

# Why Yoga?

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Since launching the Atlanta Yoga Movement, we've had many people, from parents and friends to school administrators and teachers, ask us the following questions: why yoga? What good will it do? Why should we have it in our schools? To answer these important questions, I'll begin by offering a quote I recently discovered in Forbes Magazine. Yes, Forbes, of all places—that bastion of financial practicality, espousing yoga! What follows the quote is a brief discussion of the main benefits of yoga, as we view them here at AYM. Read and enjoy!

*“This is about more than just mindfulness,” says BK Bose, Ph.D. “It’s about the integration of these modalities. This is not some feel good, foo-foo practice from the Himalayas. This is based in cutting edge neuroscience, trauma research, and in somatic psychology. This is vital to ensure our well-being, and to our economy. Let’s come together under the banner of transformative practices, and put forward the essence of yoga, not the hype. This is simple. Anyone can do this, anytime, anywhere. If you can move, if you can breathe, then you can do the practice.”*

Yoga is a powerful tool which promotes overall health and well-being. We've developed a system of teaching yoga that helps kids, their educators, and their administrators to become more relaxed, more focused, more confident, and more creative. The practice of yoga benefits our students physically, emotionally, socially, and academically.

## Physical Benefits

Over the past 50 years, it has been well documented in scientific journals that yoga increases strength, balance, flexibility, coordination, control, and awareness. Yoga has been embraced by professional athletes in all of our “Big Three” American Sports, and has been incorporated into the warm-up, strength, and post-game cool down routines of countless professional sports teams. Notable athlete yoga proponents are basketball stars LeBron James, Joe Johnson, and retired superstar Shaquille O’Neal. Professional football players Victor Cruz, Stephen Jackson, and Ricky Williams are avid yoga practitioners, and for years, yoga has been a regular (read mandatory) part of team practices for the New York Giants, the Philadelphia Eagles, the Cincinnati Bengals, and the Seattle Seahawks. Yoga can also be found as an integral part of spring training in

almost every professional Major League baseball team, and has been embraced by stars such as Alex Rodriguez and Barry Zito.

Learning yoga during youth gives individuals a body of knowledge that works in both the short-term and the long-term. In the short-term, yoga helps the battle against obesity and gives students a way to strengthen, heal, and regulate their bodies. After a session of yoga, students feel strong, relaxed, and balanced. This feeling of grounded vitality is crucial in creating an overall sense of wellness and health for an individual. Over the long-term, this same body of knowledge gives students the tools to keep themselves healthy for life. The downstream effects of a regular practice of yoga begun early in life are almost impossible to quantify: not only can yoga be enjoyed well into old age (it's possible to practice well into your 80's), but yoga can also hold down general health care costs by granting an individual a solid, productive, positive physical baseline. Good habits, when learned young, last for life, and yoga is one of the least expensive and most effective ways to incorporate simple, healthy, practices into an individual's daily life.

### **Psychological and Emotional Benefits**

The positive effect of regular exercise on an individual's psychological and emotional well-being is well documented, and the trend towards holistic exercise programs such as yoga is an integral part of the wellness movement that has swept the nation over the past decade.

Along with research into the physical benefits of yoga, health scientists have explored the internal benefits as well. Yoga helps to alleviate a broad range of common psychological challenges, such as anxiety and depression, but has been most documented as a simple way to cope with the one thing that everyone, from kids to adults, has to deal with every day: stress. While practicing yoga, the mind becomes calm and centered because the correct practice of a yoga posture demands the full attention of the practitioner—there is no room to worry about the past, and no time fret about the future. The mind is fully present in the moment, and for the duration of the class, whether 30 minutes, 60 minutes, or a full 90 minutes, the issues and problems of the outside world recede into the background, and the constant chatter of the brain is silenced. The union of body, breath, and movement acts as a simple technique of

psychological misdirection, and the student emerges from a yoga class with a sense of calm and centeredness from which they can re-enter the world with clarity, perspective, and focus.

In this way, yoga can be viewed as an easy to learn tool or coping mechanism which people can use to reduce the stress that is a natural part of their daily lives. A young student armed with this technique is more likely to display high levels of self-esteem and self-awareness, and will be more likely to act from a position of empowerment and strength, as opposed to a position of fear or confusion. From this place of calm, yoga teaches an additional skill, beyond that of a stress-reducer—how to recognize and cope with emotions. Yoga asks us to look inward, without judgment, and identify what is going on in the moment. If we feel angry, yoga teaches us to recognize and understand our anger. If we feel sad, yoga teaches us to recognize and understand our sadness. If we are happy and joyous, yoga likewise teaches us to recognize and understand. If we teach our children to honestly dialogue with their emotions, and give them tools for processing them positively, then they will be free to get on with the real business of their lives—school, friends, activities, and simply growing up.

### **Academic Benefits**

Cutting edge research in neuroscience shows that through the reduction of stress, yoga increases test scores, school attendance, graduation rates, and alleviates test anxiety. Yoga teaches students to focus fully in class, and deal with academic challenges from a place of calm and confidence, thus increasing not only their enjoyment of learning, but also their overall academic performance.

### **Interpersonal/Social Benefits:**

In our classes, we focus on and teach positive, respectful communication between all of our students, which alleviates bullying, negative peer-pressure, and gives our students a forum in which they can explore modes of communication and relationship which are free from the "Lord of the Flies" syndrome so common to interactions between teenagers. Yoga teaches compassion, empathy, self-confidence, and self-reflection—all of which lead to a more grounded individual, and thus, foster the growth of an individual less likely to express his or her emotions through self-destructive habits or in negative, non-productive ways such as bullying and violence.