

Yoga in a Child's Daily Life

By Indra Singh

As a yoga teacher and mother, I teach my own children yoga on a daily basis. I reinforce the importance of experiencing “sadhana” – personal daily practice to maximize health. “Yoga” means to unite and, as a practice, incorporates many different aspects of life: physically through movement; mentally through meditation and specific breathing techniques known as “pranayama;” and spiritually through meditation, relaxation and chanting.

Children of all ages experience so much stimulation that it becomes difficult for them to enjoy the simpler things in life. Experiencing yoga from a young age allows children to be with themselves. And, as with most things, the younger you begin the easier yoga becomes. As children learn, they absorb information with pleasure and enthusiasm and, at the same time, have a great deal of fun.

In this article, I will expand on the basics of yoga for children that I presented in *Natural Life Magazine's* May/June 2009 issue. To help encourage a daily practice for children, I have, with the help of my daughter Kali, included some of the key yoga asanas (poses) and breathing techniques to help beginners from as young as five years of age.



Trikonasana (Triangle Pose) Variation

Basic Breathing Technique: Full Yoga Breath

This breathing technique can be included at the beginning of a practice to help connect with the breath, bring awareness to the mind, and slow down the body. It can also be added at the end of practice to encourage relaxation.

- Lie comfortably on your back and become aware of the movement of the breath flowing through the nostrils.
- Place your hands on top of your abdomen with the middle fingers touching at the navel.
- As you breathe in, allow the abdomen to expand like a large balloon. This will naturally create a space between the middle fingers. As you exhale through the nose, allow the abdomen to gently relax. The middle fingers will come back together.
- Use the full capacity of the lungs.
- After five minutes, you will feel totally relaxed and calm, the mind will be still and focused, and the breath will be smooth and rhythmic.

Paschimottasana – Forward Bend

When practiced regularly, this will increase flexibility in the hip joints, tone and massage the entire abdominal area, and remove excess weight from the abdominal region.

- Sitting on the floor with the legs out straight, become aware of the sitting bones. Keep the spine lengthened upwards. Visualize a long string tied to the top of your head that stretches all the way up to the sky and, with every in-breath, the string is lengthening your spine upwards, helping to keep it straight and long. This creates space between each vertebrae in the back.
- Keep an awareness of the full yoga breath as your arms raise upwards above the head with the palms parallel and shoulders relaxed. Flex your feet and keep the body in the shape of a right angle.



Paschimottasana



- As you begin to stretch downwards towards the feet, keep the spine long by using the full space around you, stretching upwards, forwards and, if possible, aim to stretch beyond the feet. Keep the eyes closed; visualize and feel your body stretching.
- Grasp your big toes with the fingers, and the thumbs pushing into the heels, and draw the toes towards the head. If holding the big toes isn't possible, place your hands on the ankles or the legs. Move into the position slowly without jerking or forcing.
- As you hold the position, lengthen on the inhalation and relax into the stretch on the exhalation. The more the body relaxes, the more it will stretch.
- To complete, release the fingers from the toes and, as you inhale, raise the arms up to the parallel position, keeping the length in the body until you return back to a right angle.
- Take a deep breath in, exhale and release the arms down by your sides.
- When beginning the posture, hold for five long slow deep breathes and, as practice increases, lengthen the time.



Bhujangasana/Cobra Pose – Backward Bend

This asana improves circulation in the back and tones the nerves. When the nerves are stimulated, communication between the brain and the rest of the body is increased. Also stimulates appetite and alleviates constipation.

- Lying flat on the stomach, place your legs straight out behind with the feet close together and the soles pointing upwards. Rest the palms of the hands on the floor underneath the shoulders. Place the forehead on the floor. Let the whole body relax and breathe a full yoga breath with the eyes closed.
- When you are ready to begin, take a deep breath in and slowly begin to lift the upper body off the floor raising the head, neck, and shoulders. Straighten the elbows and keep the shoulders relaxed. It is important to use the back muscles to hold the position rather than the muscles in the arms. Relax the pubic bone towards the floor, tilt the head slightly backwards and breathe for five long, slow deep breaths.
- To release, exhale and slowly relax the body down to the starting position.

Variation:

Bhujangasana is a strong spinal stretch and a simpler variation may be practiced in the beginning. This is called “sphinx pose.” It can be achieved in the same way as cobra pose except the forearms and elbows remain on the floor throughout the pose.



Photos of the author's daughter Kali by Keith Hartwell

Trikonasana/Triangle Pose – Lateral Stretch

Trikonasana tones the entire body, strengthening the muscles of the waist, back and legs. It improves digestion and stimulates appetite.

- Stand to the side of the mat with a leg-length distance between the feet. Turn your right foot out to the right side and turn the toes of the left foot slightly inwards. The heel of the right foot should be opposite the left instep.
- Inhale and stretch the arms up to shoulder level with the palms facing down. Exhale and stretch towards the right side. Hold here for two or three breaths and feel the lateral stretch all the way down the left side of the body.

Trikonasana (Triangle Pose)



- Exhale and move the right hand down to rest on the right leg as far as the shin, stretching the left arm directly upwards with the palm facing forward. Turn the head to look up at the left palm. Keep the chin tucked in towards the chest and take three to five full yoga breaths.
- To return to the starting position, inhale and stretch upwards with the finger tips of the left hand. Release the right hand from the shin and bring the body slowly back up to standing, keeping

the arms stretched out at shoulder level. Exhale and release the hands back down to the sides of the body. Turn both feet to face forward before repeating on the opposite side.

Variations:

1. If the full position is difficult to achieve in the beginning with the legs straight, it may be possible to hold the position with the front knee slightly bent.
2. If there is a problem with the shoulder or arm, relax the top arm on the side of the body or rest the hand on the waist with the elbow pointing upwards.

Halasana/Plough Pose – Inverted Posture

Halasana has a multitude of benefits, as do the majority of inverted poses. These include:

- All the internal organs are massaged, which helps to activate digestion.
- Relief from constipation and dyspepsia.
- The spleen is revitalized.

- Insulin production is improved as well as the function of the liver and kidneys.
- The spinal column is toned, which reduces back pain.
- Thyroid gland activity is regulated, which naturally balances the metabolic rate.

Halasana is also widely used in yoga therapy to help many disorders such as asthma, bronchitis, hepatitis, urinary tract and menstrual problems.

- Lying relaxed on your back with the legs and feet together, place the arms beside the body with the hands facing down. Connect with the breath.
- Inhale and lift the legs vertically so that the toes touch the floor behind the head. Rest the palms on the lower back keeping the chin tucked in towards the chest.
- Although the breath will become slightly restricted, continue to breathe deeply through the nose; this will help to strengthen the lungs and bring a fresh blood supply to the whole of the body when the asana is released.
- Beginners can start by holding the pose for fifteen seconds and, in time, increase to one minute.
- To release, slowly bring the back down to the floor one vertebrae at a time with awareness on the movement of the spine. Keep the legs straight, slowly lowering them both to the ground.

Variation:

If it is difficult to place the toes on the floor behind the head, take the legs back as far as possible and cradle the ankles with the hands so that the feet are a few inches above the ground.

To begin regular yoga practice, it is important to include at least one of each of these movements so that the whole body is lengthened in every direction possible. This will help to maximize practice and increase the body's strength and flexibility.

Indra Singh has been studying yoga for over twenty years and trained to be a yoga teacher in the UK, USA, and Brazil. Her main practice is kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan. She specializes in teaching children's yoga and yoga for children with special needs, as well as the benefits of yoga for the pregnant mother and her unborn baby. She writes articles on healthy living and natural lifestyles for a variety of magazines. She lives with her two daughters in the UK Visit her website at indrasinghyoga.com.

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Halasana (Plough Pose) in process