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## Om a little teapot: Yoga Ed, taught in some Miami-Dade schools, helps children relieve stress

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Children are natural mimics. They copy what mommy and daddy do and sometimes that's adorable. But when the little ones start picking up on adult problems, such as stress, then it's not so cute.

One in five children will be obese by 2010, according to a new report from the Institute of Medicine, a group advising the government on health issues. The suicide rate among children 10 to 14 quadrupled in the past decade.

Yoga Ed hopes to reverse those statistics.

The program, new at several Miami-Dade County schools this year and already popular at grade schools in Los Angeles and Canada, aims to teach simple yoga techniques to children and their teachers to help relieve stress and improve physical fitness. The journal *School Psychology Review* recently opined that yoga for children could offer "heightened awareness, reduced tension and improved concentration . . . conducive to learning."

The idea of children, as young as 5 and normally bouncing off the walls, getting into disciplined downward dog, cobra or sun salutation poses -- hallmarks of traditional yoga -- isn't farfetched.

"The ancient yogis observed that animals in nature imitate yoga poses. Animals move in lots of cool ways. Babies are natural yogis," observes Yoga Ed instructor Jill Rapperport. "For kids, we get to use our imagination and pretend we are snakes and dogs and cats and trees and rocks and rivers and waterfalls. We get to go on adventures."

On a recent afternoon, 14 children, in grades kindergarten through fifth, are on multicolored mats in a portable at Sunset Elementary School in South Miami. The children are about to undertake an undersea adventure -- without getting wet.

But first, Carolina Sanchez de Varona, 8, pretends she's a chameleon and sketches its likeness on a pad placed in front of her on a purple yoga mat. Though only a third-grader, she's not shy about extolling the virtues of yoga.

"I use it a *lot*," Carolina says. "I use it for stretching and playing so my muscles don't get tight -- like my mom's."

Classmate Celina Riquier, 9, found another bonus in what she has learned here. "I'm in school so usually I've had a tiring day so [yoga's] good to relax your mind," she says.

For reasons such as these, Yoga Ed was readily accepted by the school, says Sunset Elementary principal Aline Sarria.

"With the pressures of test taking and all the pressures students have on them now, Yoga Ed fit in well with relieving some of the anxiety students have."

The course, held four times throughout the school year with a limit of 15 students per session, is part of Sunset's after-school camp.

Before the school year began, Rapperport, who also coordinates fledgling Yoga Ed programs at North Beach Elementary, Lawton Chiles Middle School, Martin Luther King Middle School and Bay Point School, trained a group of Sunset teachers in basic yoga principles.

"She showed them how to start the day with a positive attitude, how to release anxiety before test taking," Sarria says. "If a situation becomes what we call 'a bump in the road' -- two students getting into it with one another -- [teachers] can defuse it in a calm manner."

The program is too new to gauge its effect on test scores and cumulative behavior, but Monica Montes, mom to yoga students Bella, 6, and Frank, 5, is sold on it.

"They like to do yoga whenever they are tense or muscle-achey after playing baseball or being in the pool for a long time. They'll start doing some of the poses like the cat or downward dog . . . for fun but I realize it's them getting themselves limber," she says.

"They see me doing that a lot when my back hurts so they figure let's do what mommy does and mimic," Montes says as Bella sits cross-legged before her. "I thought it would be good to teach them at a young age that you can exercise

whenever you want and it doesn't have to be in a class structure."

Today, the lesson focuses on breathing. People breathe an average of 22,600 breaths a day.

"When you learn to consciously breathe you can learn to manage yourself in all different situations," Rapperport says. ``Children learn to manage and identify stress through the breath. There's breath to energize. Breath to focus your mind. Breath to calm you and help you sleep. Breath to integrate both sides of the brain."

Lecture portion over, everyone's preparing for a dive under the sea. Rapperport provides imaginary goggles and wet suits to her young students. Everyone sits on mats, eagerly accepting the goodies. If Rapperport were explaining the coming stretch to adults she might say: ``Put your legs out straight in front of you. Reach for your toes and then slowly peel up and stretch your arms above your head."

Try that dry explanation with a kindergartner and watch little eyes glaze over.

But put that child in the same position and tell them to put on their wet suit, starting with the feet, then wriggle into the tight, tight suit and then pull the hood over the head and greet the sun. You'll see fast results. "Hello, Mr. Sun!" is a much more effective command than your old P.E. instructor's order to place the arms above the head. Forget FCAT, we're doing the cat -- backs arching up and down.

"When teaching kids you have to be a little creative and get them to connect to the bodies [using] imagination. You can't be as specific as you can with adults," Rapperport says.

Fourteen little bodies are suited up and hardly realizing they have just done a yoga stretch to improve flexibility.

Over the course of an hour, the children have become cats, snakes, dragons and dogs to perform a roster of ancient yoga poses, each for a specific purpose. Rapperport, who says she hopes to incorporate this program at as many South Florida schools as possible, explains some of them:

- ``Forward bends take you inside, for being quiet and introverted.
- ``Back bends, anything that opens the front of the body, helps you to be more extroverted and to be more open.
- ``Standing poses -- like the warrior pose -- tend to strengthen and build confidence.
- ``Twists are cleansing, releasing the build-up of stress and any toxic stuff in the body."

That's all technical stuff. Tiago Lopez, 10, a Sunset fifth-grader, is more excited about how Yoga Ed will benefit him.

``This will help my sailing."

Yoga Ed is currently offered as a program at a few Miami schools and available to enrolled students. Schools on the roster so far are:

- Sunset Elementary School
- North Beach Elementary
- Lawton Chiles Middle School
- Martin Luther King Middle School • Bay Point School

For information on starting a program at your school contact Jill Rapperport at 305-342-7275 or e-mail [jill@yogaatschools.com](mailto:jill@yogaatschools.com).