

## **Yoga Keeps Me Calm, Fit and Focused**

### **Non-violence in elementary school through yoga**

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According to the American Medical Association, studies have been reporting that there has been an increase in violence and bullying in American schools<sup>1</sup>. What creates these behavior patterns in children at school? This question was a source of contemplation for me. As a yoga therapist for 18 years who has worked with clients of all ages from infants through senior citizens, I felt an obligation to help this struggling population. I designed and implemented a yoga program specifically to address this issue of violence and bullying in the school systems.

I worked for two successive years, October 2004 and 2005, in Boulder, Co., during national SAVE week--which is an acronym for Stop America's Violence Everywhere as designated by the American Medical Association. 125 elementary students ages 9 – 11 ranging from middle to upper middle class were instructed for six 45 minutes of classical yoga, i.e., four and a half hours of yoga training for two week sessions. The children were given pre and post surveys both years with questions designed by Dr. Grace Wyshak, a professor of biostatistics at the Harvard School of Public Health, who also analyzed the data obtained from the surveys.

The 45 minute yoga program was added into the daily academic curriculum for a two week period. Each day was crucial since the students only had six classes. Day one, Monday, the children were introduced to the concept of *ahimsa*: non-violence to self and toward others. After a discussion regarding this ethical standard, a 20 minute *asana* practice followed introducing gentle joint freeing movements and *surya namaskar*, as taught by Mukunda Stiles in his Structural Yoga Therapy book. The class ended with a brief transition of rest before returning to their classrooms. Day two, Wednesday, they were visually stimulated with props, imagery and games to represent the three types of breathing (chest, abdominal and intercostal) and their effects on one's mood and energy. After that a ten minute *asana* session was followed by a long relaxation in *makarasana* (crocodile pose a position lying in prone) which consisted of one-to-one breathing practice (*sama vritti ujaye* breath) using numbers and phrases. Day three, Friday, the entire session focused on conflict resolution role-playing in scenarios with the subject matter volunteered by the children. Homework for the weekend was given directing the students to teach a family member anything they had learned during the three yoga classes. Day four, Monday, a third of the class time was an open discussion about their homework: what the students chose to teach and to whom. The remaining time was an *asana* session introducing classical *asanas* such as *virabhadrasana 2* (warrior 2), *utthita trikonasana* (extended triangle pose), *vrikshana* (tree pose), etc... ending with systematic relaxation in *savasana*, and a review of the concentration and breathing practices. Day five, Wednesday, a 30 minute session combining *vinyasa* and classical *asanas* was taught followed by enhanced concentration and breathing practices with the children on the floor in the relaxation pose of their choice. Day six, Friday, a review of all material covered, followed by more role-playing. The post program questionnaire was then given.

Between the first and second years of the program I wrote a booklet for the children to refer to as well as a guide for teachers to use during the remainder of the school year. The students were

thrilled to have something to take home. It made it easier for them to do their homework and to teach other family members yoga.

## RESULTS FROM THE STUDENTS REPORTS:

### **Fall of 2004**

### **Fall of 2005**

75% <b>decrease</b> .....	hitting at school.....	93% <b>decrease</b>
76% <b>decrease</b> .....	hitting after school.....	68% <b>decrease</b>
55% <b>decrease</b> .....	being hit by someone.....	54% <b>decrease</b>
56% <b>decrease</b> .....	being hit by a friend.....	56% <b>decrease</b>
41% <b>decrease</b> .....	feeling bullied at school.....	41% <b>decrease</b>
68% <b>decrease</b> .....	feeling angry for no reason.....	56% <b>decrease</b>
81% <b>decrease</b> .....	feeling that their friends were angry at them.....	59% <b>decrease</b>
51% <b>increase</b> .....	ability to control anger.....	50% <b>increase</b>

Unexpected benefits the children reported were less headaches, less fidgeting, and an overall improved ability to sleep. The smiles, hugs, enthusiastic participation combined with sincere thanks from the students, teachers and parents also proves the positive effect yoga had on these elementary students. Due to the results and reputation of this study teachers of other grade levels within the same school have invited me into their classrooms for yoga education.

### CONCLUSION:

If children are exposed to yoga by a knowledgeable and experienced teacher a dramatic decrease in violence and aggression occurs. Only a 4 ½ hour exposure to yoga over a period of two weeks has been shown to result in up to a 93% decrease in aggressive behavior in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children.

The results obtained in this study confirm that classical yoga which addresses the body, mind and spirit is an elegant tool for implementing behavioral changes when administered correctly to upper elementary age children.

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<sup>1</sup> Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among U.S. youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285(16), 2094-2100.

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