

"The Yoga Service Best Practices Guide is an invaluable resource for educators bringing yoga into school settings to promote positive student outcomes. Drawing upon what we know about child development and developmentally appropriate practice, the book offers clear guidance on how best to teach yoga to children and teens in school settings. I highly recommend this book."

— PATRICIA JENNINGS, Professor at UVA Curry
School of Education, author of *Mindfulness for Teachers*

"This is a remarkable effort; a sage, inspiring, pragmatic and well presented manual of best practices for every one seeking to provide "safe, effective, inclusive, and sustainable" yoga classes in schools. The collective wisdom and experience is immediately apparent."

— JOHN KEPNER, Executive Director: International
Association of Yoga Therapists

"This is a thoughtful, well researched guide that should be an essential read for anyone wanting to bring yoga to schools. I'm so excited that the Yoga Service Council has been able to create a resource of this caliber using a collaborative model that leaves room for individual styles and philosophies. This is exactly what the field of yoga service needs- agreed upon best practices that unify all the great work already being done."

— HALA KHOURI, M.A. E-RYT, Co-founder Off the Mat,
Into the World, Somatic Counselor,
Yoga Teacher and Mother

"As a principal and superintendent I have implemented yoga programs in urban and suburban schools and have witnessed the success with students of all ages. Academics increase and off task behavior decreases with every yoga breath students take. *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools* is a great resource to start a yoga program in your school."

— CYNTHIA ZURCHIN, Superintendent of Schools, author
of *The Whale Done School*

"*Best Practices for Yoga in Schools* is a must have for anyone teaching or considering teaching yoga and mindfulness in a school setting. The book synthesizes an incredible body of knowledge and gives specific guidance in how to create effective programs that have lasting impact. I wish I had had this resource 20 years ago."

— MARIAM GATES, Director of Kid Power Yoga and author of
Good Night Yoga: A Pose by Pose Bedtime Story and *Good Morning
Yoga: A Pose by Pose Wake Up Story*

"A lot of very bright and experienced teachers, researchers, and clinicians gathered together and worked long and hard to create this well documented publication. For anyone who dreams to include the powerfully beneficial practices of yoga - such as movement, conscious breathing, and meditation, into any school curriculum, *Best Practices for Yoga in Schools* is an incomparable resource. To be effective and supported by the entire community, yoga must be introduced progressively and safely by well trained teachers. When offered in this manner yoga can be a powerful aid in helping students of all ages gain and maintain physical, psychological, and mental fitness, and manage stress. This book details how that can be accomplished."

— BERYL BENDER BIRCH, Co-Founder The Glve Back Yoga Foundation

YOGA SERVICE BEST PRACTICES GUIDE: VOL 1

BEST PRACTICES FOR YOGA IN SCHOOLS

Presented by the Yoga Service Council
and the Omega Institute

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AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITORS

Traci Childress and Jennifer Cohen Harper

It has been an honor to work with so many dedicated people to bring this white book into being. From its inception, everyone involved came to the project with a deep commitment to the work of sharing yoga in schools. Creating this resource required us to explore ourselves, our work, our field, and many intersecting ideas and definitions. This challenged us, and we know this work will continue to challenge us as the field of yoga in schools evolves.

Yoga, as Sat Bir Khalsa points out in the forward article of this book, is a set of practices that support the development of self-awareness and self-regulation, along with improving physical and mental health outcomes for children. When taught in schools, high quality yoga programs have the potential to improve both student wellbeing and readiness to learn, as well as contribute to an improved school climate. Currently, we know of over 900 schools with official yoga programs. There are undoubtedly more, and many teachers and parent volunteers share yoga with children as well. These programs are growing steadily. With so many children experiencing yoga in school, it is critical that we work as a community to share information and build our capacity to offer programming that fully respects the needs of both students and schools.

The information offered in this white book is meant to support those who wish to share school-based yoga in ways that are safe, effective, inclusive, and sustainable. This includes yoga instructors and yoga service

organizations, as well as school teachers and administrators, parents and the school community. Our hope is that this guidance, derived from the collective experience of the larger community, will benefit the children and be useful for those serving them.

The best practices outlined in this book are based on the knowledge of 23 contributors and their collective years of work in the field. You can find contributor biographies at the end of this book. As a new field, there is not yet extensive research to support every practice suggested here. However, we confidently offer these practices as a solid foundation from which the field of yoga in schools can grow. They are based on the collective wisdom and collaborative input of the paper's many contributors; preliminary research; the experiences of practitioners, teachers, and administrators; and research from related fields, including education, sociology, and child development. We hope this book fuels future research projects and helps articulate the nuanced questions that will stimulate scientific inquiry into school-based yoga.

In order to understand the context in which we put this book together, a brief overview of some core concepts and definitions follows, including how we define a “best practice,” what we mean by yoga and yoga service, and how yoga in schools fits within those related frameworks.

The Relationship Between Yoga, Yoga Service, and Yoga in Schools

Sharing yoga in schools is a winding path that requires awareness and skill in many areas beyond the knowledge of how to teach yoga practices. To effectively and sustainably offer high-quality yoga programming in a school setting requires that we grapple with, and address head-on, the intersecting realities of the school environment.

To begin this conversation, we needed a clear definition of yoga. We chose to use a definition that reflects many yoga styles and that encompasses core practices that are often included in research on yoga's efficacy: yoga is a set of practices that

includes postures or movement, breathwork, focused attention, and deep relaxation. We recognize that other aspects of yoga, including ethical, psychological, and philosophical study, may be an important component of some programs.

While this definition of yoga is helpful, we know that sharing yoga in schools involves more than just yoga. So, we chose to frame the discussion within the broader context of yoga service.

Yoga in Schools is Yoga Service

For this project, we used the working definition of yoga service first published by the *Huffington Post* in 2015 in an interview we (Traci Childress and Jennifer Cohen Harper) did with Rob Schware, Board President of the Yoga Service Council. It defines yoga service not by who is served, but rather by the manner in which the practices are offered:

Yoga service is the intentional sharing of yoga practices within a context of conscious relationship, supported by regular reflection and self-inquiry.

Teaching yoga in schools is first and foremost about teaching yoga to children and youth. Being in conscious relationship with students in this situation means being educated in youth development and able to adapt teaching techniques to the way children learn. All children do not experience and react to the world in the same way, and we must educate ourselves about the many things that can affect our students' experiences. We must be conscious of issues related to many factors, including culture, religion, race, socio-economic status, and language; have an understanding of specific needs and sensitivity to trauma history; be aware of how behavior management strategies affect students' sense of safety and self-confidence; understand how school culture and organizational mandates influence children; and more. Being in conscious relationship with students when teaching yoga in schools is much like being in conscious relationship with the entire world, as almost every facet of a society is reflected in its children. This is a complicated and challenging task, and undertaking it requires substantial reflection and self-inquiry.

When we step into a school, we step into a space that is shared by people with experiences and histories that may vary widely from our own. In order to be of true service, we must be willing to open our heart and mind to different perspectives and opinions, recognize our own assumptions and tendencies, seek out advisors and trusted colleagues who can help us hold ourselves accountable, and work to reduce barriers to meaningful relationships.

Combining knowledge of developmentally appropriate yoga practices, conscious relationship practices, and self-inquiry and reflection allows us to offer meaningful school-based yoga programs that have the potential to transform the educational environment, provide young people with tools to support their wellbeing, and help students thrive in a wide variety of situations.

What Are Best Practices? Why Are They Needed for School-Based Yoga?

The term “best practice” has been used to describe what works or is effective in a particular situation or environment.

A best practice is not:

- complicated,
- trying to prove a particular perspective or solve a research question,
- used to further one person’s work or a particular program, or
- a marketed version of a practice.

Any school-based yoga program can, and should, have its own best practices. This book articulates more generalized practices that have application across programs and in a variety of contexts and can be utilized by anyone in the community. We also considered questions that might be relevant for the yoga in schools community or for future research, as we recognize that many questions remain unanswered in this work.

When we step into the school environment, we become responsible for other people's children. This responsibility demands that we connect to a body of work that is larger than our own. When we work as islands, we inevitably work with blind spots. One goal of collaboratively outlining these best practices is to empower us as we connect our work so that we can hold one another accountable for bringing yoga into schools with a shared level of understanding. In the end, the aim for the field must be bigger than the aim of our individual programs. Our goal must be to improve our understanding of how to share yoga with youth in schools in a safe, effective, and just way.

How This Book is Organized

This publication is a White Book, sometimes also referred to as a White Paper. A white book is a publication created by a group of experts in order to express an opinion, make a statement, or share knowledge. In this case, the experts come from the field of yoga and education. This publication lives in the context of research that supports its claims, but it most explicitly expresses the wisdom and knowledge that this particular group of contributors and editors were able to cull from their years of practice in the field. The intention of this publication is to be user friendly, concise, and when possible, to point readers to concrete references that relate, contextualize, and support the claims. It is also significant that this publication can work in reverse. By bringing experts together to articulate concise understandings they share about what works and what is important in the field, we are mapping out details of interest to the research world that can support the articulation of important research questions.

There were many contributors to this project. As editors, we (Traci Childress and Jennifer Cohen Harper) worked as both project developers and content editors: organizing the in-person gathering and related events, contributing and revising writing, collecting and synthesizing the input of other contributors, and organizing and editing the content. We worked with four outstanding contributing editors, whose roles were to review and revise content provided by contributors, as well as provide writing on relevant sections of the book according to their

areas of expertise. Contributors attended the working meeting at the Omega Institute, helped to create content, and supported the editors throughout the revisions. The book was then evaluated by four reviewers who offered support and feedback before the final version you are holding was complete.

As we sought to integrate the ideas generated through our collaboration, the structure of this paper became clear. Prior to this introduction is an overview of the current research on yoga in schools, along with a scientific rationale for offering school based yoga, written by Dr. Sat Bir Khalsa. Then the first four chapters examine overarching information relevant to all yoga service providers working in schools. In Chapter One, we discuss culture, communication, and getting programs set up in a way that maximizes sustainability. In Chapter Two, we explore the content of yoga in schools programs through some best practices relating to curriculum development. Chapter Three describes suggestions for staffing programs and training yoga teachers to work in school settings, and Chapter Four offers considerations for the legal requirements, safety concerns, and logistical matters that may arise.

In Chapter Five, we offer a deeper exploration of practices related to the cultivation of productive and mutually respectful relationships, both among adults and between instructors and students. This chapter examines more closely some of the ideas discussed in our description of conscious relationship, in recognition of the fact that it is our responsibility as a community to hold ourselves accountable and serve every child with clarity and compassion, regardless of their background or circumstance.

The final two chapters (Elementary Age and Early Childhood; Adolescence) examine working with students of specific ages and consider developmentally relevant information.

For clarity, throughout the book we refer to yoga teachers as *instructors*, and classroom teachers as *teachers*. When speaking about yoga based organizations, we refer to them as *providers*. In some contexts, the term provider is used to refer to yoga organizations and individual yoga instructors collectively.

At the end of each chapter, you will find that we have provided references, to highlight works that have inspired, supported or reported the work of the contributors.

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach

We are inspired by how this book's contributors came together, wrestled with hard questions, and identified some important issues for us to consider and evaluate as a community. We hope that we can commit as a field to delve into the questions, consider the discrepancies, look for synergies, and build relationships with research institutions, related fields, and one another.

We hope these suggestions serve you well. No teacher, program, or school can implement all of these best practices. Yet an awareness of the value of each one—and consideration of each best practice's significance to our individual work—will support us as we evolve. We invite you to join us in the process of reflecting on how our work relates to existing research and the larger community, and refining the questions we must ask of ourselves and each other in order to best serve our children.