



# How yoga is changing the classroom

Everybody get into the lotus position.... A business that brings yoga to primary schools around the country is yielding startling results - quieter lessons, better test scores and more confident children. Julie Ferry reports

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The traditional way of getting children to sit still and be quiet requires nothing more than instructing them to cross their legs and put their fingers on their lips. However, as this is 2007 rather than 1977, you can see why some schools are using rather different methods of behaviour management. One new approach is offering schools a more creative alternative and is producing results for all children, ranging from four-year-olds to 12-year-olds.

YogaBugs is a company that has trained more than 1,100 teachers in their dynamic yoga programme. It teaches children yoga postures, breathing and relaxation techniques through adventure stories that capture a child's imagination.

Through government initiatives like the School Sports Partnership, these teachers are now seeing around 40,000 children a week take part in lunchtime and after-school yoga clubs, which aim to improve fitness, flexibility and concentration.

The programme is the brainchild of sisters-in-law Fenella Lindsell and Lara Goodbody, who featured on BBC2's *Dragons' Den* last summer. They approached the show to fund a plan to franchise their business around the UK, but eventually turned down three of the "dragons'" investment offers and the opportunity of a buyout from one of them, to find a better investment deal after the programme.

Since *Dragons' Den* aired the business has gone from strength to strength, with a large boost to the number of teachers enrolling on the training courses and school-led demand for classes increasing tremendously.

"I used to run a large complementary health centre in London and we had a combination of adult and children's classes. The one that seemed to engender the most interest was Yogabugs," says Lindsell.

"So many parents were aware of the benefits they got themselves from yoga and they wanted to pass that on to their children. We thought it would be really fun to create lots of crazy adventures where children were interacting with different characters. In yoga, you have postures resembling trees, snakes and fish, so there are some fantastic ingredients already there to make up stories. It was immediately popular and we just naturally went from there into schools."

Delivered over a period of eight weeks, the programme takes children through a

range of activities according to their age. YogaBugs is for children from two-and-a-half up to seven and Yoga'd Up focuses on eight- to 12-year-olds.

"When I am teaching the younger ones, the focus is mainly on stories and adventures," says Jackie Wilson, who teaches the course at several primary schools in Nottingham.

"The other day we chose a medieval adventure because one of the little boys is fascinated by knights. We had to find the naughty dragon, get on our horses and make sure we had our swords, all while not hurting anybody.

"At the end of the course I ask them to create their own story and through that story we move into different poses. I've found it's fantastic for literacy because they really use their imaginations. So when they sit in their literacy lessons and the teacher wants them to create a story, the ideas that can flow are extraordinary."

A typical session starts with a warm-up, then the teacher will begin to weave an adventure while also concentrating on breathing and relaxation exercises. Children are always positioned as the heroes in each story, which helps to build confidence and raise their self-esteem.

Wilson explains that the confidence-building part of the class is what she finds the most rewarding. In one of her schools, she has been able to work closely with Year 6 children who are undergoing their SATs.

"For the last three years I've been trying to get to grips with what helps children to relax and feel confident before they take their SATs and I think this year my methods have been perfected.

"Every child should have the ability to learn how to relax, be still and visualise something that will help them to put all of their negative emotions about the test to one side. For example, I teach them to visualise a lion or a warrior to give them inner strength and confidence."

"We also do visualisations of a worry tree where they imagine any negative emotions, place them into an imaginary box and put it on the tree. They then turn away and when they turn back the box has disappeared. The children were so focused when they sat down at their tables this year to do the tests, it was amazing. The last three years I've worked with them the SATs results have been better than expected. I can't say that is all down to yoga, but the feedback has been very good."

The schools where Wilson teaches certainly seem to be in agreement that the programme helps children in lots of different ways. Amy Charlesworth is a Year 3 teacher and school sports coordinator at Rise Park primary school in Nottingham. She says that she has noticed a difference in the behaviour of the Year 3 children who attend the after-school yoga club.

"We get offered a lot of different clubs and we like to choose activities that are more unusual and give children an opportunity they wouldn't usually have. We choose a year group that we think needs it, would really enjoy it and would benefit from improved concentration," says Charlesworth.

"Everything Jackie Wilson did in the sessions was related back to their behaviour

and focus in the classroom, so they could use it afterwards. It has definitely helped."

Charlesworth has also been able to use some of the postures learnt through Yogabugs in another fitness session the school has embraced called Activate.

"Twice a day, every year group takes part in Activate. We do short exercises to music for about 10 minutes and some of the moves we have included are yoga moves. The kids who have attended the after-school club love demonstrating to the rest of the class. Activate is another way to get children focused after playtime so it fits in quite well with the ethos of yoga."

Anna de Souza, a reception class teacher at Norman Court Preparatory School in West Tytherley, Wiltshire, also noticed an improvement in the children's behaviour after Yogabugs teacher, Fiona Kitson, started her sessions at the school.

"Through yoga, the children are given the opportunity to release lots of energy, but in a controlled environment. This makes them calmer when they return to the classroom and behaviour is better," de Souza says.

"At the start of the yoga sessions, the children are very excited, lively and eager to get started. However, from the beginning, the breathing techniques teach them to slow down. They focus on themselves and try to ignore any distractions around them. By breathing deeply, they become calmer and more aware of their own bodies. As a result, they are in a better position to listen more carefully to instructions."

It is clear that yoga has a positive effect on younger children. But how does this controlled activity and its "my body is a temple" image fare with the body-conscious pre-teen group?

"In our classes we take the focus away from looking and competing with each other and get the children to look at themselves," says Lindsell.

"We also use positive affirmations to reinforce good messages about themselves. In Yoga'd Up we use plenty of music to make the classes fun, so we might even do some salutations to Green Day. We also do a lot of partner work, where they work together and learn to respect each other."

This programme can also help children with behavioural difficulties. As Wilson recalls: "I have been working with a boy who is challenging in the classroom, however he has never stepped out of line with me.

"He stays behind at the end of class, without being asked, to help put the mats away and he loves doing the relaxation side of yoga, which seems a bit of a contradiction as he is known for being quite boisterous. Seeing his self-esteem grow has been one of the most rewarding parts of teaching yoga."

For more details go to [yogabugs.com](http://yogabugs.com)

### **Activity for all**

Yoga has many health benefits, so most children will gain something from it.

It can help with pupils' posture, the mobility in the hips, as well as helping to build strength and increasing flexibility.

Younger children love the activity of yoga while the older ones enjoy the relaxation and learning to control their breathing.

It is inclusive so children who would not normally participate in sport enjoy the challenges of yoga because it is non-competitive. It enables them to enjoy a physical workout without the pressure sometimes associated with team sports

It can also help children who are particularly good at competitive sports. By giving them a better knowledge of their body they can improve the more technical parts of their game that require more balance and strength.