

Innovative Therapies May Benefit Your Child's Readiness for School

Who would think that yoga or sensory-motor play could help a child with academic readiness!? But these types of therapies may offer many benefits to children who are facing a variety of issues, such as autism, ADHD, sensory processing and motor skills disorders. With summer on the way out and school on the way in, why not jump start your child's re-entry with some fun activities to support academic readiness and provide a host of other benefits!

Yoga Can Be Fun & Effective

Yoga can be a fun and effective way to help kids of all ages and abilities to grow and develop to their full potential. "Yoga" means unity, and refers to the mind-body-spirit connection between the individual and the whole. Yoga includes postures, breathing techniques, eye exercises, mantras or positive affirmations, and relaxation/meditation techniques. The best way to get your child started is for you to learn and practice it with him or her. This not only helps you to help your child, but it can give you much-needed stress relief and exercise!

Physical benefits of Yoga

Regularly practicing yoga asanas (or postures) brings improved muscle strength, flexibility and body awareness, which helps children with developmental delays to improve these underlying motor skills.

Yoga also includes pranayama (or breath control). There are a variety of breathing techniques that warm the body up, cool it down, and stimulate a relaxation response. Our breath is our connection between our mind, body and those around us. Our muscles need oxygen to contract and relax fully, and many children and adults do not breathe effectively. Learning breathing techniques is especially helpful for children with respiratory problems, low or high muscle tone, and speech disorders, as these exercises open the rib cage and strengthen the abdominal and accessory breathing and speaking muscles.

Many childhood disorders such as allergies, asthma, and autism spectrum disorders are associated with immune function and

Additional physical benefits of yoga may include improved:

- Digestive processes
- Sleep patterns
- Lung Capacity
- Immune function
- Decreased pain

difficulties with digestion and sleep. Yoga offers a natural, non-invasive approach to improving overall bodily health.

Mental/Cognitive benefits

Perhaps one of the best benefits of yoga is reducing stress and anxiety, which can bring about many of the physical benefits listed above. Too many demands, deadlines and limited down-time in our technology-driven, fast-paced world contribute to children's stress. At the same time, kids are not getting as much physical exercise or stress-relieving activity.

Balancing poses and breathing techniques can also help with attention or focusing. Cognitive skills, such as sequencing and short-term memory, can be improved by learning and practicing yoga postures and sequences. Younger children can develop imaginary play skills by learning to move their bodies in different ways, such as pretending to be a dog, cat or tree.

Easy Ways to Begin Yoga with Your Children

1. Breathe! Be a good role model for your child by talking about breathing. For example, while you are in the car, take 10 deep breaths with your child. Help your child learn to breathe by placing a hand on his/her stomach. The stomach should rise as the child breathes in, and fall as the child breathes out. Try to breathe in through the nose, and out through the nose or mouth. Count how many seconds you breathe in and how many you breathe out. Gradually try to increase the time, especially for the exhale.
2. Move and stretch! When you get up in the morning, do a short series of stretches or yoga poses to warm up your body for the day. At bedtime, do some quiet poses and breathing.

Simple morning sequence:

Mountain pose: Stand with feet hip width apart and hands together at heart.

- Reach to sky and look up while breathing in.
- Swan dive arms down gently to the floor while breathing out.
- Look up while breathing in, then breathe out to squeeze your legs and relax your head.

Downward dog: Place both hands with fingers spread apart on the floor, shoulder width apart and arms directly under shoulders.

- Step each foot back so that your body makes an upside-down V.
- Stick your rear end up in the air and stretch back with just a slight bend in arms and legs. Heels can touch the floor if possible.

Evening poses:

- **Butterfly:** Sit on floor with both feet pressed together and knees apart, opening the knees to the floor. Keep the chest lifting and head aligned as if a string is pulling you to the ceiling. Take some good belly breaths here.
- **Owl:** Sit in a pretzel position (criss-cross legs) with same posture as above. Gently twist to one side reaching back with the hand to the floor behind you, looking in the direction you twist. Reach across with opposite hand to knee; hold as you wish but keep breathing here (You can say “hoo, hoo” if you want)!
- **Dead bug:** Lie down on your back. Bring knees to chest and grab outsides of feet, gently pulling the feet to the sides of your body, keeping knees bent. You can rock back and forth slowly in this position to massage your back.
- **Child’s pose:** Roll over on your belly, tucking knees under the chest and sitting back on the feet. Head gently rests on the floor and arms can rest behind you or in front of you on the floor. Take 10 good breaths here, feeling your breath rise through your back.

Sensory-Motor Play Sparks Multiple Benefits

Who would have guessed it – you can help your child develop building blocks for academic and writing skills with fun and interesting activities right in your home! The benefits of each activity are highlighted in bold:

- Use sidewalk chalk to make large “Figure Eights” on the sidewalk or driveway. (Try to begin in a “counterclockwise” direction as this correlates better with letter formation) Your child can then drive a toy car or truck on the racetrack he just drew, or jump along it with one or both feet. **Bilateral Coordination, Visual Motor**
- Use a small squirt bottle to water plants and clean up messy play outdoors such as finger painting, sandbox play, and sidewalk chalk. **Fine Motor, Hand Strength**

- For a motivating coloring activity, gather various textures from around the house and yard, and have your child place them under a piece of paper. Then have her color over them on the paper. As she does, talk about how it feels. (Ideas include sandpaper, aluminum foil, cardboard, leaves, flower petals, tree bark, etc.) **Sensory Awareness, Visual Motor**
- Grab your child's interest by having him practice forming letters and numbers with a variety of materials: cooked spaghetti, Play-Doh, finger paint, foam soap or shaving cream (the latter two on a mirror or bath tub), sand in a sand box or at the beach. **Sensory Awareness, Handwriting**
- Give your child fun opportunities to use handwriting: write to a pen pal, write post cards, type emails, write grocery lists, keep a diary, write in or decorate a scrapbook, help to plan a party, play tic-tac-toe and hangman, do simple word searches and crossword puzzles. **Fine Motor, Handwriting**

Learn more about both of these therapies! Enroll your child in a class or small group where socialization provides great motivation!

About the author:

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