

**Opinion Article***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Beth Elenko*

Use of Yoga Practices for Young Children

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The purpose of this opinion paper is to present the use of yoga practices in young children, primarily those younger than age 3 years old. The benefits that are seen in older children are just as beneficial to the young child who is typically developing as well as for those who are at risk or developmentally delayed who participate in early intervention. Young children can use yoga strategies to promote motor, and sensory skills in the early years. Even if modified from typical yoga poses to enhance their skills in a fun and creative way. Applying these yoga practices with young children has limitedly been studied, and further research on the benefits and uses is still necessary. Programs that are developing need to increase the evidence to support their practices.

Keywords: Young child; Yoga; Early intervention; Motor; Sensory development**Abbreviations and definitions:** EI= early intervention

Early interventionists: occupational, physical therapists, speech language pathologists or special educators toddlers -typically referred to as children ages 1-3 years.

Introduction

Yoga practices in children have been steadily increasing over the years. A 2017 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) done every 5 years found that the use of yoga has increased in percentage almost tenfold in children ages 4-17 years [1]. Yoga is used with notable benefits throughout the lifespan. In children, yoga can help improve many skills such as decreasing anxiety, emotional regulation, improving body awareness, concentration, strength, flexibility, and behaviors that affect them. Through yoga we can improve our physical bodies, learn to breathe, and begin to take care of our bodies [2-5]. Most of the benefits of yoga have been demonstrated for school age children, even those with special needs [6-8]. Yet, yoga for young children under the age of 3 years has been studied the least in the literature [8-11], The purpose of this opinion paper is to increase awareness of using yoga practices with younger children.

Younger children especially toddlers, ages 1-3-year-olds can practice modified yoga poses. At a young age, children imitate the movements and behavioral practices of their caregivers whether

it be grandparents, parents, teachers or siblings. It is what they naturally do and how they learn their basic developmental skills. Yoga itself benefits not only mindfulness, and reduces stress but improves skills in motor, attention, and behavior [5]. The benefits are growing and outweigh the negatives if there are any, although in one study it has been reported that yoga may be harmful to young children due to their lack of development [8]. Yoga not only benefits typically developing children, but children with developmental disabilities who receive early intervention (EI) (services for children who are at risk for or have developmental delays from birth to the age of 3 years old). I would argue that simple yoga postures mimic motor skills and promote weight bearing and elongation of muscles in young children as they develop. This can not only be beneficial, but essential to their sensory motor development. There are some children whether developmentally delayed or who engage in sedentary play that can engage in this an alternative activity. One that promotes their motor learning through yoga and that could be transferred to their development of motor skills.

While there has been little research on benefits of yoga for young children [8-11], there is much to support the use and benefits of yoga practices on improving mindfulness of children especially in schools [1-5]. These same benefits can apply to younger children, and they go beyond mindfulness. In young children, primary development is occurring in the first years of life. Yoga can promote and enhance what is already naturally occurring, while simultaneously teaching the child an activity to promote mindfulness as they grow. Not only can this be done as a family activity, but it can also be done to enhance skills that may be delayed in young children under proper direction from early interventionists [7]. Early interventionists promote motor and sensory skills to optimize development in young children which yoga can simultaneously nurture.

Motor

Think about babies first movements against gravity during the first year of life. Babies push on their arms and lift their heads as early developmental skills. As they gain these skills and begin to be more active in their movements, they strengthen their core muscles as a stable base for their arms and legs to move more freely. By the time they are physically ready to walk and stable in these muscles, they can begin to imitate simple yoga poses. Many yoga poses encourage these basic movements in creative and fun ways for toddlers [11].

Even those toddlers that are developmentally delayed need to work on these skills and practice them in a variety of ways. This can be done by imitating animals or silly postures. While doing this, it allows them to imitate postures that enhance their movement capabilities. Thus, strengthening their core muscles in their trunk, head and neck as well as their extremities. Toddlers can work on postural control, muscles, and joint stability as they maintain these postures. Toddlers who need to work on increased upper body stability through weight bearing benefit from a fun and creative way as they imitate these simple and modified yoga poses. The practice and repetition in learning these motor skills and yoga integrate beautifully while building their endurance for movements which they can carry over into their daily routines. Many poses focus on balance and stability of posture. The young child's participation helps them with their balance and learning of these movement skills. This full body movement brings together their use of hands and feet enhancing bilateral integration and midline orientation. Overall, a toddler's motor development can be enhanced by creative and fun mechanisms using yoga poses and principles at an early age [11].

Sensory

As the young infant develops control motorically in different postures, other important sensory skills are developing simultaneously. They develop skills in their visual system as they gain control of their head and neck muscles and begin to move in space. As the child grows and experiences control in more movement, they

develop proprioception, a sense of body awareness to know where they are in space, in relation to the world around them and feel the surfaces their body touches in their environment. Yoga can provide this sense of body awareness as they hold various yoga positions which are essential for their sensory motor development. Their vestibular or movement system is enhanced by various postural changes, and head position as they explore different postures. The visual, proprioceptive, and vestibular systems are fundamental systems to development of a young child.

Discussion

While yoga has been known to improve mindfulness and decrease stress in persons across the lifespan, its benefits for learning have yet to be explored in young children [11]. Specifically, with young children with special needs in EI. Children today are affected by trauma and other stressors of their social-emotional development that would benefit from coping strategies [12]. These can include behavioral, breathing, focus, and meditation. Learning these at a young age can inspire children to implement practices across their lifetime. Modifications of yoga postures can be done to meet the needs of differing abilities as well. Many poses can be modified for young children who may not have the complete control or achieved the skill needed to maintain the poses.

Conclusion

Applying yoga principles to young children needs further research and continued practice to identify the benefits and strategies that work best for their young developing bodies. There is no reason to think that the benefits children ages 4 and up receive would not benefit typically developing children under 4. Further application for children with developmental delays under three with modifications is necessary under the guidance of their occupational and physical therapists. As programs develop and utilize these yoga poses to emulate benefits for younger children, it is critical that we increase the evidence to support them.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

No.

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