

Concentration and focus are taught and demonstrated through the practice of yoga at the Prospect family shelter.



The Peace Within



Yoga and Meditation for At-risk Youth

by Katie Linek

It is a Friday afternoon at an after-school program in the Bronx. A high-energy group of students, ages 12 to 17, talk and laugh excitedly amongst themselves. When Bart van Melik, an instructor for Lineage Project, calmly announces that yoga class is about to begin, he is barely audible among the cacophony of voices. Through the noise, however, the kids hear him and quickly sit on the yoga mats that line the room.

Lineage Project is a New York City–based not-for-profit that uses yoga, meditation, discussion, and other mindfulness techniques in working with at-risk youth to break the cycle of poverty, violence, and incarceration. The group’s mission is to teach alternative behavioral models that support young people in overcoming the enormous challenges of living in communities with very few resources. Today Lineage is being hosted at FutureLink, an after-school program held at the Prospect family shelter run by Homes for the Homeless, a social services provider based in New York. Some students enrolled in FutureLink come from the shelter, others from the surrounding community.

“Lineage Project is vital to our program,” explains Leo Benavides, education programs coordinator at Prospect. “The kids look forward to yoga and learn a lot of important skills, like how to breathe and concentrate.”

Previously considered an activity for New Age, spiritual types, yoga has risen to the cultural mainstream. The media and celebrities alike have touted its health benefits, leading to yoga’s now being practiced by more than 20 million people in the United States. People from all walks of life and all ages are now enjoying yoga.

Beyond the trendiness of yoga, however, lies its value as a therapeutic tool for numerous at-risk populations, from prison inmates to those suffering Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to children experiencing homelessness.

According to *America's Youngest Outcasts*, a report by the National Center on Family Homelessness (part of the American Institutes for Research Health and Social Development program), nearly 2.5 million children, or 1 child in 30, were homeless in America at some point in 2013. The impact of homelessness on children can be extremely detrimental and traumatic, with periods of prolonged stress leading to numerous cognitive and behavioral issues.

Yoga, a healthy practice for both the body and the mind, can help to counteract some of the stress associated with homelessness. It offers a gentle form of exercise that increases strength, flexibility, range of motion, and balance. In addition, stretching, controlled breathing, and meditation combine to help those who practice yoga relax. Several studies have found that regularly practicing yoga yields positive results with regard to stress reduction, mental health, increased behavioral, social, and cognitive skills, concentration, emotional regulation, and overall health—the very same areas in which children are negatively impacted by the experience of homelessness.

That is why programs like Lineage Project can be found in cities across the country, bringing the benefits of yoga to the children who need them most.

For example, Street Yoga, an organization that originated in Portland, Oregon, and is now headquartered in Seattle, Wash-

ington, has been using yoga since 2002 to help at-risk youth to “overcome trauma and to create meaningful, healthy lives.” Its goal is to help children and their families build skills like self-soothing, goal setting, and self-confidence that they can apply to their everyday lives.

“Street Yoga shares yoga’s tools for healing and empowerment with youth experiencing homelessness, poverty, addiction, abuse and trauma,” says Stephanie Toby, co-executive director of Street Yoga. “We partner with sites already serving youth facing adversity, such as homeless shelters and treatment centers.”

Street Yoga holds weekly yoga and wellness classes for youth and their families at over 25 locations on the West Coast. Over 500 people have now been trained by the program to help youth overcome their struggles through yoga. In the more than 12 years since its founding, Street Yoga has served thousands of children and their families.

The main goal at Street Yoga is to provide classes that are predictable, safe, and fun. Toby explains, “Predictability allows youth to know what to expect from our classes, which creates trust and supports the re-regulation of their nervous systems. In other words, it’s easier for them to not immediately go into ‘fight or flight’ mode when faced with a stressor, or easier for them to transition from that mode to a calmer state. Safe classes allow all youth to feel successful and build resilience. Fun

classes increase the likelihood that yoga will be an enjoyable experience and that youth will want to continue to participate.”

Another organization, Sheltered Yoga, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Camden and Newark, New Jersey, provides instruction in yoga, meditation, and mindfulness in conjunction with strategies aimed at building wellness, self-esteem/self-worth, and tolerance as well as anti-bullying programming and curriculum. Sheltered Yoga serves people from homeless shelters, low-income schools, prisons, residences for those with disabilities, and addiction treatment facilities.

Teens in the FutureLink after-school program learn balance and concentration and practice putting their best foot forward.





Bart van Melik, an instructor with Lineage Project, guides students through a series of yoga poses while also incorporating themes such as positivity, trust, and compassion.

“One major aspect that we push in our curriculum in yoga and meditation is mindfulness of self. We help the kids recognize how important they are through self-esteem and self-worth mantras and mental exercises,” says Tina LeMar, executive director of Sheltered Yoga.

Mindfulness, or the focus of one’s attention on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations of the present moment, is a key component of yoga. An article in *Social Work Today* on the use of yoga and meditation for the treatment of anxiety explains that anxiety is regulated by the autonomic nervous system. Achieving mindfulness can actually calm the nervous system by focusing attention on the present moment and away from anxious thoughts and ruminations. Controlled breathing can also relax an overwhelmed nervous system, slowing the heart rate and putting the body into a parasympathetic state, or one of “rest and relaxation,” as opposed to the sympathetic, “fight or flight” state of a body under stress. Regularly practicing yoga can even train the nervous system to better handle stress as it comes.

According to van Melik, “Yoga teaches the children very skillful tools that they can use anytime. They learn how to relate differ-

ently to stress. Rather than pushing it away, they see what it’s like to be aware of it and notice how it comes and goes.”

“A teenage girl in one of our classes wrote us a letter thanking us for bringing a ‘good medicine’ for her and the other students,” says Toby. “She said that life was very stressful and everything seemed to be moving very fast. She didn’t know how to handle everything that was happening. She said that yoga calmed her but also gave her more ‘power.’”

Experiencing stress is a normal part of development, but chronic stress, often faced by homeless children, can actually impair brain development—altering brain size, reducing cognitive skills, memory capacity, and emotional self-regulation, causing behavioral problems, and negatively affecting coping abilities and social relationships, explains *America’s Youngest Outcasts*. In addition, studies show that children who have experienced homelessness have greater difficulty in concentrating. Control over one’s attention, including the ability to focus, shift attention, self-regulate behavior, and ignore irrelevant stimuli, impacts both academic and social outcomes. Problems with attention have been linked to antisocial behavior and rejection by peers.

Amazingly, yoga and meditation can actually change the brain. A study published in the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* found that meditation increases gray matter concentration in the brain, which is involved in learning, memory, the regulation of emotions, self-referential processing, and the ability to maintain perspective in a given situation. Practicing yoga can actually improve cognitive functioning, boosting focus and working memory. In a University of Illinois study, participants performed significantly better on brain functioning tests after doing yoga than after vigorous aerobic exercise.

“We now have scientific evidence that mindful practices can rewire the brain,” explains Toby. “These practices reduce suffering, such as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD.”

Yoga gives the kids tools to help them focus, gain insight, and have more control over their impulses. Yoga techniques have been shown through research to enable young people to stop and take a breath before they expose themselves to risky situations.

“It’s like I tapped into some part of my mind that I didn’t know I had. That’s what I like about yoga. That’s what yoga does for me,” explains Tyrik, one of the teens participating in the Lineage Project yoga class at FutureLink.

Not only do homeless children experience chronic stress, but youth who have experienced traumatic situations often over-react to stress. In an interview with *Integral Yoga Magazine*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world’s leading authorities on PTSD, explains that yoga offers a way to reprogram these automatic physical responses that are triggered by intense emotion. Neuroimaging studies of people in highly emotional states revealed that emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness cause reduced activity in parts of the brain related to feeling fully present. Therefore, learning to be present may hold the key to regulating emotions and controlling one’s response to stress.

Lineage Project is teaching the FutureLink class to do just that. The children sit with their eyes closed as van Melik guides them through meditation, inviting them to be aware of what is happening in their minds and to be mindful of thoughts instead of getting lost in them. “Remember that everything is constantly changing. When we’re okay with that, we feel a sense of freedom. When we no longer hold onto things, we feel free,” van Melik tells the children.

Problems with aggression and emotional regulation are common among children experiencing homelessness. According to *Profiles of Risk: School Readiness*, a report by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH), children who experience homelessness at a young age are more likely to demonstrate behavioral problems such as aggression, social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety, which can in turn affect academic, social, and economic outcomes.

“A lot of kids come here with stress and the yoga helps them to relax,” explains Benavides. “One child in particular had anger problems and yoga provided him with a safe environment where he could relax, reset, meditate, and find a better outlet for his anger.”

Van Melik continues, “The kids have learned how beneficial it can be to pause, especially when kids are about to fight. We talk a lot about how to defend yourself in a skillful way, without using violence. They learn to pause in the moment when they are about to, out of habit, lash out.”

Beth Navon, executive director of Lineage Project, adds, “Yoga gives the kids tools to help them focus, gain insight, and have more control over their impulses. Yoga techniques have been shown through research to enable young people to stop and take a breath before they expose themselves to risky situations.”

“I learned that violence is not acceptable behavior. If you’re feeling stressed, just pull out a mat and do yoga,” says Jazmine, a young girl participating in yoga at FutureLink. “When I come home to my mom, she asks why I’m so calm and I tell her it’s because I did yoga today. She thinks I should do yoga every day.”

Lineage Project classes foster three primary skills: self-awareness, which is non-judgmental awareness of the body and mind; self-knowledge, which is the ability to recognize what creates stress and what relieves it, to see the repercussions of negative emotions and behaviors, and to understand the benefits of positive emotions and behaviors; and compassion for oneself and others, including cultivating and expressing kindness and empathy. Students who have participated in Lineage Project classes report an increased capacity for these skills, a sense of calmness and relaxation, and the ability to bring those feelings into other aspects of their lives—helping them to sleep better, prepare for sports, avoid fights, and show more patience toward themselves and others. Additionally, they report feeling less helpless, more able to calm themselves, and more trusting of others.

Contributing to this success are the discussions that begin each Lineage Project class. Instructors present questions about

universal themes such as compassion, gratitude, trust, and judgment, and the children are invited to contemplate those concepts while listening to and learning from one another's answers.

"The discussion teaches the kids that they are not alone in this human experience," explains van Melik. "When we were talking about self-judgment, one little boy said, 'I never knew other people judged themselves too. I thought I was the only one.'"

Tyrik admits, "Yoga helps me to reflect on myself and makes me a better person." Benavides agrees. "The meditation and discussion helps the kids learn a lot about themselves."

The theme of today's FutureLink class is lying. About ten students take turns telling stories of times they lied and why they did so. Van Melik asks them a series of questions prompting them to think further about the impact of lying on themselves and others. "When do you think lying is okay? How do you usually feel after you lie?" The class then considers the theme as it relates to the body; the kids are invited to move and to be conscious of how the body feels. Van Melik explains to the kids, "This is the truth of your experience. We've been talking about lying, but the body never lies to you. If you want to find the truth you can always find it in your own body."

Those who practice and master yoga movements and poses can develop a positive relationship with their bodies, boosting their feelings of empowerment and control over the body and building self-esteem. Van Melik tells the story of one young girl: "She announced in front of all of her peers that yoga had helped her to stop hating her body."

Many are aware that yoga is a healthy form of exercise, but the physical benefits of yoga extend far beyond a toned body. Yoga has been shown to improve cardiac functioning, lower blood pressure, increase lung capacity, reduce chronic pain, steady blood sugar levels in people with diabetes, strengthen bones, lower the risk of heart disease, strengthen the immune system, and help maintain a healthy weight.

Most importantly, though, practicing yoga helps to provide a sense of order in what may otherwise be a chaotic life. At the end of yoga class at FutureLink, the cacophony has completely quieted. Students calmly open their eyes, stretch, and share how they are feeling.

"The biggest lesson I try to transmit is that it's possible to find peace within," says van Melik. "It's there, but we have to look for it." ■

Lineage Project classes teach self-esteem, tolerance, and mindfulness.

