts self-confidence and body awareness, important to a healthy lifestyle. The poses can help loosen teens’ tense muscles from team and aerobic sports, while the meditation and breathing exercises help them focus and calm the mind, promoting further relaxation. (Lyness) Another benefit for teens with yoga is that it is very low cost; besides the mat, no special equipment or clothes are needed, and it can be done anywhere at any time.

Yoga is a useful “life tool” for adolescents, which can help them blossom into their full potential with a healthy body, a calm

mind, and a belief in their own intrinsic worth. Yoga's eight components or "limbs," as described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, offer multiple ways to expose yoga philosophy and movement to adolescents. (Desikachar) Yoga, which means "union" or "yoke" in Sanskrit, looks to integrate postures (asana, 3rd limb) with breath work (pranayama, 4th limb) and meditation (dharana, dhyana, samadhi, limbs 6–8), all of which can be incorporated in a yoga practice for teens. The first two limbs of yoga, the yamas (how we relate to our environment) and the niyamas (how we relate to ourselves), respectively, are particularly useful for teens to understand as they begin to navigate the world on their own. Even a superficial understanding of the yogic mindsets of the brahmaviharas (loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity) in Yoga Sutra I.33 are also very helpful for teens because they provide a framework for dealing with the human emotions of jealousy and hostility.

Life for modern teens is highly scheduled and stressful, making them prime candidates for yoga's benefits. I see this in the lives of my own two teenage daughters. They worry about keeping up with their schoolwork, doing well on exams and placement tests, as well as fitting in with their peers, making friends, and understanding their changing bodies and fluctuating emotions. They are under pressure to take ever more demanding classes to be competitive for the best colleges and universities. Today's teens must juggle increasingly challenging academic courses, with a full schedule of extracurricular activities, like sports, clubs and volunteering, while still trying to find time to enjoy being a kid and have fun with friends. With such an overloaded schedule, what usually gets short changed is sleep, something teens need to keep their immune system functioning optimally. Teens need more sleep than when they were younger, optimally 9 ¼ hours per night, according to the National Sleep Foundation, to accommodate their

changing bodies and to rest from all their activities. (Carskadon) Given that most teens are not getting the recommended hours of sleep, it is no wonder our teens are stressed out, anxious and exhausted.

In addition to the stress of their schedules, teens are going through tremendous changes within their bodies and minds as they figure out their place in the world and find their voice. Teen girls, in particular, feel compelled to live up to an impossible beauty standard which the media portrays. Most teens begin pulling away from their parents to demonstrate their independence and increasingly turn to their friends for advice. Life becomes even more stressful for them if they are having a tough time fitting in with other teens, struggling academically, or beginning to date. Teens may feel that they aren't as smart, good-looking, or athletic as their peers and it is during these years that body image, particularly for teenage girls can become an issue.

A Blend of Physical and Emotional Benefits from Yoga

Given the pressures on teens today, it is not surprising that yoga has been identified as providing a number of health benefits for them. According to a recent article in Huffington Post, yoga can lower stress and improve your mood; boost confidence; lower the risk of injury; help you lose weight; increase flexibility; improve muscle tone and strength; benefit breathing and lower blood pressure; and improve your posture. (Joseph) One of the primary poses in yoga, downward facing dog, where your body is in the shape of a "V" with your hands and legs on the floor is thought to provide many benefits, such as strengthening the arms and legs, energizing the body and calming the mind. Most active teens engage in strenuous exercise, such as running and team sports like soccer, which involve a higher risk of injury and result in increased muscle tension and tight muscles. Yoga can help counteract those

effects by lengthening and strengthening the muscles and improving flexibility. Many yoga postures, such as downward dog or plank, improve upper body and core strength. Standing poses strengthen your legs and lower back. Beyond stretching your muscles, yoga makes movement in the joints smoother by stretching ligaments and tendons, which connect bone to bone and muscle to bone, respectively. Yoga's meditation techniques focus and quiet the mind, while relieving stress and making you feel more relaxed. The breathing practices also can help people to sleep better, increase lung capacity, and improve focus and energy for sports. This is an important health benefit for teens because it can translate into greater stamina and endurance in their various sports activities. When engaged in a regular yoga practice, teens also can improve their posture because of their strengthened core and lower back muscles; standing and walking tall also may help teens feel more confident, another added benefit. (Joseph)

A nationally known yoga teacher and author Thia Luby in her *Yoga for Teens* book talks about how various poses can help alleviate teen stresses in body and mind. (Luby) Twists and inversions stimulate the nerves along the spine, and all yoga poses help produce space between the vertebrae of the spine, because of the emphasis of getting length in the spine before moving into the pose. (Joseph) For teen boys, much of their physical activity helps to build up strength in their arms and legs but does nothing for flexibility; the muscles become stronger but tighter and shorter. Yoga helps to stretch and elongate the muscles. Teenage girls as they develop breasts can experience stress in their upper and lower back because of the added weight on the front of their torso. Chest opening poses, backbends, forward bends and inversions are all good to counteract this. Some poses can help ease menstrual cramps, while others can counteract headaches, irritability or insomnia, common adolescent woes. (Luby)

Some research shows that yoga is particularly beneficial to teenage girls, given the specific physical and hormonal changes taking place in their bodies. “This is a time when girls can feel ‘disembodied’” says Kim Weeks, RYT, founder of Boundless Yoga in Washington D.C. “They feel pressure to have the perfect body and perfect face.” (Harzog) Unless the girls are athletes, yoga may be the first time they experience the awesome strength of their bodies. Because yoga lowers stress and improves body awareness and body image, it can even help a teen lose weight. Stress can result in weight gain because when someone is stressed they often are not taking care of themselves by eating right, exercising, and getting adequate sleep and fluids. Teenage girls may overeat to help calm nerves or soothe social anxiety. That perspective can start to shift when they begin to practice yoga. Yoga encourages people to focus inward and honor their true essence. Much more than exercise, yoga is a way of “being” in your body that often ends up changing the way a person treats their body, what types of food they eat, and their self-image. When a teen begins to see their body as strong and flexible, they start to care for their body better. For me, once I started practicing yoga, I began to naturally want to nourish my body with good food and not overeat, which had always made me feel terrible physically and emotionally. My daughters also have each begun to think more critically about what they put into their bodies. I don’t limit or dictate what they eat but I make sure to have plenty of fruit and easy-to-eat raw vegetables in the house, along with healthy dips, such as peanut butter and hummus. My daughters’ favorite afterschool snack has long been mozzarella and tomato salad.

Yoga’s impact on the prevalence of eating disorders is inconclusive, suggesting more studies are needed. A 2005 study in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* noted that yoga may help women feel better about their bodies and help them avoid eating

disorders (Hitti). According to psychologist Jennifer Daubenmier, Ph.D., of California's Preventive Medicine Research Institute, women may have found a way through yoga to overcome the negative media messages that argue that only thin bodies are beautiful. The study examined two different age groups of women, those in their late 30s and those in college, and showed that those women who practiced yoga expressed healthier attitudes toward their bodies and had less disordered eating behaviors. This study also suggested that further research could show that yoga may help prevent and treat eating disorders. Yoga practitioners learn to tune in to the body as it moves through poses, which tends to emphasize the body's abilities, rather than its appearance. Given that anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorders are diseases that affect the mind and body, it is not surprising that yoga's focus on the mind-body connection would be beneficial. (National Institute of Mental Health) However, a study by the National Institutes of Health, which observed over 1000 men and women each over a ten year period looking for connections between mind-body activities like yoga and pilates with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (unhealthy weight control and binge eating) showed that there was no difference between the groups of yoga/pilates participants and non-participants, suggesting that even yoga students can be susceptible to eating disorders. (Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Wall)

Meditation and gentle yoga postures can slow the heart rate and have been linked to improving the immune system. (Health Benefits of Yoga Explained) Given how fast-paced teens are living their lives, getting an immune boost from yoga can really help protect them from getting run-down and sick. In a recent discussion of yoga's physical benefits on MedicineNet.com, the author noted that the physical benefits of yoga are just beginning to become known and are not yet fully documented. (Weill) For instance, Weill noted that there is some indication that yoga can

help lower blood pressure; in one study, blood pressure dropped slightly after three weeks of daily yoga while another study showed that one hour of daily yoga over eleven weeks could help control high blood pressure. The author also notes that there is some evidence to suggest that yoga may lower blood glucose, which is important for people with diabetes. The most persuasive study of young men and women (ages 18–27) showed that those who practiced twice daily yoga sessions over eight weeks increased their arm strength from 19 to 31 percent and leg strength by 28 percent. (Weill)

Yoga's emotional benefits can help provide teens some protection against the stresses of modern society. According to recent study published in the Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics cited in a Huffington Post article, yoga does provide some benefit to teens and study researcher Jessica Noggle, Ph.D. of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School noted that, "yoga may serve a preventative role in adolescent mental health." (Chan) The 10-week study included a group of approximately 50 junior and senior high school students, where half of the group took a regular physical education (PE) class while the other did a yoga class of asana, meditation, and breathing exercises over the same period. All of the students took the same psychological tests at the start of the program which examined their levels of anxiety, mindfulness, anger, resilience and mood fluctuation. The study found that the teens who practiced yoga did better on a number of the psychological tests at the end of the program compared to the students that did the PE class. Specifically, teens that took the PE class scored higher for mood problems and anxiety after the ten-week period; the teens that practiced yoga scored lower on these indexes or stayed the same. Moreover, the adolescents who did yoga reported fewer negative emotions during the course of the study. (Chan)

Yoga Philosophy Provides Teens Framework for Approaching Life

Teens also can benefit from an exploration of yoga philosophy, particularly the yamas and niyamas, the brahmaviharas, and the chakras (energy centers), which can help them approach life's inevitable changes with grace and ease. Yamas, the outward practices of how you interact with the world, and niyamas, how you interact with yourself, are the first two limbs of the eight limbs of yoga (Desikachar). A number of the lessons of the yamas and niyamas are helpful for young people to learn as they enter adulthood. The yamas of ahimsa (non-harming to others and oneself), satya (truthfulness), asteya (not stealing), aparigraha (not hoarding), and the niyama of santosha (contentment) are particularly relevant for teens. Explaining how these concepts might manifest in their life brings added meaning to the concepts. Having the teens understand that they need to honor their bodies, where they are right now, and not try to push themselves too hard to master a certain pose or sequence is a valuable lesson in ahimsa, satya, and santosha. The themes of asteya, aparigraha, and santosha play out for teens when they learn to be comfortable being themselves and not someone else, and realizing that they have what they need in terms of abilities, qualities, and even friends and material possessions. More is not necessarily better. I have had fun leading yoga classes for my daughters and their friends using some of these concepts as themes and look forward to exploring the rest of them in upcoming classes.

The four states of mind known as the brahmaviharas described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra I.33 are useful to introduce to teens to help them begin to see the world in less competitive terms.

(Satchidananda) These states of mind or attitudes show us the way to a kinder, more compassionate relationship with ourselves and others. The four brahmaviharas are friendliness or loving kindness

(metta), compassion (karuna), joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekha). “Cultivating the qualities of kindness, compassion, and joy opens your heart to others, while equanimity balances that with the recognition and acceptance that things are the way they are. “ (Boccio) While all of us seem to compare ourselves to others in terms of how we look and what type of house or car we have, teens seem to be even more captive to that zero-sum mentality. If someone else wins, teens often see themselves as having lost. Yoga philosophy’s brahmaviharas teach adolescents that that they deserve to be happy and that their happiness won’t take anything away from their friends (embodying metta & karuna). Likewise, they can be happy for their friends when good things happen to them (demonstrating mudita). If they are jealous of their friends’ good fortune, their friends’ good fortune remains but they themselves continue to feel bad. “When you judge yourself, compare yourself to others, and envy others, you perpetuate a sense of aloneness and deficiency.” (Boccio). The fourth brahmavihara is equanimity, probably the most profound and difficult to attain, because it calls on us to remain balanced and content despite life’s guaranteed disappointments and struggles. As mindfulness author Jon Kabat-Zinn says, “we can’t stop the waves, but we can learn how to surf.” The earlier this concept is learned the better, because otherwise we become victim to life’s circumstances. To teach teens that they can choose happiness rather than misery and despair is a wonderful gift. I have tried to do this with my daughters, especially when practicing yoga with them and their friends, but I appreciate that this is a lifelong lesson that I myself am still trying to fully integrate and emulate.

An understanding of the chakras is beneficial for teens and a fun way to focus a class, while yoga’s ultimate goal, non-attachment, also can find resonance with teens. Thia Luby, in her book *Yoga for Teens*, talks about the many chemical and

physiological changes occurring in adolescence and how the chakras are still developing. She stresses that yoga can help balance the chakras that get imbalanced in teens. She notes that the most sensitive for teens are the 3rd chakra, the emotional center located at the solar plexus between the naval and the bottom of the ribs; the 4th chakra, the heart center; and the 5th chakra, focused on communication. Her book outlines a number of poses selected to work to balance the various chakras. For example for teens, twists, backbends, and inversions, are effective ways to balance the 3rd, 4th and 5th chakras respectively. (Luby) Finally, vairagya, or non-attachment, which also can be expressed as equanimity is yoga's highest goal. While this lofty goal is hard for adults as well, I think teens can benefit from an appreciation of vairagya or non-attachment, as they go on to face life's challenges. Knowing deep inside themselves that they are ok just as they are, that they have all they need to be the best that they can be, and that they don't need to compare themselves to others or worry about how their actions will be perceived by others is a wonderful life lesson that I wish I had learned a long time ago.

Making Yoga Accessible to Teens

When presenting yoga to teens, it is important to make it fun, informative, and contemplative. Teens often enjoy practicing with other teens and to music. Since music at this age is becoming a big part of how they self-identify, it would be good to incorporate soothing music, or even some popular songs that they listen to on the radio. Teens are at an age where they are questioning everything and they like to know why they should do something, so it is important to explain the benefits for yoga and the individual poses to them. Mary Kay Chryssicas, author of the book *Breathe: Yoga for Teens* helps teens understand the various sources of real stress in their life, noting that walking into a crowded lunchroom on the first day school can be stressful but may not be something that teens recognize as “real world” stress. (Harzog) Chryssicas helps validate their experience and develop ways to manage such stress. She also breaks down the particular benefits of the poses into how they help reduce stress, improve balance or strengthen the body. I have observed that the teens I teach like to know how the particular poses can help them and how they can bring yoga’s emphasis on “being in the moment” into everyday life. Teens seem to appreciate the time to slow down and stay in the moment, rather than worrying about the exam they need to study for or the paper they need to write. I have found that teenage girls enjoy doing yoga with their moms, particularly in a group. The teenagers may find that they can more easily do many of the poses than their moms and that helps build their self-confidence. The teens I teach also like to see that they are progressing in their yoga practice, so they enjoy increasingly challenging poses.

A recent *Yoga Journal* article discussing teaching yoga to teens noted the importance of setting a non-competitive environment for the yoga class, setting boundaries of respect for others and themselves, while allowing the teens to express their own creativity.

(Rodefer) Teens worry a lot about failing and not measuring up, so explaining that there are multiple ways to do a pose gives them an opportunity to succeed and not feel like they have to push themselves beyond their limits. Let teens know that coming out of a pose isn't failing and that they can come back into the pose and try again. (Harzog) Yoga teacher and author Chryssicas argues that it is fun for teens to work in partner poses and to try challenging poses in a fun creative way. (Rodefer) A Laguna beach-based teacher Christy Brock adds a lot of backbends to her class to remind teens to enjoy life and to counteract all the forward movement they do as students. Adolescence is probably the most self-conscious life stage, so it is important to praise them for trying the poses and sticking with the practice and not criticizing how they are doing the poses. (Rodefer)

It is important to teach teens some simple yoga exercises that they can incorporate throughout their day, before a big test or presentation, and before going to sleep to help them lose the stress of the day. (Lyness) Neck and shoulder rolls sitting at their desk at school can help release tension in the shoulders, neck and back. Forward folds and twists can ease lower back strain from sitting too long studying. Balance poses can focus energy for better concentration. Any forward folding poses are especially good before bedtime because they are relaxing. My girls and I often practice some gentle yoga postures together before bed, such as forward folds and legs up the wall. Keeping teens focused on what their body and breath are doing in the moment, and noticing how a particular stretch feels, can help alleviate stress. Noticing the breath and working to elongate the exhale particularly are techniques that I have introduced to my daughters and their friends as well. They like to know that the breath is always with them and that they can help de-stress themselves at any time, such as before a confrontation with a friend or parent, or before a big test or presentation. I have

also introduced the yogic three-part breath and will soon be teaching them alternate nostril breathing.

A number of articles talk about the fact that while a desire to get fit may bring teens to yoga, the quiet contemplative aspects of yoga keep them coming back, making yoga a lifelong activity. Yoga is the fastest growing fitness activity, according to IDEA, the national trade association of fitness professionals, and the demand for yoga classes for teenagers is accelerating. To “work out” is the number one thing teenage girls like to do with their spare time, according to Teenage Research Unlimited. (Gallanis) Most teens begin to drop out of organized sports at high school because it is increasingly competitive to make the team, but sports like yoga, bicycling, running, and tennis are activities that they can enjoy their entire life. This has been a real draw for my daughters and their friends who don’t compete in any varsity sports. Learning how to manage life’s most powerful emotions, like anger, jealousy and frustration, also are likely to bring teens back to class. (Gallanis) I hope that my daughters and their friends look back upon their initial yoga exposure with gratitude for encouraging them to be good to their bodies, for realizing the awesome strength and beauty of their bodies, and for a profound understanding that they have and are all they need. I feel so blessed to be able to share the lifelong gift of yoga to my daughters and their friends.

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