



# Let's Play **YOGA**

When children and  
an Eastern discipline meet,  
good things happen

BY JACI CONRY

One recent evening at a yoga class I attend in my New England town, I noticed a little girl around seven or eight years old. Alongside her mother, she kept right up with the rest of us. While some of the other class members struggled—yes, including me—the little girl folded, twisted, and stretched skillfully, smiling, pose after pose. It was clear she was having a great time—and she knew what she was doing.

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Are kids doing yoga all over the place?, I wondered. It turns out they are.

"Our children live in a hurry-up world of busy parents, school pressures, incessant lessons, video games, malls, and competitive sports," says Marsha Wenig, creator of the Michigan City, Indiana-based YogaKids curriculum, a program with more than 1,000 teachers worldwide, and author of *Yogakids: Educating the Whole Child Through Yoga* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2003). "We don't usually think of these influences as stressful for our kids, but they often are."

Yoga, she says, can help children counter these pressures. "When children learn techniques for self-health, relaxation, and inner fulfillment, they can navigate life's challenges with a little more ease."

#### Physical and mental benefits

The benefits children may derive from yoga include enhanced flexibility, strength, coordination, and body awareness. Through regular practice, their concentration and sense of calmness improves. "Doing yoga, children exercise, play, and connect more deeply with the inner self," says Wenig.

Wenig knows about the benefits of yoga firsthand. The former TV entertainment news producer discovered the practice in the late 1980s, while living in Los Angeles. A heavy smoker, she was feeling stressed and trying to cope with the recent loss of both her parents. She discovered yoga, and it became her solace. "For someone with a tense lifestyle and an over-active mind, yoga was the perfect antidote," she says. "Physically, it made me feel good. Mentally and emotionally, it steadied my nerves and helped me relax. In a short time, I felt a new ease in my body."

Wenig quit smoking, began teaching creative writing to children in public schools, and married her yoga teacher. In the early 1990s, she and her husband, along with their infant daughter, Dakota, moved to Michigan City where they opened the Dancing Feet Yoga and Retreat Center.

"I was a 'yoga mom,' learning how to be a mother and practicing my craft every day to help me stay present, peaceful, and healthy," she says. Dakota had been doing yoga since "before she was

born," but Wenig wanted to share the practice with her daughter's friends. When Dakota's Montessori preschool welcomed Wenig's offer to teach yoga, the experienced instructor was confident it would work well.

She was in for a few surprises. "After two classes with a group of three- to six-year-olds, I had to seriously reevaluate my approach," says Wenig. "I needed to learn to let go of my agenda and my expectations of what yoga is and is not." Unlike adults, children didn't wait for Wenig's instructions, nor were they interested in explanations. They just jumped in and did the poses with her. They had no interest in holding poses, or in trying harder, or in trying again. "They wanted to play and have fun," says Wenig.

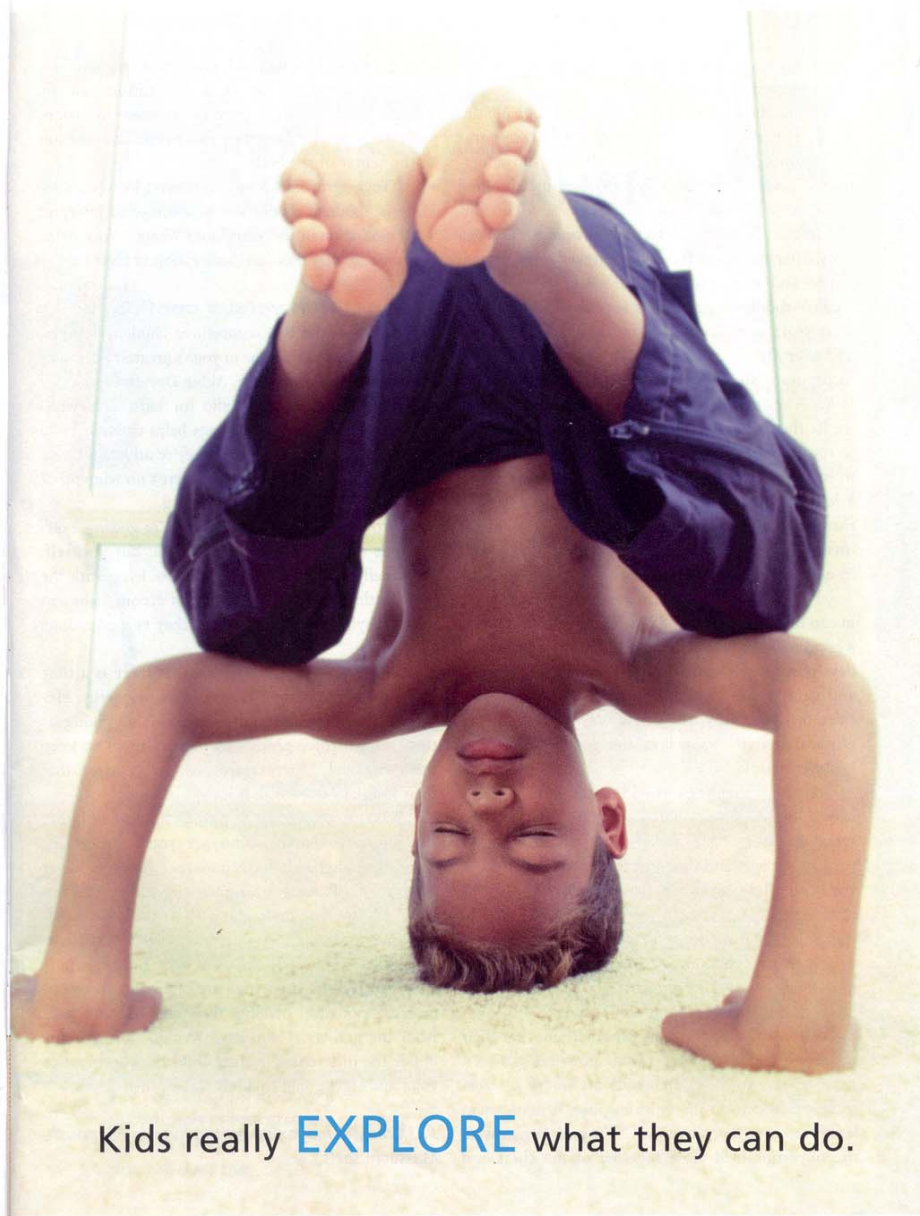
#### A playful challenge

The greatest challenge with children is to hold their attention long enough to teach them the benefits of yoga, says Wenig. She quickly learned that in order to engage kids and keep them interested, she needed to modify traditional poses into something child-friendly and fun.

The playful style of yoga that Wenig and other children's yoga teachers offer takes a multidisciplinary approach, including storytelling, singing, and games. "Most children love to talk, and they love to move, both of which can happen in yoga," she says. Many yoga poses derive their inspiration from animals and plants. Kids love pretending to be cobras and other animals, trees, flowers, or warriors. They can let go and roar in the lion pose, bark in the dog pose, meow in a cat stretch, and hiss in a cobra. As they imitate the movements and sounds of nature, they feel the power of a lion, the grace of a swan, or the grounding of a tree, says Wenig. This experience introduces kids to the true essence of yoga: union, expression, and honoring oneself and other living beings.

While adult students sometimes have a hard time with the mind-emptying parts of yoga class, kids can be more receptive says Michelle Wing, founder of It's Yoga Kids, a studio for kids and families in San Francisco.

"Kids love yoga. It comes easily to them. In class, we don't adjust them, and we don't use



Kids really **EXPLORE** what they can do.

mirrors. They just learn how to do the poses—they feel it in their bodies,” she says.

Wing, the mother of two, practiced yoga next to her daughter as a baby. “When she was 18 months old, I noticed her mimicking me, doing a sun salutation. I said, ‘Wow!’ and it really got me thinking about yoga for kids.”

In early 2006 she and a partner opened It’s Yoga Kids, offering classes for infants to teenagers, as well as pre- and postnatal classes for mom and baby. The studio’s toddler yoga class is for ages 18 months to three years, accompanied by mom or dad. Kids three and over are on their own. “For each age group we incorporate stories and songs to their level,” she says. “After the action is over, we cool them down, we let them rest. We tell them why it’s so important to rest the body.” Each class at her studio is tailored to its particular students. If a class happens to have a lot of boys who tend to be very action-oriented, there might be more activity. Another class might involve more relaxation if there seems to be a high level of anxiety among students.

While some activities that children participate in can be hard on their bodies, Wing believes yoga is a good balance between physical activity and mental development. “It’s great for developing motor skills and gaining the ability to move the body on both sides the same way. It’s a safe way to engage in a physical activity that lays the foundation for a healthy lifestyle,” she says.

She adds that yoga provides essential tools that help children emotionally, academically, and in social situations. “Lots of kids deal with anxiety at a very young age, and the most important benefit that yoga can offer is the ability to relax, to calm down,” says Wing. She cites one of her students, a high-energy six-year-old boy who was very anxious about a bully in his classroom at school. “At home, he went into his room and did some breathing exercises that he learned in yoga and was able to relax.”

Wenig says that parents often tell her that their children are able to resort to yoga practices as anger-management tools. “When kids are angry or frustrated, they can do the volcano pose. It helps them let off steam in a positive way.” The pose begins with the fingertips held close together at the chest and

then goes to a jumping jack position where children are encouraged to get their frustration out by yelling. It ends in the peaceful *namaste* position, with the palms held together in a prayerlike position at the center of the body.

“Yoga gives kids a strong interest in what their body is about. It gives them a language to interpret what’s going on inside them,” says Wenig. “Yoga helps them realize that they have other tools in their bag.”

#### Competition versus confidence

In this age of fiercely competitive children’s sports, many parents feel that one of yoga’s greatest attributes is that it is noncompetitive. Abbie Davies, founder of My First Yoga, a yoga studio for kids in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, says yoga helps children build confidence. “All kids, whether they’re athletic or not, can feel good about themselves. There’s no winning or losing, so there’s no way they can fail.

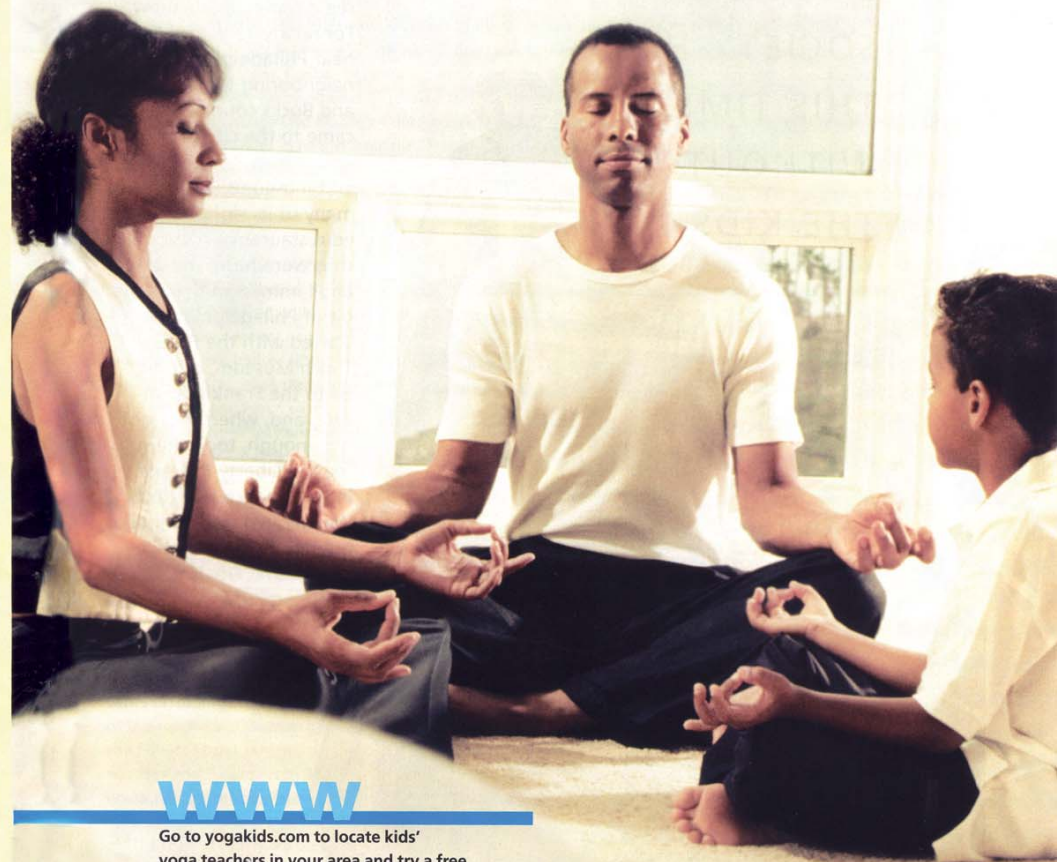
“Yoga is an activity where you’re getting exercise but not competing with anyone but yourself. Kids really explore what they can do. Even with the really little guys, they get a sense of accomplishment when they’re able to do a pose they’ve never done before.”

Davies teaches her students that there is a time to be calm and a time to have lots of energy. Her classes last 45 minutes, even for kids as young as three, and involve props and partner poses to keep them engaged. “Parents are always surprised that their kids can last for that long.”

Who are yoga kids? Wing says about half of her students have parents who are yoga enthusiasts, while the other half have parents who have never tried yoga. “Parents who practice yoga themselves really get it—they understand all of the great benefits that it offers, and they want their children to experience them early on,” she says. But even parents who haven’t tried yoga are often able to recognize the potential benefits their children can gain from the activity. Then, says Wenig, “The parents notice the differences in their children who practice yoga and start going to adult classes themselves.”

*Jaci Conry, a magazine editor, lives in Falmouth, Massachusetts.*

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**WITH THE INNER SELF.”**



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