



Thanks to Ella, Olivia, Alice and Lucas.

...for kids!

A Practical Approach

BY LORAIN RUSHTON

Teachers who have tried to teach yoga to kids know how difficult a task it can be. Obstacles range from the lack of classes and resources, to fluctuating levels of children's enthusiasm, motivation and attention. I myself can remember some anxiety before walking into a classroom, knowing how much energy and patience was going to be required to keep the class interested and under control for the full hour.

After a year of persevering and experimentation, I have found that with a different approach, teaching yoga to kids can be fun, enjoyable – if not hilarious – and a very rewarding experience.

I can remember being thrown in at the deep end – a class of 20 boys aged 14, who were being forced to take a yoga class as part of their sports education program. I'd done my homework and read all the relevant books I could lay my hands on and walked into the class prepared to teach my series of postures that I thought would benefit them. My smile soon faded though, as I quickly realised these were not a bunch of Indian boys familiar with spirituality – these were a group of boys more

interested in kicking each other and making crass jokes than learning the art of Down Dog! How I got through the hour I'm not sure, but I knew that I needed to put my books away and start with a fresh approach aimed at Western kids who had little understanding of yoga and needed to be introduced in a more appropriate manner.

The following are some key factors you may wish to take into consideration when teaching children. I have narrowed these down to basics in the hope that they will help aspiring yoga teachers in their approach to teaching kids.

SET GOALS

At the beginning of a course, I often ask the kids why they chose to join the yoga class, and then use their personal motivations to build my syllabus. It gives a focus and a reason for doing the asanas. After a few weeks into a course, you can point out the improvement they're making, although more often than not, they'll be showing you the perfect Plow as soon as you enter the room!

I often set a few postures for homework, or encourage the kids to introduce an exercise to

a family member or friend. This is valuable in introducing a home practice and encouraging the family to get involved. When teaching families, I often give follow-on practice including partner work, so that yoga can become integrated into home family life.

STRUCTURE

Pre-planning the format of your lesson gives you an indication of what you want to achieve. From your basic structure you can adapt or change as required within the class. This allows for a stress-free and confident way of teaching.

Dividing your class into time slots is a good way to start. Perhaps begin with a warm up – 'Do-In' is a Japanese form of warm up that involves tapping the body from head to toe and can be such fun as the children focus their awareness on individual areas of their body.

After a warm up phase, move into individual postures that you want to practise or introduce as interest is still engaged. Children seem to respond best to the postures if grouped, for example; standing postures, floor-based, animals, backbends and forward

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bends. It is easier for the memory and you add more variety. Breaking up classes in this way is useful for dealing with attention and motivation, particularly by having breaks in between – all kids love rest pose, belly breathing, and partner stretches. If the class is an hour I tend to 'chunk' my class into: warm ups, sitting asanas, standing postures, animals, belly and back strengthening postures.

I have found that when you find a plan that works, it can be beneficial to stick to it, as kids respond well to structure, but as soon as interest begins to wane, it's time for a change.

RELEVANCE

Maintaining interest and enthusiasm in yoga classes is possible by making it relevant to the group. With the boys tell them which sports stars practise yoga and how it can improve their sporting ability. With the girls there's always the famous models and pop stars for examples. I have a class of young surfers who specifically asked for classes designed to strengthen their backs and help their surfing skills. Depending on the age of the kids, you can explain what each asana is designed to do health-wise, which muscles are being used, what meridians are being activated or what is happening internally. My teenage girls love to know when we are squeezing their kidneys or cleaning their bowels!

FLEXIBLE

The key is to be flexible – read the mood of the class. If the kids seem tired one day, begin the class with a partner massage – tapping all over the partner's back to wake up the body. If the class motivation wanes early, then move into partner work and/or group work to allow the energy to liven everyone up. If all else fails then move onto games. A colleague uses the 'carrot and stick approach' – just one more exercise then we can play a game!

CREATIVITY

Always have elements of fun in the class.

Children love to play games – particularly if teaching at schools. Yoga can be an opportunity to let go of school and exam pressures and find fun in the moment. We all know how healing it can be to laugh. Slot in a sequence of animal postures – make noises, move in the postures, encourage the class to use their imaginations and let them 'go wild' for a short time. You can always quieten them down after; rest pose is the answer to this problem.

The main difference between teaching adults and kids is the creative and light-hearted approach that comes from you and the class. It is this element that makes for an exciting, fun and rewarding class. Let the children explore their bodies, feel their 'achy spots', make noises like a lion, move on the floor like a snake, create their own animals, pretend to be a boat bobbing on the water while a crocodile crawls past. The more imaginative your class becomes, the more the kids want to be involved.

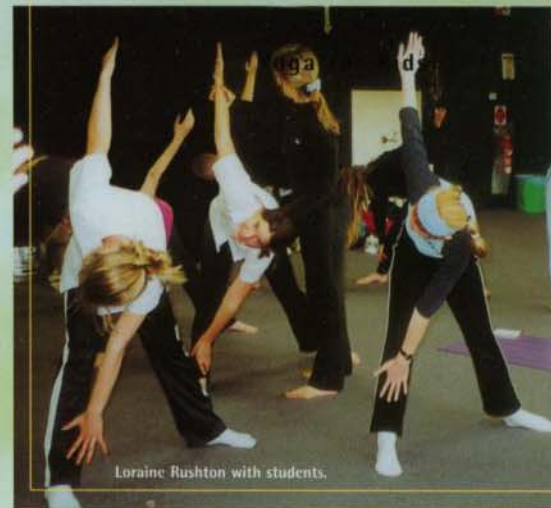
ENDINGS

Finally, fun endings to a class include partner massage or chanting. I either pair kids or group them for a final massage – this can be relaxing as they walk their hands over the back, or can be stimulating and fun as they pound, cup and use fingertips to tap all over the back of the body. Again, use your imagination. A relaxing ending could be yoga nidra, meditation or visualisation. My students have started to ask for meditation every week since I introduced it to them and they can stay up to 30 minutes after the class telling me about what they visualised.

ENCOURAGEMENT

The amount of attention you give can never be underestimated. Praise the fabulous postures, point out the improvement each week, encourage the quieter or shy ones in the group and bring out the best in the whole class.

Fostering a supportive atmosphere with little



Lorraine Rushton with students.

toleration for unpleasantness helps to maintain positive group dynamics. An example would be choosing the pairs yourself to allow for minimum disruption, or a favourite of mine is to partner up with the student who is always left out to avoid feelings of isolation.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Towards the end of term, take in a camera and photograph the class doing their practice. Kids love this – they also try harder for the camera! And it's always fun to take in the photos for the last lesson. They can be used to promote yoga for the next term – it always works for ensuring a full class when other students see how enjoyable yoga can be!

REWARDING

Soon yoga becomes the most rewarding and fun class of the week. The smiles you receive upon walking in the room, the requests for favourite poses, the conversations you hear when they are proudly telling friends after the class how they did some chanting. The benefits can be overwhelming as aches and pains start to go, even serious disorders can gradually disappear and confidence levels lift in the quieter kids as they find something they are good at. I think my most rewarding present last Christmas was when a class of year seven girls told me that for Christmas they had asked their parents for a yoga video! Maybe that's my next project!

Lorraine Rushton is an Oki yoga teacher and Zen Shiatsu practitioner. Based in Manly, Sydney she holds adult classes and runs a clinic where she offers Zen shiatsu treatments and yoga correctives to adults and children. Lorraine has been teaching yoga to kids for over three years, utilising her skills as an English teacher. She is committed to encouraging more schools to introduce yoga into the schools. Lorraine can be contacted at zenenergy_yoga@yahoo.com