

# Yoga Therapy in Practice

## Teaching Yoga in Urban Elementary Schools

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**Abstract:** *Teaching Yoga to children is a fulfilling but challenging journey, particularly in poverty-stricken urban school districts. The physical, mental, and emotional impact of poverty on children has serious implications for their academic achievement. Introducing Yoga as part of their regular school experience shows tremendous potential for helping students navigate challenges that interfere with learning. This article helps teachers and therapists understand the experience of providing Yoga and mindfulness programs in urban elementary schools and provides specific information on ways to ensure successful program implementation, including a sample class description, activity instructions, and best practices in training teachers and teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Yoga, elementary school, children, education, mindfulness, teacher training*

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### Introduction

Teaching Yoga to children has tremendous potential to give young students powerful tools for personal and academic success. Working with children is an appealing path for many Yoga teachers; as the director of a program that brings Yoga to New York City schools and community centers, I receive resumés, calls, and emails almost every day from Yoga teachers interested in sharing the practice that has changed their own lives. However, teaching Yoga to children differs greatly from teaching adults. I have seen many enthusiastic and well-meaning teachers have negative experiences, particularly in urban schools where overpopulated classes, challenging environments, and children with a wide variety of unmet needs can quickly lead to frustration and a sense of failure.

The places that are most challenging to teach are also the places where children embrace (and need) Yoga practice the most. Those children deserve teachers who are well-prepared. During my four years as the director of Little Flower Yoga, I have trained and supported teachers in a wide variety of urban school programs. This work has taught me many lessons about appropriate expectations, finding the teacher who

is the right fit for each classroom, and giving teachers what they need to be successful. In my experience, the teachers who succeed in the classroom are not necessarily the most experienced Yoga teachers. They are the teachers who are most willing to let the children's developmental needs direct the flow of the class and those with the most skill in handling classroom management and behavioral challenges.

Teaching children's Yoga can be an inspiring and fulfilling path, but for someone who is unprepared, it can also be very overwhelming. In this article, I hope to give prospective children's Yoga teachers insight into what they can expect in the classroom and how to obtain the skills necessary for success in this growing field.

### Understanding the Needs of Urban Youth

#### *Environmental Stress*

Many children in urban public schools show up every day dealing with stresses and distractions that inhibit their readiness to learn. Low-income and minority students are more likely to live in neighborhoods plagued by violence. They commonly face overcrowded, and at times deteriorating, living conditions. Health concerns and fear of personal

harm are some of the top worry-inducing factors in children, and African American children are significantly more inclined to anxiety than other children.<sup>1</sup> Children who face consistent poverty are also more likely to suffer from depression and antisocial behavior, and childhood poverty continues to impact mental health over time.<sup>2</sup>

Schools themselves can also contribute to children's stress. As the focus of many school districts has shifted to accountability, schooling has become more test-based and linear. This leads to tremendous pressure on children, particularly in struggling school districts where the consequences of students' performing poorly on exams can be dire. Schools in urban centers are typically control-oriented, often with armed, uniformed police officers for security even at the lower grade levels. This reinforces the perception that the students are continuously in harm's way. With all of these challenges facing them, focusing on schoolwork can take a heroic effort on the part of many children. Addressing students' overall wellness and giving them tools for coping with stress and managing their emotions is crucial if we can reasonably expect them to focus their attention on learning.

### *Physical and Mental Health*

In addition to coping with the stress caused by their environments, students across the country, but particularly in minority communities, are suffering from increasing rates of obesity and diseases such as diabetes and asthma.<sup>3,4</sup> Whether it is the result of food costs, environmental factors, or personal and parental choices, in low-income communities, children's nutrition is often poor, and many do not get the exercise that they need to stay healthy.<sup>5</sup>

Children in low-income communities also face many environmental hazards, such as increased pollution and exposure to cigarette smoke, as well as exposure to rodent and cockroach feces, that can trigger respiratory problems. Asthma is a widespread disease, particularly in low-income communities.<sup>6</sup> The constant discomfort and anxiety children with asthma suffer is frustrating enough, but the attacks themselves are painful and frightening and are a leading cause of missed school time. Asthma attacks also frequently interrupt sleep, making it difficult for children to focus the next day. They may also prevent children from the normal play that is a crucial part of development

Attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are growing problems for many children. The use of medication to modify behavior in children is at an all-time high, with the diagnosis of ADD and ADHD becoming more and more routine.<sup>7</sup>

There is some controversy as to whether these diagnoses are accurate and the treatments medically necessary, and some research has suggested that it is a combination of biological and classroom variables that interact to elicit ADHD-related behavior.<sup>8</sup> The underlying fact is that many children struggle to concentrate and have difficulty maintaining self-control.

### **Why Yoga?**

All of the above social, physical, and mental health risks faced by urban youth point to the importance of experiences that offer these children the opportunity to be active, reduce stress, and learn skills for emotion regulation, attention and behavioral self-control, and social connection. The use of Yoga to improve mental and physical health is well documented in adults, and preliminary studies suggest that Yoga is beneficial in treating obesity, asthma, diabetes, and ADD/ADHD,<sup>9-13</sup> which are some of the most persistent obstacles for children in minority and low-income communities. While the academic research on the use of Yoga for children is limited, what has been done suggests that a regular Yoga practice helps students improve their grades, behavior in school, physical health, and attitudes towards themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, programs that aim to help youth develop holistically are challenged by the current educational and political trends in accountability. An extensive focus on test scores constricts the definition of school success and has the potential to both undermine these types of efforts and at the same time make them ever more essential. High expectations and universal standards are trendy words in education right now, but they are used lightly and are frequently not being applied in meaningful, positive ways. Applying these concepts requires us to distinguish between having universal standards in testing and the genuine belief in all children's capacity to do well. High expectations are irrelevant if children do not have the resources and support to achieve them.

Yoga, taught in a mindful way by compassionate teachers, has the potential to be one of those resources. Yoga has an added benefit of being relatively easy to implement, at a low cost and in a small space. Large-scale institutional changes in education require huge investments of money and political will and take time that today's children do not have. Although I would never recommend Yoga as a substitute for education reform or community health initiatives, Yoga is a powerful and immediately available practice to support students and the entire school community.

### *Yoga Is Not Just a Physical Activity*

All children need physical activity, but most sports and active play that children participate in today are competition-based. Yoga presents an entirely different model. Students participate in an activity that is cooperation-based and rooted in the idea that practicing and improving yourself are what indicate success. This model allows all students to develop self-efficacy and awareness of their potential, regardless of how they compare to their peers. Classroom Yoga fosters a sense of community without the need for an opponent or enemy.

Yoga also has a unique ability to integrate the physical and the mental, and Yoga-based activities have the potential to reduce stress and anxiety, increase health and wellness, and teach emotional regulation. Yoga gives students a framework for processing and handling their emotions, helping to defuse anger and stress. Yoga practice also develops the ability to focus attention. Improved emotional regulation and focus can increase students' ability to work independently and productively, despite the wide variety of environmental and personal distractions that surround them.

In addition to addressing the physical, mental, and emotional wellness of students (all of which contribute to their readiness to learn), Yoga classes have the potential to address the many different ways that children learn. In Yoga classes, learning takes place in a dynamic, supportive, and encouraging environment where students are not hampered by the pressures of testing or the fear of failure. Academic skills can be combined with engaging and fun activities, music, movement, and storytelling that allow students to learn in a holistic way that is accessible to all learning styles.

### *Do Urban Schools Even Want Yoga? Survey Results of Three Harlem Schools*

Although Yoga may generate many benefits for children in urban schools, it can only do so if Yoga programs are embraced by the community. Key stakeholders, including educators, parents, and school administrators, all must support bringing Yoga to their children if programs are to be sustained. This can be a serious challenge, as Yoga is not part of the common culture in many of the poorest communities, and it may be viewed with suspicion.

In early 2007, I conducted a small qualitative study at one of our program sites in Harlem, New York, distributing surveys to students, teachers, and parents after a ten-week Yoga session. The intention was not to measure how Yoga was affecting the children but to assess the degree of acceptance and support for this program in a school that had never had Yoga before and where most of the staff and parents did not practice Yoga themselves.

I received sixty-four surveys from students, seven from teachers, and fourteen from parents, and with very few exceptions, students loved the classes, and parents and teachers found it beneficial. While the teachers took some time to adjust to Yoga and to my way of conducting classes, the children did not. They loved their Yoga classes. The positive feedback that I received from students was overwhelming and inspiring. Teachers who had initially been hesitant to embrace the program noted that their students loved attending and that they seemed more cooperative and happier on the days they had Yoga classes.

In June of 2010, I repeated this small survey at two of our schools after they had received a full year of Yoga programming for kindergarten through third-grade students. This time I received ninety-four surveys from children in the second and third grades. The responses were once again extremely positive. (See Table 1 for comments.)

While I cannot say that every community is interested in Yoga, my experience with Little Flower suggests that many communities will embrace Yoga if given the opportunity. Our programs have been requested in all five boroughs of New York and in some of the city's most historically challenged neighborhoods, such as Central and East Harlem, Bushwick, and the South Bronx. Yoga has a tremendous amount to offer people in many different life circumstances. My experience has been that when it is presented clearly, and the teachings are transparent to educators and parents, they welcome the practice for their children.

### **What Does a Children's Yoga Class Look Like at School?**

Children's Yoga classes work best when they are dynamic and engaging explorations of the practice and when children have time to experiment and imagine. Often this does not look much like what most adults and teachers think of as a typical Yoga class. This section describes a typical Little Flower Yoga class to illustrate the wide range of possibilities for children's Yoga. Appendices 1–3 provide detailed instructions for specific activities for teaching cooperation, stress reduction, and mental focus.

### *A Balance Between Routine and Creativity*

At Little Flower, most of our school-based programs run Yoga classes for 45 minutes at least once per week. Class size varies from about ten to twenty students. Most sessions are held in classrooms with the desks and chairs stacked and pushed aside. If you were to look through a window at a Little Flower Yoga class, you would see at any given

**Table 1: Children’s Survey Responses: 2010 Promise Academy Study**

**Survey Highlights:**

- 83 of 94 students rated Yoga a 5 on a 1–5 scale (1 hate it, 5 love it).
- 70 of 94 reported that they practice Yoga at home or at school on their own.
- 86 of 94 said that they would recommend Yoga to a friend. [One student responded that they would not recommend Yoga to a friend, “so I could have it all to myself!”]
- 86 of 94 responded that they would like to have Yoga more often. [One student said that they would like Yoga twelve times per week. Many students responded that they would like to have Yoga every day.]

**Representative Responses to Open-Ended Questions:**

After Yoga class I feel \_\_\_\_\_

- Happy and joyful
- Great and refreshed
- Calm and great about myself
- Like me
- Like I want more Yoga
- Like I have more energy
- Strong
- Relaxed
- Super good and relaxed
- Peaceful
- Energized
- Happy, I love Yoga
- Happy and like a new person

What are some things you like about Yoga class?

- That we really use our imaginations
- I like relaxing my brain
- Exercising together
- The fun games we play
- I like becoming more flexible
- The resting at the end of Yoga
- That you can relax
- I like meditation
- I like to stretch my body
- Everything we do in Yoga is fun

**Do you think Yoga affects your life at home or at school? If so, how?**

- Yes, because I just feel calmer.
- Yes, because Yoga helps get rid of my anger.
- In life it helps cool the body and mind, and helps lower stress.
- Yes, because when the Yoga teacher walks in the door I say a big, “Oh yeah!”
- Yes, it keeps me strong.
- I would do Yoga in my whole life because it is fun to do with friends.
- Yes, because it makes my behavior better at home and school.
- Yes, Yoga is the most amazing class in the world.
- Yes, because I can become an acrobat when I grow up because I will be flexible.
- It calms me down when I’m mad.
- Yes, because it gives me energy.
- It does by doing the three steps of Yoga: stretching, relaxing, and meditation.
- I think it’s healthy and I love it.
- Yes, because it gives me more energy.
- It does because we learn new things.
- Yes, because it helps me at home and helps me at school because it helps me focus.

time students on their Yoga mats or moving around the room. Children might be engaged in group activities or in personal reflection. The teacher might be the center of attention, or a child might be sharing. The room could be quiet or very noisy.

Although Little Flower programs are customized to respect the needs of each school, they all incorporate thematic lesson planning, emphasize a wide variety of sensory experiences, and include *savasana* (final relaxation). Many use songs, storytelling, art, and journaling. We also strive to achieve a balance of repetition (which deepens understanding and provides children with an experience of success) and new activities (which are stimulating and stretch children’s ideas of what is possible) in every session.

When the students come into the space, mats are set up in a circle, if possible. The students start class on their mats with an opening ritual that always stays the same and generally incorporates some form of singing *om*. Many teachers expect problems with introducing *om* in the classroom, but I have not had any of the negative experiences that many people seem to anticipate. When it is explained clearly,

school administrators have not had a problem with it. Singing at the beginning of class is a way to bring the group together and provide a distinct transition. After singing *om*, most classes begin with a few sun salutations, made more child-friendly by being recast as a sun dance. Repeating a sun dance each class (with an accompanying song that the kids sing) is an easy way to teach them a Yoga sequence that they can remember and use any time.

### *Theme-Based Lesson Plans*

The bulk of the class then consists of *asana* (postures), but the way that *asana* is presented will depend on the larger lesson plan for the day. Students may spend the class exploring Yoga poses that make them feel powerful. They might create a story with lots of animals and elements of nature and then animate that story with Yoga poses. They might use group and partner poses to work on communication and team-building skills. Regardless of the theme or what poses are practiced, class allows time for questions and for the children to share how the poses make them feel. *Pranayama* (breathing) activities are included in this section of the class, and while there are many creative ways to bring a breathing practice to children, our main goal with elementary age students is usually just to encourage deep belly breathing.

This segment of class also frequently includes a Yoga game. These are often variations on games that the children are familiar with already, but transformed to be noncompetitive and to incorporate Yoga principles. Yoga games are an engaging and fun way to help children learn to work together within a framework of collaboration and mutual support. For sample Yoga games, see the Appendices.

Finally, every Little Flower class ends with relaxation in *savasana* (corpse pose). This relaxation is a crucial component of our program. Most students need a week or two to understand the idea of relaxing without actually going to sleep, but once they have the experience, they frequently ask for it. Relaxation for children may be accompanied by a guided visualization or soft music. Sometimes we read inspiring stories to the class during this time, and as the children get older, we allow longer amounts of silence. When children gently wake their bodies up from their relaxation, they end class by saying “*Namaste*” to each other and then its English translation, “The light in me bows to the light in you.”

### *Taking Advantage of the Teachable Moments*

Our teachers are encouraged to stay present to the many teachable moments that Yoga creates. Depending on the class and age group, that may mean asking students

what letter cat pose starts with, or what other poses rhyme with cat. It may mean discussing (and acting out) how a seed transforms into a tree, or asking, “If we hold warrior pose for five breaths on each side, how long have we held it for altogether?” The more that we can collaborate with the classroom teachers at our schools, the more effective this kind of incorporation of academic learning into Yoga class can be. We have found that many of our students who are struggling to learn in traditional settings benefit from having literacy, math, and science concepts made accessible in new ways, in a space where they already feel confident and capable of success.

### *Does Every Class Really Happen Like That?*

No matter how well you prepare for class, the unexpected will happen. Changes in location and even in the students that are brought to you are common. Mats can disappear, classes can be canceled without notice, fire drills happen, and while dealing with all of it, you need to be modeling Yoga for your kids.

We train Little Flower teachers to show up early and adapt to whatever the school throws at them. The practice of teaching Yoga in urban schools is much like a meditation practice. You can embrace the joyful moments that you have with your students and let the challenging moments flow by without affecting your optimism and determination. Let things come and let them go but keep bringing your energy and attention back to the central task of allowing the students to play, breathe, learn, and rest in a supportive and nurturing environment where they can feel completely safe.

Although creating an interesting curriculum keeps many children engaged and focused, there are always students who manifest behavior problems. Common reasons a child may misbehave include boredom, unmet physical needs (e.g., being sick, tired, hungry), unmet emotional needs (e.g., the need for attention, respect, guidance), a reactive response to being over-controlled, unclear understanding of an activity, or an inappropriate and distracting environment. In an urban school environment, many of these factors are present all of the time. It is important to remember that negative behavior is meeting a need for the child, and you cannot reasonably expect him or her to change the behavior unless you offer an alternative way of meeting the need.

Dealing with negative behavior in a large class can be an overwhelming task, and in my experience, most of the teachers who have stopped teaching children’s Yoga have done so because they felt like they had lost control of their class. Learning classroom and behavior management techniques that invite students to cooperate and give

them opportunities to make productive choices will mean that you can maintain order in your classroom without stifling your students' natural enthusiasm. The section below offers strategies for compassionate, effective classroom management.

## Classroom Management and Communication Skills

Classroom management and communication skills are vital for creating an environment of productivity, learning, and collaboration. When children feel frustrated or angry, it can change the nature of their interaction with others. But when children feel happy, respected, and understood, they will be able to be the best version of themselves and contribute to the positive functioning of the group. Learning classroom management and discipline strategies will help you avoid some of the most common mistakes of all teachers, including escalating situations in which children are already upset, ostracizing children who are already experiencing negative feelings, and becoming entangled in power struggles with students.

In dealing with students or situations that are challenging, we often respond based on our own childhood experiences of how we were spoken to. It is also common for teachers to become emotionally involved in the situation at hand and act based on their feelings rather than in a mindful and skillful way. It is important to recognize what your own response patterns are so that you can catch yourself before falling into them. Being a successful teacher requires that you are able to maintain your own equilibrium even in a chaotic environment.

Another layer of challenge is that urban schools frequently operate under a culture of control. The discipline strategies used by the staff around you may be counterproductive to the environment you are trying to create. On more than one occasion, I have had school staff members yell at a child from the sidelines while I was teaching, pull children that they thought were being disruptive out of class, and even criticize a child's efforts out loud during class. All of these things damage the fragile space of safety and freedom that you are trying to create in Yoga. Addressing this concern will require you to be a diplomatic and creative communicator, and failing to address it will have a serious effect on the morale of your students.

There are classes and workshops that can help you develop these skills, and there is also a wide range of literature addressing the topic. However, the suggestions below are a good starting point. The skills and strategies described are

important for the well-being and success of both the children and adults in the classroom.

### *Recognize Your Own Needs, and Separate Them from the Situation at Hand*

When we approach discipline from the point of view of meeting our own needs (for quiet, stillness, eye-contact, or even our own need to be in control), we often lose sight of our larger goals. We sacrifice a child's self-esteem to meet our need to be heard. We ostracize a child to meet our need for quiet. It's important to ask yourself: am I trying to regulate behavior for the sake of being in charge, or am I trying to help students learn how to think through the consequences of their actions and make good choices? In every action, think: what is my need, and what is the child's need?

It is important that your needs get met, but never at the expense of or before the child's need. You may even find that what you think is important actually has nothing to do with your larger goals. For example, teachers often think that students must be still in order to demonstrate respectful listening, but many kids need to let their bodies move around in order for their mind to be present for the material. When you find yourself about to tell a child to change his or her behavior in some way, pause and ask yourself if the change is really necessary for the sake of the child or other children, or if it is just something that would make you feel better.

### *Accept People's Feelings*

This may be the most important and challenging step toward changing the dynamics of your classroom. When your students feel that they are not understood, respected, or appreciated, they have no motivation to cooperate. When people's feelings are dismissed, they cannot get past their initial emotional response to a situation and find a way to solve the problem. Accepting a child's (or an adult's) feelings allows them (and you) to move on to the next stage of figuring out how to meet their needs with positive rather than negative behavior. To acknowledge feelings, you can:

- Put their feelings into words, or give the feeling a name. ("I can see that you are very frustrated about this situation.") This encourages further sharing.
- Listen attentively and actively. ("So what I'm hearing is that.... Is that right?") This shows the student that you understand (or want to understand) his or her feelings and are there to help.
- Respond to situations with concern rather than advice or criticism.

It is important to understand that you can accept feelings and still change negative behavior. For example, if a student is jumping off of a chair, some common responses might be: “STOP THAT!” “Control yourself!” or “You’re going to hurt someone!” A more effective response that is positive but still redirects the student’s behavior might be: “You are an amazing jumper. You must have really strong legs. Bet you can do a lot of frog jumps. Want to try?”

### *Invite Cooperation and Joint Problem Solving*

Your classroom management goals should always be to support and encourage students to make productive choices, to help them develop an internal sense of self-discipline that does not require external punishment as motivation, and to engage students’ cooperation so that learning can be maximized. We often inadvertently make kids feel scared, stupid, misunderstood, or bad when their behavior fails to meet our expectations. This disconnects them from us and creates a situation in which even doing the “right” thing doesn’t feel good. We want to set up situations in which children demonstrating negative behavior feel that they can return to the activity at hand as a full-fledged member of the community and not as an outcast. Some things you can do include:<sup>15</sup>

- Describe the problematic situation. (“I hear answers but don’t see hands.”)
- Provide information. (“Dirty Yoga mats aren’t comfortable to sit on.”)
- Offer a choice, not a threat. (“What would be easier for you? Sitting together but still paying attention to the class, or changing spots so that you won’t be tempted to talk? Discuss it with each other and let me know what you decide.”)
- Talk about your own feelings.

Many children (and adults!) have a strong need for independence and self-direction. Ignoring this will get you into a power struggle that has no winner. We must be careful of our language so that a child can make a decision to cooperate and feel good about it. The end result of a child doing the right thing should always be that they feel good and proud of themselves. Being pressured into doing the “right” things and doing them while feeling angry, defensive, or belittled causes the child to associate those feelings with the action, which is ultimately counterproductive. Instead we want to empower children to recognize and act on their own good decision making.

Be prepared for the kids to challenge you, but know that this is normal, natural behavior, and avoid allowing it

to upset you on a personal level. Be playful yourself, and your students will have fun. Connect Yoga to their lives, treat them with dignity, keep your own emotions under control, and you will be able to engage your students and truly serve them.

## How You Can Set the Stage For Success

### *Teacher Training*

There are many things that you can do before you step into your first school-based Yoga class to help make your experience a positive one. The very first is to make sure you have training in teaching Yoga specifically to children. The methods of presenting the material are entirely different from teaching adults. While the rare teacher may be able to creatively adapt his or her Yoga practice to working with children, this is a process of trial and error that you most likely do not want to inflict on underserved children. You should honor your students with the best possible experience during what may be their only access to this type of program.

When thinking about training for this work, make sure that you find a program that gives you not only a range of Yoga activities but also a solid foundation in youth development. This will help you understand your students, have appropriate expectations, and allow you to plan classes that will be engaging and meaningful to them. Understanding children’s developmental stages will also enable you to make their Yoga experience one of success, rather than frustration.

### *Know Your Own Strengths and Limits*

Once you feel that you have the training you need to begin teaching children’s Yoga, it is essential to assess your own compatibility with different ages and environments. A thorough understanding of youth development will help you do this, as will taking every opportunity to visit schools before you actually begin your classes. Ideally your teacher training will include a period of time during which you observe and assist classes in environments similar to the ones you hope to teach in.

Nobody is the perfect teacher for every group. Assess your own strengths and try to match them with the needs of the community you can serve. Be realistic about what your own limits and emotional triggers might be, so that you don’t get overwhelmed and end up putting your own needs ahead of those of your students. Practice visualizing situations that might come up in a classroom, and pay attention to how those visualizations make you feel. Think through

alternative scenarios for addressing challenges before you face them, and you have a much better chance of handling them mindfully rather than reactively.

### *Class Preparation*

Once you have made a decision to teach a class, it is time to create your curriculum and lesson plans. Creating lesson plans for children's Yoga classes can seem like an exercise in futility; classes will never go exactly as planned. But while it is vital to be responsive to your students and to adapt to what is going on in your classroom, it is also very helpful to have ideas about what activities fit together well and options for how to address particular topics. Spending a little bit of time developing lesson plans will make you a more conscious teacher. Using themes can serve to keep students engaged and make classes even more beneficial, as learning is focused and each session can build upon the last. Achieving a balance of planning and creativity in your classes takes practice and requires that you be absolutely present during your teaching. I find it helpful for teachers to establish a transition ritual for themselves. Whether it is a breathing technique or listening to a favorite song, having a practice that helps you leave your personal stressors behind and prepare to engage completely with your students will serve you well.

This is also the time to set up a framework of mutual respect and support with the staff at the school you will be working with. I highly recommend taking the time to offer some kind of orientation to Yoga for any school staff who will be in your classroom (or even just anyone who is interested). Provide information about what your goals are and make it clear that you recognize the staff's experience and value their advice. Discuss any classroom management strategies you will use that you think might surprise them, and allow time for discussion and feedback. Let them know what their role can be if they want to support you during class, and politely but firmly ask that they stick to that role. You can expect school staff to challenge you, but if you earn their respect, they can be your greatest allies. They can help you understand and engage the students and even remind students of what they learned in Yoga while you are not there.

Before you begin teaching your first children's Yoga class, reach out in your community and find other people who are doing similar work. Having a support group is an important way to keep yourself invigorated. Being able to talk with people who truly understand the challenges you are facing will make you feel much less isolated. The other students in your teacher training can be a great place to start building a community.

## Conclusion

The children you teach will also teach you. Children in urban classrooms will inspire you to new levels of creativity and compel you to let go of preconceptions and relinquish a great degree of control. They will challenge your patience, your dedication, and maybe even shake your confidence, but they will also inspire deep joy and satisfaction. There is nothing quite like helping a child master a difficult balance pose and knowing that her confidence and self-esteem have been strengthened along with her legs; or watching a group of students dissolve into giggles as they make up their own Yoga poses; or seeing the shift that occurs on a child's face when he finally releases into truly nurturing relaxation, maybe for the first time ever.

Remember that the kids are more important than the Yoga practice. Meet their needs in whatever way works best at the time. The Yoga practice gives us an incredible toolkit, but it takes an incredible teacher to apply those tools meaningfully, and even better, to teach children how to use the tools themselves.

## Appendix 1. Activities For Teambuilding and Engaging Cooperation

### *Partner Boat*

Partner Boat is a great preliminary activity to do before students are going to work together in a more complicated capacity. It creates a shared challenge that brings students together and helps them recognize that they can be stronger with another person than by themselves. It teaches children and the adults they are working with how to both offer support and be supported, how to be patient with others, and how to communicate in a problem-solving situation. This pose is also a great core strength builder and is just a lot of fun.

Sit face-to-face with your partner (someone around the same size works best). With your knees bent, place the soles of your feet together and hold hands. Get a good grip because you're going to need it!

Making eye contact with your partner, slowly lift one leg and then the other until you together form an inverted V shape with your legs.

Take a deep breath in and sit up straight. Pull in your belly and use your core strength to keep you lifted.

You can stay right there for a few breaths and then lower your legs, but if you want to try another variation, it's a lot of fun. Keeping your feet connected, bring them down between your arms and then move them to the outside of your

arms, straightening them out to the sides in a wide-legged boat pose.

Another fun variation on this pose is called Sailboat. From the wide-legged version of Partner Boat, cross your wrists and hold onto your partner's opposite hands. Then let go with one hand and turn your body open, your arm reaching out and behind you. Then come back to the center, switch hands, and try the other side.

Then, if you are feeling really strong, take a deep breath and let go of each other's hands and find your balance on your own.

### *Yoga Obstacle Course*

A Yoga Obstacle Course is a fun way to work as a group and create a shared experience. It requires creativity, cooperation, and patience, and it is one of the most requested activities by our students.

Gather up some Yoga mats or towels (anything that you can use to define a "station"). Place them in a row, a circle, a squiggle, or any other shape you would like. Each station will be a different activity or obstacle.

Gather up any props that you might want to use, such as balls, feathers, puppets, or bells.

Work as a group to decide what activity will take place at each station. Here are some ideas: a Yoga pose or breathing activity; a part of a Yoga game, such as carrying a bell from one end of the mat to another without letting it ring; choosing a finger puppet or stuffed animal from a selection, and creating the Yoga pose of that animal; creating a *mantra* and chanting it three times. An obstacle course can have any type of movement or activity within it, so be creative and have fun.

Make your way through the obstacle course one person at a time, or just make sure you leave enough space between participants to avoid a traffic jam. When everyone has completed the course, take a minute to appreciate your collective inventiveness, then move everything around to create a whole new obstacle course.

## Appendix 2. Activities for Reducing Anxiety

### *Turning Colors: Yoga Nidra For Children*

*Yoga nidra* (Yogic sleep) is a very deep relaxation technique in which the person's attention is guided very slowly throughout the entire body. With children, we often use a variation called "Turning Colors." This variation uses the power of color to bring an additional depth to the practice, as colors are strongly connected to our emotional

state. Students and teachers can modify how this practice makes the students feel by changing the color used for the visualization.

Begin lying down on your back with your legs extended and arms at your sides, palms facing up to the sky. Close your eyes and let your breath become soft and even.

Choose a color for your visualization that complements the effect that you would like to create in your body. For example, choose blue for a soothing and calming experience, yellow to lift your mood, or orange to help energize you.

Now take your attention to your toes. Begin to imagine that your toes are slowly turning your chosen color. Imagine how it feels to be this color. Is it warm and soft or cool and silky? Is the color dark or light? Bright or subtle?

As you breathe in, imagine the color spreading very slowly, just a little farther up along your legs. Let each inhalation pull the color up through your body until you are completely full of your color, all the way to your hair and eyelashes.

How quickly the color moves up your body will depend on how long you want your practice to last, but the more slowly you can go, the deeper the relaxation.

When you are completely full of your color, imagine a tiny white light glowing inside you at your heart center. Let this light get brighter and brighter as you begin to glow and radiate with your color. As the light gets brighter, imagine it pushing the color out into the atmosphere until you are surrounded by a shimmering cloud of your color. Slowly, turn back to your regular color.

Keep that light glowing inside your heart as you gently bring yourself back to the world and move through the rest of your day.

### *Crossing-the-Line Game*

Stress and anxiety are often caused or made worse by the feeling that we are alone in the world—that no one understands us or what we are going through, and that no one has had the same experiences we have had. Although sometimes this is true, usually there are many other people going through similar challenges. Knowing this can be a very reassuring and calming force in our lives. This is a group activity best done with eight or more people.

Begin this activity by dividing into two groups and having people form two rows facing each other, about eight feet apart. Place a line (using string, masking tape, etc.) about three feet in front of each group.

There should be one person who is the caller or director. When that person says a statement, anyone for whom that statement is true crosses the line into the middle. When you

cross the line, take a moment to silently make eye contact with the other people in the middle, acknowledging your shared experience.

This game can be as simple or as meaningful as you choose to make it. The following statements are just suggestions, and you should change or add to them based on the needs of your group. Be sensitive to any issues that may arise, and carefully match your choice of statements to your capacity to support anyone in the class who may be upset by them.

**Cross the line if you \_\_\_\_\_.**

- Have brown hair
- Have been embarrassed
- Can wiggle your ears
- Have made someone feel bad
- Love to read
- Are an artist
- Were born in (your city)
- Want to be happier
- Like to play sports
- Have cried this week
- Love animals
- Are a big sister or brother
- Feel peaceful today
- Feel beautiful today
- Have helped someone this week
- Have hugged someone today
- Have been afraid of another person
- Have done something you are ashamed of
- Have done something you are proud of

## Appendix 3. Activities for Building Focus and Concentration

### *Sa Ta Na Ma*

*Sa ta na ma* is a variation on the phrase *sat nam*, which means, “I am all that I am.” It is an active meditation to affirm and ground yourself in any situation. It is also an extremely useful tool for students who have trouble keeping their bodies still. *Sa ta na ma* will help wake you up if you are feeling slumped and will draw you back to the core of your being so that you can act confidently. It is a great activity to practice with students before a test or other challenging task.

This meditation combines vocalization with movement of your fingers. Begin by connecting your thumb to your pointer finger for “*sa*,” your thumb and middle finger for

“*ta*,” your thumb and ring finger for “*na*,” and thumb and pinky for “*ma*.”

Put enough pressure to feel the connection your fingers are making and be present with that feeling.

You may begin slowly, using both hands simultaneously, and as you feel more comfortable, getting a bit faster. You can start by saying “*Sa ta na ma*” loudly and then each round lower your voice until it becomes a whisper and then continue repeating it silently to yourself for a few rounds.

As you feel ready, you may end there, or you can gently bring your voice back up to a conversational volume, keeping your tone soft.

You can try this type of active meditation with any four-word (or syllable) *mantra* or saying. Feel free to experiment and be creative. Some examples are “I am so strong,” “I will be kind,” “I have no fear,” and so on.

### *Walk Stop Wiggle Sit*

Walk Stop Wiggle Sit is a very simple game that requires tremendous attention and listening skills. It is enjoyable for a wide range of age groups and is a great way to refocus a group.

One person is calling the action, while the rest of the group is following that person’s direction. The director begins, saying, “When I say ‘walk,’ you walk. When I say ‘stop,’ you stop. When I say ‘wiggle,’ you wiggle. When I say ‘sit,’ you sit.” Then take a few rounds with these being the guidelines, going as quickly or slowly with changing commands as seems suitable to the group.

After a few of these warm-up rounds, start to switch the directions with its opposite. “When I say ‘walk,’ you *stop*. When I say ‘stop,’ you *walk*. When I say, ‘wiggle,’ you *sit*. When I say ‘sit,’ you *wiggle*.”

Have fun with this. Vary the pace and the order of the instructions so that the group really has to think about their actions.

This can be done for as long as you like, and as the group is ready, you can add in any other sets of movements. Examples include: clap/jump, squat/spin, etc. You can also make pairs of movements out of Yoga poses.

Play this game when your group seems scattered but has extra energy. Say, “How about a few rounds of Walk Stop Wiggle Sit?” This allows you an alternative to a potentially frustrating power struggle with your class. If you are working with students who are having a chatty day and you feel like they just aren’t listening, this game is a wonderful way to say, “I think we need to practice our listening skills today.” In addition to practicing listening skills, this game is also an opportunity for people to pause and think about what they

really want to do. So often we react instinctually instead of mindfully to life's challenges, and end up making wrong choices. This game helps train the mind to pause, evaluate, and then act, a valuable life skill for anyone.

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