Steady bodies active minds: a resource for using yoga and mindfulness in the classroom

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Steady Bodies Active Minds

A resource for using Yoga and Mindfulness in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to provide a resource for teachers to use the practices of yoga and mindfulness effectively in their elementary classrooms. Yoga and Mindfulness are ancient practices that cultivate increased awareness of the present moment, others, and ourselves. When used appropriately with children, they can provide the tools to both steady their bodies and engage their minds. Teaching children yoga and mindfulness may help to channel these energies into learning techniques that will allow for healthier, stronger, more flexible, and relaxed bodies. In these whole healthy bodies, children’s ability to focus and attend to both school as well as new and growing relationships may enhance their confidence and sense of self. An education in child development from Bank Street along with experience teaching children in classroom and non-conventional settings, informs my purpose for creating this resource. In addition to my own personal experiences, a literature review outlines how schools across the country are incorporating these practices into their classrooms to teach social and emotional competence, enhance academic learning, extend play, and encourage movement and breathing. I conclude the paper by outlining the avenues through which I hope to share yoga and mindfulness with my own students this coming fall in a first grade classroom.
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RATIONALE

The word yoga means union or to unite. One of the world's foremost yoga teachers B.K.S. Iyengar (1966) explains: “The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word yuj meaning to bind, join, attach, and yoke, to direct and concentrate one’s attention on, to use and apply (pg. 19).” What is generally described as the practice of yoga is to work towards this union between the mind and body so that we might operate in the world with more awareness and connection to our self.

Mindfulness can be defined as living with this same awareness and attention. It is originally a Buddhist practice, but is non-dogmatic or religious in any sense. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and peace-activist writes: “Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, and at one with those around you and with what you are doing (http://www.plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice.html).” Mindfulness and meditation coach Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) offers a second definition: "Mindfulness is awareness cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally (pg. 1)." In my experience with children mindfulness is less a meditation discipline and more an exploration of what it feels like to be in the present moment and particularly how you feel in the present moment. Breathing is a big part of this practice with children because breath is the one thing we can count on in every
moment of life. Breath is the symbol of being alive. Asking children to listen to their breath and feel it in their bodies connects them to the most basic aspect of living in each moment and is the foundation of a mindfulness practice.

Practicing yoga and mindfulness together allows the body to be steady and peaceful so that the mind may attend to the present moment listening and open to the possibilities it offers. Practicing yoga and mindfulness with children gives them the tools to both steady their bodies and engage their minds. The result is a harmonious union of the whole child allowing the spirit to grow and flourish. With instruction, children naturally become yogis. They love to move and play and explore and experience the capabilities of their bodies. Teaching children yoga and mindfulness may help to channel these energies into learning techniques that will help their bodies become healthier, stronger, more flexible, and more relaxed. In these whole healthy bodies, children’s ability to focus and attend to both school as well as new and growing relationships will enhance their confidence and sense of self.

Today, school is an increasingly busy and often demanding place, even for young children. As early as Pre-K and Kindergarten, children are being asked to sit still and pay attention, a task that is developmentally quite challenging. When I was teaching, I noticed how often I asked my students to be still, to focus, to listen, and to be present. Teachers get so frustrated because we have to constantly reiterate those requests. It is important to remember that these are children. Whether they are 5 or 9 their developmental stage means they are still
trying to figure out how to master all of those seemingly simple tasks. Just like we would never expect a child to know his/her 10’s facts without our guidance and lots of practice, how can we expect children to know how to be still and pay attention if we have never taught them how and given them ample practice?

In the progressive educative tradition, we believe that children learn best through interactive hands on experiences from play to observational inquiry. Howard Gardner (1988) emphasizes the teacher’s role as one who can “Stimulate crystallizing experiences which play into and support and give students a chance to develop their particular profile of abilities (pg. 3).” Yoga and mindfulness can provide opportunities for children to have these “crystallizing experiences” of feeling strong and steady, of knowing how to find balance and control, and of focusing in the classroom on their teachers and their peers. Through movement and breathing, yoga and mindfulness are interactive and experience based practices that can help children find the tools necessary to feel relaxed and free of stress, at home in their own bodies, connected to themselves and the community that surrounds them, and confident in their mind’s ability to listen and learn. These tools will serve them on their daily journey of health, happiness, and wholeness at school and far beyond.

In my experience in contemporary culture the words yoga and mindfulness inspire images of challenging postures, long intervals of sitting, meditation, and contemplation. As a teacher, none of those words connect with my knowledge of how children operate. Therefore, it is important to erase all of our preconceived
notions of what we adults think of as yoga, because for children it is completely different. Yoga and mindfulness for children is not so much concerned with alignment and getting the pose or the breath just right. It is more about being playful as we learn about our bodies and become aware of our breath (Jordan, 2009, pg. 6). It stimulates imaginations and helps children to live without the pressure of high expectations. While adults are constantly working to "perfect" our bodies / our minds, we remind children that we call it a yoga practice for a reason not a yoga perfect. In fact, this is a good reminder for adults as well. Children are involved in so many competitive activities between athletics, arts, and academics. Yoga and mindfulness emphasizes the process rather than the outcome, providing a place for children to playfully practice without the worry of comparison (Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 5).

Having used these practices for morning meeting, classroom management strategies, transition times, community building, and enhancing the curriculum; I can attest to their impact on the children I worked with. While different activities resonated with particular children’s needs, what I noticed most was the sense of community and connectedness it generated. In a first grade classroom, we started each day with a “mindful minute” at the end of morning meeting. This minute looked different every day as some days children needed stillness and other days they needed movement. Many of the activities included in the resource that follows were implemented during this minute. We always discussed how we felt afterwards; I was always surprised how honest and insightful my
students’ comments could be. Some comments I remember were: “I thought this was silly, but once I breathed I relaxed.” “It makes me feel sleepy and awake at the same time.” “I feel really really good!.” This short minute created a feeling of trust and understanding amongst the class and an ability to share feelings, and to understand that we all experience the same things differently.

As teachers we often are overwhelmed by the plethora of material we are responsible for teaching, that we neglect attention to the social and emotional well being of our students. The mindful minute showed me how much children crave attention to that aspect of their lives. While I do think it is ideal to attend to these issues for more than one minute of the school day, a minute is a good place to start and a quick and simple way to create an environment of trust and openness. One teacher, Adele Caemmerer, states: "Of all the things we teach our children, the teaching of mindful presence is one of the most critical yet often ignored in the rush to cover curriculum and manage the task of supervising children (Hanh, 2011, pg. 11)."

These observations inspired me to lead a professional development workshop for teachers at my former school on incorporating yoga and mindfulness activities into the classroom. From a staff of approximately 200, 60 people signed up. We had to offer the workshop three times, suggesting that teachers are interested in these practices and hoping to learn how to use them with their students. Being a yoga workshop, I naturally planned to have everyone move and participate in many of the activities I do with children. The teachers
were hesitant, and began to rattle off excuses as to why they needed to simply sit and observe. We took a step back and discussed some of their fears and reservations all largely related to our cultural construct that yoga is for young, skinny, women. Teachers voiced some of the following concerns: “I’m too old to move like that, yoga is for people who are in shape,” “I’m not flexible,” ”I could never do that.” I realized that despite the amount of interest and excitement about yoga’s potential in the classroom, the stereotype of our cultural perception of ‘yoga” will often prevent teachers who are unfamiliar with the practice from ever sharing it with children.

I want to create a resource for these educators who are interested in yoga and mindfulness My hope is that it will be easily accessible and not intimidating for teachers like those at my former school who fear they do not have the skills to learn the practices themselves and share them with their class. The truth is, if you know how to breathe, and smile, and let go of a little insecurity, you are already a yogi. This resource will be a guide for anyone no matter their physical ability or knowledge of the practice to incorporate yoga and mindfulness activities into their classroom’s daily life. It is not a curriculum, but rather a series of independent activities that can be integrated into any aspect of the day. An activity can become a routine or be a spur of the moment offering.

The activities are divided into four categories: Breathe, Move, Connect, Learn. Breathe includes exercises to help children become aware of their breath and take moments of stillness and/or silence. Move consists of specific yoga
poses as well as activities that can help children increase mobility, balance, and coordination, and expend excess energy. Connect lists games and activities that can do just that help classmates connect with one another, learn valuable communication skills, and develop compassionate attitudes. Learn suggests ways in which yoga and mindfulness tools might be incorporated into different curricular units to enhance the learning experience. All activities have a few notes on the specific benefit for children and a time or situation that might be appropriate for its use. I say, "might" as each educator knows what their group needs more than I do in any given moment.

It is my hope that this resource will make the language of yoga and mindfulness seem less foreign, the movements seem less intimidating, and the practice seems a natural tool to use every day with students. The benefits for both child and teacher as it generates such positive energy in individuals and develops the corporate well being are such, that I hope this resource breaks down a few barriers and enables the practice to be shared with children more and more.
DEVELOPMENTAL ARGUMENT

Developmental Benefits: Early Childhood

While yoga and mindfulness are wonderful tools to support health and wholeness for every age beginning with infancy all the way through the end of our lives, this resource is specifically geared toward using the practices with children from ages 4 to 10 in early childhood and elementary classrooms and other educative spaces. Outlined below are the specific developmental milestones in both the play years (ages 3-6) and the school years (ages 7-10) and how yoga and mindfulness can benefit children in these stages. While the activities are appropriate across both developmental stages, they are geared specifically toward the median (ages 5-8). The language or sequencing of an activity may need to be altered slightly to be accessible and appropriate for the youngest or the oldest children.

Kathleen Berger, a developmental psychologist and author of *The Developing Person Through the Life Span* describes one of the most profound shifts in children between the ages of 3 and 6 as the maturation of the prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain controls impulsivity. Thus as this region of the brain matures, children master the feat of preservation, defined as the tendency to maintain one thought or action for an extended period. Simultaneous to the maturity of the prefrontal cortex, are the processes of myelination of the corpus callosum and lateralization of the brain. These two events allow for greater coordination between left and right and a dramatic improvement of gross motor
Yoga and mindfulness can provide excellent tools to support and enhance a child's development of the ability to pay attention when necessary and coordinate their movements in a more graceful, connected, and focused manner. Mindfulness helps children to focus their attention and become aware of how their emotions feel in the body. Through mindful breathing, children learn to be present, even if just for one inhale, helping to decrease impulsive tendencies. Yoga aids children's increasing coordination skills and improves balance, which is a critical aspect of gross motor development. Yoga poses and movements allow children to play with and test their body's ability to balance in a non-threatening or competitive environment. Berger (2008) writes: "Adults need to make sure children have safe space, time, and playmates; skills will follow. According to socio-cultural theory children learn best from peers who demonstrate whatever skills the child is ready to try (pg. 216)." Practicing yoga together makes mastering movement and balance a group endeavor, children will learn best from the other children in their class. (Jordan, 2009, pg. 5)

The idea that children in this phase of development will learn by imitating the movements of their peers when they are ready to connects with Vygotsky's theory that learning is a social construct. He describes the gap between a child's capabilities working on his/her own or with peers as the Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone is defined as: “the distance between the child’s actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level
of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult
guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, pg. 131)."
He argues that children will develop skills more readily if they experience these
zones of proximal development.

Vygotsky further argues that it is not simply observation and imitation that
spurns physical development, but it is primarily through active engagement in
play that allows children to extend their cognitive and social development. He
writes:

  In their play children project themselves
  into the adult activities of their culture and
  rehearse their future roles and values.
  Thus, play is in advance of development,
  for in this manner children begin to acquire
  the motivation, skills, and attitudes
  necessary for their social participation,
  which can be fully achieved only with the
  assistance of their peers and elders (1978,
  pg. 129).

Through imaginative play children have this unique opportunity to step beyond
their current developmental abilities, honing their social and problem solving skills
to match those of the adults in their life. Play provides an outlet for children to
process their experience in the world, express their feelings and their learning.
"Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual,
and social-emotional development at all age levels...Play allows humans to
realize their highest aspirations and ideals. (Elkind, 2007)." Yoga for children is
nothing if not playful. When I first started practicing yoga and mindfulness with
children, I was very worried about sitting quietly and having our bodies aligned
properly for each pose. I quickly realized that these children were not interested in either of these aspects in the slightest. They wanted to laugh and play and try all the “hardest” poses and could actually pop right into and out of some of the things I had been working on for years in my own practice! The yoga I share with children has to connect with them where they are, and that often means imaginative play, story telling, and lots of movement. I do not want to denigrate the disciplines of yoga and mindfulness in any way. My practice of both is essential to my wellbeing and my ability to function in my relationships and my work. However, my practice reflects where I am: I am an adult. Developing a practice with your children should reflect them and their stage of life.

Using yoga in the classroom allows for a type of play that is not necessarily the norm in the classroom. Children are encouraged to use their imaginations with both their bodies and their minds (Jordan, 2009, pgs. 8-9). As a class you will play together, witnessing how each child’s creativity and individuality inspires the next.

During these early childhood years, children primarily operate with an egocentric perspective (Piaget, 1972). This perspective limits their ability to conceive that another has a different experience or point of view. It is challenging for children of this age to empathize with their peers and demonstrate compassion for other's sufferings. Playing yoga together helps children begin to understand that we are all different and plants the seeds of empathy, generosity, and love for their playmates (Jordan, 2009, pgs. 2-3).
Another developmental milestone of this age is the increased ability to regulate emotions. Berger (2008) explains that children learn when and how to express their emotions during this time (pg. 255). Mindfulness teaches children the value of stopping before reacting and acting. If you can stop and be still for a moment to take a breath, you can become slightly clearer (Hanh, 2011, pg. 19).

When taught to stop, children are more inclined to demonstrate emotional stability, social tolerance, and are empowered to be less reactive (Jordan, 2009, pg. 3). Another key component of emotional development during these years is the understanding of a self-concept and a sense of self-esteem (Berger, 2008, pg. 256). The practices of mindfully moving and breathing help children find a peace within themselves. They develop a sense of purpose and control over their growing and ever changing bodies. The feeling of increased balance both in their bodies and minds gives children a sense of confidence and pride in themselves and their abilities (Jordan, 2009, pg. 2). The cultivation of this inner strength and peace allows children to experience the many ups and downs of learning to navigate the new and unknown world of school, teachers, and playmates joyfully and confidently. Thic Nhat Hanh illuminates the value of cultivating this practice: "There is no way to Peace, Peace is the way (Rechtschaffen & Cohen, 2010, pg. 3)."

**Developmental Benefits: Childhood**

As children pass through the early childhood years into the school years, exercise habits become increasingly important for a child's health and happiness.
(Berger, 2008, pg. 359). During these years, physical problems can lead to deeper psychological problems. Children's muscle growth and increased coordination enables them to engage in more active games. Berger (2008) writes: "Active play benefits children in every way." In our increasingly sedentary culture yoga gives children the opportunity to play games that require a lot of movement, and to experience how that movement makes their body feel. Yoga provides physical challenges that are surpass-able by all children. Because children's yoga is not about perfect alignment or mastering difficult poses, but simply moving freely and exploring their bodies' limitations and strengths; the practice is an accomplishment in itself. While sports teams and little leagues often have incredible benefits for children, they can also turn into another place for possible failure and loss of self-esteem. Yoga and Mindfulness are non-competitive alternatives. Incorporating this movement into the classroom gives children an opportunity to develop confidence with new challenges and experiences. Additionally, so many children do not have the opportunity to run around or play on these types of sports teams, and default to playing video games or watching TV in their homes. Yoga provides an exercise that children can carry with them throughout their lives. It does not require expensive equipment or relocating. To practice yoga one only needs their body and time. If children are encouraged to move their bodies in ways that are fun and playful rather than seen as a way to "exercise," they will be more likely to adopt the practice as a habit.
One of the largest differences in a child's world as they leave the play years behind, is that formal schooling begins. In first grade (ages 6 and 7), children are expected to work at the business of becoming readers and mathematicians. Unfortunately for many children, the onset of formal schooling coincides with the departure of free and imaginative play. Yoga offers an opportunity for children to expend some of their energy and be silly as well as develop self-discipline allowing them to attend to the important matters of learning. I believe that there is a direct correlation between academic success and physical health. Poor physical health can increase the number of days missed causing the child to miss out on learning and feel anxiety (Rechtschaffen & Cohen, 2010, pg. 5).

According to Piaget one of the largest changes during the school years of middle childhood is the ability to reason, or propensity for concrete operational thought (Berger, 2008, pg. 307). One example of this is classification. Children begin to organize items or things according to an overarching or defining property. Language plays a large role in the lives of children during the school years. Gardner (1988) argues: "just as we don't all look the same or have the same personality, we don't all think the same way. We don't all have the same kinds of intelligence. (pg. 3)." Because each child learns in a different way, it is our role as teachers to provide a layered approach to skills and concepts. Yoga provides a unique entry point for children, one through movement. It can be a fun and interactive way for children to use and apply new vocabulary. Language can be incorporated into a yoga journey or scavenger hunt, as well as communication
game. Furthermore, John Dewey (1938) argues for the inherent value of experience in the role of every individual's education. “There is one permanent frame of reference, namely the organic connection between education and personal experience (pg. 25).” Yoga provides an opportunity for children to process and solidify by experiencing it in their own bodies. Mindfulness practices help children be more aware and capable of reflection on these experiences.

Yoga games also increase opportunities for children to increase interaction with their peers. As discussed in relation to early childhood development, Vygotsky argues this interaction with peers and instructors is what enables children to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to move forward developmentally. Warrior pose is an example of a fairly common yoga pose. There are multiple warriors calling for slightly different positions and alignments. The mirror warrior game instructs partners to mirror each other in the different poses. They have to communicate about where and how to align themselves physically. Another game with the warrior poses is the warrior name game. After discussing the different qualities a warrior needs (i.e.: brave, strong, etc), stand in a circle and have each child create a warrior pose and connect it with a warrior quality they think they embody or want to embody. The other students have to imitate each pose and call out each new word. Both these games display how yoga can provide ample opportunity for interaction and connection among classmates.
Connection and interaction with their peer group becomes increasingly important during the school years. Having friends and being liked at school is at the forefront of most children's thoughts. Berger (2008) writes that children during these years "are well aware of their classmates opinion, judgments, and accomplishments (pg. 333)." Navigating the waters of friendship and peer approval during this age can be challenging and daunting, not to mention stressful. Mindfulness practices help children develop a sense of self-awareness as well as empathy for others. Because mindfulness teaches us to stop and breathe, respect and love our self, as well as others; it sets up the child with powerful conflict resolution skills. Children learn that living life mindfully means doing all the same things they always do, but simply doing so with awareness (Hanh, 2011, pg. 15). Planting the seeds of awareness enables children to pause before reacting perhaps thinking about their friend or peer before making a decision about them or the situation. In my classroom last year, I used these practices of yoga and mindfulness whenever it seemed appropriate and relevant. In particular, we did a lot of breathing exercises and games, which I encouraged the children to use as tools when they needed to take a moment. For much of the year I wondered if these tools were really making a difference in their lives and being utilized. As time progressed I slowly started to notice children breathing. I don't just mean inhaling and exhaling as we all do, but taking a break, standing alone, closing their eyes and taking a few intentional breaths. One child relayed how annoying her little sister was; she always got in trouble for yelling at her in the morning on the way to school. One day, she told me that she had done a
yoga breath in the car on the way to school, instead of saying something mean to her sister. She was so proud of herself, and claimed she would never get annoyed with her sister again! While I doubt that extreme was possible, this girl realized she had a tool to help keep herself out of trouble and maintain the peace on the morning commute to school.

When I look back at childhood I think of it as simply a joyous carefree time. How could it possibly compare to the stress or responsibility of adulthood? I forget how I thought or felt as a child, that sometimes it was not all ice cream sundaes and fairytales. Between the new emphasis on high stakes testing and being held accountable for one's learning as well as the constant navigation of friendships and peer groups, children can feel a lot of pressure. Berger (2008) writes that it is during these middle childhood years that children develop competencies and aptitudes to defend themselves against stress and cope with anxiety (pg. 359). Knowing this about children, it seems all the more crucial that we provide them with the tools to reduce anxiety and cultivate a feeling of confidence, joy, and inner peace. Yoga and mindfulness nurture the whole child empowering them to feel at home and steady in their bodies, focused and aware in their minds, and therefore joyful and confident in their spirits.
LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years educator’s efforts have been increasingly focused on attending to the needs of the whole child. Yoga and mindfulness practices support the healthy development of the whole child through social emotional learning, movement, and play. The following review of literature will discuss why these aspects of education are important in helping children adapt to life in community and successfully navigate the world and relationships and how yoga and mindfulness are serving children and teachers in our schools today.

What is Social Emotional Learning?

It is important to define social emotional learning (SEL) as it can be misunderstood as simply relationships and feelings, which it does address, but in reality it is much more complex. Director of the Center for Social and Emotional Education Jonathon Cohen (2001) provides the following definition: "Social and emotional education refers to learning skills, understandings, and values that enhance our ability to 'read' ourselves and others, and then to use this information to become flexible problem solvers and creative learners (pg. xii)." Specifically Cohen (2001) describes the core competencies as “the capacity to understand, process, and express the social and emotional aspects of life (pg. 5).” This type of education helps children build healthy relationships with themselves as well as their peers at school and families at home. In order to navigate school and life beyond school children must have interpersonal as well as emotional intelligence. Cohen (2001) outlines the core concepts that make up
an SEL program and necessary components to help children develop the complexities of these intelligences. SEL programs should foster children’s capacity to reflect, to solve problems, and learn creatively, as well as the creation of safe and responsive environments, and a thorough, on going school-home collaboration (pg. 3-29).

SEL programs seek to help children develop the ability to recognize their own feelings and connect with the feelings of others around them. In addition to recognition, children also learn how to verbalize. "The capacity of being attuned to one's own emotions and needs is fundamental to effective social and emotional functioning. We call this capacity verbalization and it manifests in a child's ability to express his or her emotions in the form of words (Cohen, 2001, pg. 68)."

So much of academic curriculum seeks to guide children in the process of being able to express specific concepts and ideas with words. Cohen (2001) argues: "educators and developmental psychologists have long been aware that much significant teaching in schools takes place outside the formal academic curriculum (pg. 48)." SEL allows children to take some of their academic skills and apply them to the understanding and verbalization of their inner self and how it relates to others.

While it is true that any SEL efforts do not naturally fall into what we historically consider academic curriculum, educators and researchers are increasingly interested in incorporating these skills into the daily routine of the
classroom rather than offering a separate, isolated program. The Research and Guidelines Work Group of the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) found that "brain studies show, for example, that memory is coded to specific events and linked to social and emotional situations, and that the latter are integral parts of larger units of memory that make up what we learn and retain, including what takes place in the classroom (Elias, 1997, pg. 3)." These studies indicate that incorporating SEL into the daily curriculum will help children develop these emotional and interpersonal skills as well as remember and connect more deeply with the academic concepts they are learning in school. "In the CASEL (2003) review of the 80 nationally available programs 34% included methods to promote the integration of SEL with academic curricula and teaching practices. (Zins 2004, pg. 14)." Schools are beginning to work towards methods of incorporating the development of interpersonal and emotional intelligences of their students. SEL is being applied using concepts previously outlined by Cohen into their daily rhythms of academic learning,

**Importance of Social Emotional Learning in School**

CASEL (1997) argues that: “emotional Intelligence is the capacity to be successful in all domains of life (pg. 2).” It seems only logical to me, as an educator who is working to help my students become successful members of society, to make concerted efforts to consistently weave social and emotional education into my classroom life. According to this research, if schools and
teachers want to give our students the highest opportunity for success in the long term, social and emotional learning needs to be a priority. Cohen (2001) writes:

> It is abundantly clear to those who work with young children that how children feel about themselves and others colors shapes their ability to learn. Their social emotional capacities effect and even determine their ability to listen and communicate; to concentrate; to recognize, understand, and solve problems; to cooperate, to modulate their emotional states; to become self motivating; and to resolve conflicts adaptively- in short the ability to become a member of the group (pg. 4)."

Attending to social and emotional learning enables students to engage in the process of learning. If children are distracted by relational or emotional problems, their ability to actively participate in school becomes strained. Cohen (2001) continues the argument by calling attention to the number of children in schools who are not being given the care they need: "Between 15%-22% of our nations youth experience social, emotional, and other problems that necessitate mental health treatment, but approximately 80% are not receiving needed services. (pg. 5)" This research indicates that this 80% of children are not being given the tools to actively participate in academic learning, thereby completely inhibiting their chances of success in school and life beyond.

Historically academic and social issues were seen as two separate entities not necessarily related to one another. With standardized testing being the bar to which students and teachers are held, academic success is the name of the game. Appropriate testing data of academic achievement is what enables schools to receive programs and funding they so desperately need. Due to this
pressure, schools are often focusing so intently on the academic drilling of skills, social and emotional learning fall by the wayside. This is problematic because research increasingly indicates that academic achievement directly correlates with the healthy development of social and emotional skills. CASEL (1997) looks at the numbers of drop out rates in relation to SEL: "Whenever one looks at children who have remained in school, one will find that SEL was provided to those children by at least one or two caring people, often in the school (pg. 6)."

Another study demonstrates the number of social and emotional educative programs that translated to academic success in the classroom: "83% of such programs produced academic gains. In addition 12% of the programs that did not specifically target academic performance documented an impact on academic achievement (Zins, 2004, pg. 14)."

Classrooms need to be infused with social and emotional education because it provides tools for students to attend to themselves and the business of academic learning. Cohen (2001) argues: "Strong social skills nourish academic and personal growth because they foster confidence, competence, and curiosity (pg. 78)." In order to give students the best tools to succeed academically and in all areas of life, schools need to attend to the relational and emotional world of children, and it needs to be attended to in a way that is ongoing and seamlessly incorporated into the academic curriculum. When writing about this specific initiative, neuroscientist Robert Sylvester (1995) advises: “It’s
impossible to separate emotion from the other important activities of life. Don’t try. (pg. 75)."

It is evident that providing children with the tools to develop social and emotional intelligences needs to happen in the classroom in conjunction with traditional academic learning. Zins (2004) drives this argument home: "If developing social, emotional, practical, and creative competencies is important so that children can lead healthy and productive lives, this should be viewed as an essential goal for education (pg. 79)." Once the decision has been made to actively teach social and emotional learning skills, the questions lies in the how. There are an increasing number of programs and ideas. Mindfulness and yoga offer one solution.

**Mindfulness as an SEL program**

"We know we can teach them to read. Can we also help them to take better care of themselves, each other, and their environment? (Cohen, 2001, pg. 77)"

As schools are increasingly looking for ways to educate the whole child through social and emotional education, mindfulness is becoming more widely understood and used. Thich Nhat Hanh defines mindfulness as “the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment (http://www.plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice.html).” Mindfulness helps children create the space to understand, process, and express the social emotional issues they encounter in each moment. The following is a review of
some of the research and subsequent literature that informs educators about how to use mindfulness in classrooms and its benefits for children.

Susan Kaiser Greenland, one of the first practitioners and researchers of mindfulness with children, lists the life skills the practice builds: approaching experiences with curiosity, calming down when upset, concentrating and ignoring distractions, observing what happens around us objectively, developing compassion, developing pro-social qualities (2010, pg. 9). All of these skills correspond directly with the social and emotional skills children need to develop in order to be successful adults.

Mindfulness differs from other social and emotional programs in that its focus is primarily the breath, and the practice of learning how to breathe with attention. Based on her experience working with dozens of children Greenland (2010) writes: “the transformative power of breathing never ceases to amaze me (pg. 2).” It is through breathing that children learn to pay close attention to how they feel throughout the day, how they do and say things, and how they react to situations and people. What seems like such a simple act, to take a breath, is actually quite challenging when attempting to do so with awareness and attention. Just noticing how they feel helps children change the way they think and react. Greenland continues: “changing the way you think about things and react to life events takes hard work, practice, strong modeling, and guidance…It's easy to develop habitual patterns of speech, behavior, and thought without realizing it. Mindfulness of breathing, when practiced properly, helps develop a
stable and strong faculty of attention capable of recognizing these patterns (2010, pg. 11-12)."

If the premise of social and emotional learning is to lead children toward becoming healthy and productive adults, fostering awareness of their own ways of thinking and doing, and helping them create healthy habits through breathing is a good way to do just that. In an article on contemplative education and youth development one author defines mindfulness with children as: “a set of pedagogical practices that have as their aim personal and social transformation through the cultivation of conscious and willful awareness. These practices help young people develop the self-awareness to recognize mental and behavioral habits and learn ways to transcend habitual patterns in favor of more mindful and willful forms of living, learning, and relating to others (2008, pg 103).”

Greenland also argues that mindfulness practices will help children engage in life in a more holistic balanced way. “By learning both attention skills and compassionate worldview, children are introduced to tools that could help them live a balanced life (Greenland, 2010, pg. 18)."

While the research is young on the affect of mindfulness-based programs being implemented in classrooms, the early studies demonstrate positive results. In a preschool eight-week mindful awareness intervention, which included sitting, movement, and body, scans, parents and teachers report improvements in “executive functioning, social skills and temperament post treatment (Burke, 2010, pg. 7).” A third grade program including 24, 45 minute lessons in which
children partook in body scans, meditation, relaxation, and mindful movement demonstrated positive changes in executive functioning. “Significant improvements were reported in post treatment measures of self-rated test anxiety, teacher rated attention, and social skills, objective measures of selective (visual) attention but not sustained attention (Burke, 2010, pg. 7).”

Another study focuses on the academic benefits of mindfulness programs rather than the social, emotional, or executive function benefits. “The study, conducted at a California middle school, reported that 41 percent of the meditating students showed a gain of at least one performance level in math, while only 15 percent of the non-meditating students showed improvement (Ball, 2011).” This author argues the techniques of mindfulness allow the mind to access its reserves of energy and creativity (Ball, 2011).

The preliminary studies mentioned above demonstrate the positive effect mindfulness has on the development of children whether it is socially, emotionally, or academically. We know from the previous section that those constructs are all inherently connected and related, which is why it is crucial for educators to implement programs that address all three. In addition to empirical evidence, children’s own reports help to strengthen the argument for incorporating mindfulness as a social emotional learning tool. One middle schooler says: "After a session of Mindful Awareness, students gradually became more positive and less tired and their stresses began to go away (Greenland, 2010, pg. 24)." Another child, a fifth grader, defines mindfulness as “not hitting
someone in the mouth.” His mother writes: “He doesn’t know what to do with his energy….But one day after school he told me: ‘I’m taking a moment.’ If it works in a child’s mind - with so much going on - there must be something to it. (Brown, 2007).” Both of these children were able to recognize the changes in their behavior, and one child continued to access the practice as a tool outside of the classroom. The ability to notice and be aware of how their efforts to breathe are affecting their body is a testament to the practice of mindfulness and an indication that it is transforming children’s habits and behavior. According to Greenland, it is this hope of transformation through the process of practice that makes mindfulness unique and effective in developing whole, healthy, and happy children. "The point of mindful introspection is to bring awareness to what happens to your mind and body. Not to control your mind, but to transform it. It is a process-oriented practice. This is the polar opposite of the school day during which children are compelled to direct their energy to a static, rigid goal (Greenland, 2010, pg. 24).”

**Movement in the Classroom**

John Dewey (1938) calls all educators to incorporate active experience into their daily routine of learning whether it be in or outside the classroom. I have seen the fruits of this effort with the children I have taught in classrooms, camps, museums, and after school programs. Movement is a form of experience, offering children a different entry point into learning than is often used in classrooms. A husband and wife team and early advocates of education through movement, A.
and P. Barlin (1971) argue: “When a child has put all of himself into an experience—his body, his mind, his emotions, his imagination, his enthusiasm—he will learn and he will grow. He will not only grow in the specific experience at hand, but in his entire personality (pg. 6).” Movement allows children to extend this Deweyian educative experience beyond the cerebral or the emotional to the physical. By experiencing classroom subject matter with physicality, children reflect and express new knowledge with their bodies.

This movement provides for learning to be a layered, multi-dimensional and sensorial thing allowing children with different needs or, intelligences as Howard Gardner puts it, to equally access materials, make discoveries, and produce meaning. A. Stinson (1990) points to the increasing "belief in [the] linkage between moving to learn and learning to move, and a belief in the interrelatedness of all learning (pg. vii)." It is most likely that any educator who works with young children knows that they need to move. "Children differ in the range of their abilities, strengths, and needs, but movement is central to the very existence of all (Stinson, 1990, pg. 1)." Educators are not only attending to this basic fact, but also beginning to acknowledge that movement is not an end in itself. The benefits extend beyond the stabilization of energy levels and focus. Barlin (1971) argues that: "Appreciation of every subject can be amplified when children use their bodies to experience it (pg. 94)." Stinson (1990) adds to this argument: "It is evident that psychomotor, cognitive, and affective learning domains are influenced by an active learning environment (pg. 3)."
Yoga as a Movement Practice

In the most physical sense, yoga is a form of movement. The asanas, one of the eight limbs of yoga, are a series of postures and poses that stretch and exercise the body. As teachers and administrators are looking for ways to incorporate movement into the classroom curriculum in a seamless and meaningful way, some look to yoga to create this bridge between learning and movement. One teacher recalls her experience using yoga with students:

When I began to honor the children's innate intelligence and tune in to how they were instructing me to instruct them, we began to co-create our classes. We used the yoga asanas as a springboard for exploration of many other areas—animal adaptations and behavior, music and playing instruments, storytelling, drawing—and our time together became a truly interdisciplinary approach to learning (Wenig).

This teacher’s attention to the individual children’s needs and ability to flexibly co-create learning experiences is a beautiful picture. She incorporated the yoga asanas not as isolated, individual movements; but as “a springboard for exploration.” The asanas became yet another layer in their learning experience, a way to reflect and express their understanding and further generate personal and corporate meaning.

Another classroom teacher testifies to this concept that "skillful movement requires skillful thought. Young children often learn through discovery and are movement hungry (Stinson, 1990, pg. 59)."
how to use yoga in her classroom, Grace Horn describes how these asana
postures enhanced the quality of their curricular studies:

“[She] used yoga to help her class learn about the
French and Indian War (1754-1763). ‘We used the
bow and arrow pose because bows and arrows [were
used in battle]’ says Grace....[She] also had the class
do a warrior pose and a boat pose to represent
soldiers crossing a river. They ended the lesson with
a peace breath (Linn, 2008).”

Incorporating yoga movement into a social studies unit helps these children to
remember information as they use not only their brain, but their bodies to fully
experience the material.

In addition to enhancing curricular learning, teaching children to move
helps them to develop confidence and comfort in their own body and their sense
of their physical environment. On a basic level "Moving through space helps a
child understand his physical relationships to his real world (Barlin, 1971, pg.
81)." While this may seem trivial, this is important for children to feel safe and
comfortable in their classrooms, optimal and arguable crucial elements for
learning. As children move they learn more about him/herself and
consequentially how they fit and move within the larger space and community of
their classroom. "Movement is purposeful; children learn to cope with their
bodies, to achieve, independence, or a sense of competency and autonomy
(Stinson, 1990, pg. 17).” When children enter a classroom, they have to learn
how to navigate that space both emotionally and physically. "Bumping and
crowding in the classroom are minimized as children become increasingly
spatially aware of their relationship in their space (Barlin, 1971, pg. 91)." It is our role as educators to scaffold this navigation.

Further articulating how movement can create this ideal learning environment Barlin (1990) states: "These movement experiences can create a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom by harmlessly relaxing fears and hidden angers, resulting in friendlier relations between student and student, and more open communication between student and teacher (pg. 91)." We return to this concept of attending to the whole child discussed earlier with the increased efforts to incorporate social emotional learning into the classroom. Stinson (1990) argues: "If we want children to have satisfying lives as children and to grow into socially competent adults, we will have to retain a vision of the child as a whole, though constantly changing human being (pg. 23)."

Educators who are interested in attending to the whole child and helping children to develop a sense of pride and comfort in their own bodies and how they occupy and navigate space are increasingly experiencing success with yoga. “Yoga at an early age encourages self-esteem and body awareness with a physical activity that's noncompetitive. Fostering cooperation and compassion—instead of opposition—is a great gift to give our children (Wenig).” Being noncompetitive is surprisingly somewhat unique. So much of children’s lives are taken up by strictly competitive activities, after school programs in the arts and athletics as well as the academic environment. Having the opportunity to explore
and discover themselves through physical movement, gives children space to practice and to process without the pressure of performance.

As children are given the space to develop confidence in their own skin, they are increasingly able to be present to classroom learning and engage in positive interactions with their peers. The results from two separate studies indicate how yoga programs in schools have enhanced the learning experience of children.

Williamson describes the difference a yoga program made in Case Street School, a public school, after just one year of implementation. “Using the U.S. Department of Education’s Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, the team calculated disruptive incidents. In the year before the yoga program was introduced, there had been 225 classroom disruptions, 320 disorderly conducts, and 150 fights. During the pilot program in 2010-2011, these metrics were all cut by more than half: 110 classroom disruptions, 40 disorderly conducts, and 52 fights (Williamson, 2013, pg. 35-37).” The fact that behavioral issues decreased by more than half throughout the school year is a strong indication that yoga movement programs helped these children acquire the tools necessary to relate to their peers and focus in the classroom in a more positive productive way.

A second study compares 4th and 5th graders who participated in yoga after school programs once a week for 12 weeks with children in the same grades who did not. While the results cannot indicate a significant difference between the children who practiced yoga and those who did not, children did
report a sense of change in their perception of themselves and their behaviors at school. “Children participating in yoga reported using fewer negative behaviors in response to stress and had better balance than a comparison group. Improvements in wellbeing, specifically in behaviors directly targeted by yoga, were reported. These results suggest a possible role of yoga as a preventive intervention as well as a means of improving children's perceived well-being (Berger, 2009, pg. 36).”

**Play: The Work of Children**

Movement is a natural connection to yoga. It is essentially inherent in the practice. A second aspect of yoga that is of equal import in the classroom is play. Adults do not immediately equate yoga with play, as an adult yoga practice is quiet, calm, and personal. Children’s yoga, however, can be quite loud, rambunctious, and interpersonal. It is playful at its core.

Children’s yoga adapts to its practitioners who thrive and grow through their play. Vygotsky’s (1978) extensive work demonstrates that children are able to extend their cognitive, physical, and psychological development through interactive, engaged play. As the pressures of state tests and accountability increasingly push schools to more academic rigorous models, it is crucial to advocate for the value of play. V. Paley (2004) addresses a common feeling among educators: "We're on safer ground with a somewhat academically dependable (pg. 7)"
But she presses into this all too common idea reminding us that play should truly be redefined as work: "It looks and sounds like play, yet we properly call this play the work of children (pg. 1)."

David Elkind (2007) echoes this theory that play is valuable and essential work: "The child does learn by constructing and reconstructing the world through his play generated learning experiences (pg. 103)." Elkind extends this theory by citing studies completed by both educators and psychologists that demonstrate evidence of learning through play. The Israeli psychologist Sara Smilansky found:

"The relation of socio dramatic play to academic achievement was clearly demonstrated in one study that followed the children through second grade. Children who had engaged in dramatic play as preschoolers demonstrated superior literacy and numerical skills as second graders (Elkin, 2007, pg. 210)."

Through her research Smilanksy concludes that play successfully stimulates emotional, social, and intellectual growth in children (Elkind, 2007, pg. 210). Combining this information with the research on social and emotional learning, we know that growth in these areas translates to healthy growth of the whole child and therefore success in school and beyond.

Elkind cites studies providing evidence that children’s abilities in the academic subjects of math and literacy improved through play. "The Columbia Teacher's College team…found that incorporating learning materials into the play of preschool children facilitated their acquisition of mathematical skills (Elkind,
A comparable study demonstrated that children's reading achievement was greatly facilitated when they were involved in imaginative play with adults (Elkind, 2007, pg. 2011). These studies indicate that physical and emotional development as well as academic success is linked to children’s opportunities to engage in active play. Play is a crucial element in helping a child to develop into a whole, happy, healthy, and successful human being. As Paley (2004) writes: “fantasy play is the glue that binds all other pursuits, including the teaching of reading and writing skills (pg. 8).”

**Yoga as Productive Play**

A key aspect of practicing yoga with children is play. Yoga incorporates movement and fantasy in a unique way. Children are directed to imagine and create using their bodies and their minds. Barlin (1971) describes this connection between movement and play in the classroom: "Within movement education, the general responsibility of the teacher of young children may be defined as initiating and extending the child's play (pg. 69)." Incorporating yoga into the classroom helps to extend this play, enhancing growth and cultivating more meaningful experiences. One educator recalls her yoga practice with students: “Together we wove stories with our bodies and minds in a flow that could only happen in child's play (Wenig).” Even mindfulness, a practice we primarily associate with silence and introspection can be taught to children in a playful way they will connect with and relate to. "Playing mindfulness games and singing mindfulness songs are fun ways to help children develop attention skills and
understand how breath awareness can help them self regulate (Greenland, 2010, pg. 13)."

Yoga and mindfulness allow for this co-creation of experience through play and imagination between the educators and the children. The practice involves games with made up rules, social interactions, fantasy worlds, and real life skills. Play and movement may seem like frivolous and inconsequential activities on a surface level, but the existing evidence suggests that these practices are the foundation of facilitating the growth of children into successful adults integrated into our society. Elkind (2007) affectively argues that there is a lot more involved in this play than simply having fun. "While playing these self initiating games is fun, it also helps children learn the interpersonal skills needed to become effective social beings (pg. 145)."

We often think of play as something valuable to the early childhood age group. Developmentally this age group thrives more in the realms of fantasy play than older children. Although children begin to age out of this imaginative world, play in its different iterations never gets old or boring. Yoga and mindfulness offer variations that are appropriate from every age group from the youngest of early learners through high school aged children and on to adulthood. An educator articulates this scope of the practices’ benefits for children’s social and emotional capacity, physical development, and academic success. Hanningsen (2013) writes: “The beauty of yoga is that its benefits are available to students of every school-age group. For young students (4–6 years) yoga creates a framework for
total body movement and gross motor development. Incorporating games, storytelling, and songs allow this age group to connect with the energy of the poses and philosophy of the practice. Children ages 7–9 years benefit from yoga by building on their gross motor skills while taking on challenges in strength, agility, and endurance, as well as cooperation.”
Steady Bodies Active Minds

A Resource for using Yoga & Mindfulness in the Classroom

Clare Murchison
Steady Bodies Active Minds
A resource for using Yoga and Mindfulness in the Classroom

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BREATHE
Breathe

The breath provides our energy, our life source. It is the one thing we can count on in every moment of life, however; it is probably one of the things we take most for granted in life. Asking children to notice, listen to, and feel the breath in their bodies connects them to the most basic aspect of living in each moment and is the foundation of a yoga and mindfulness practice. Eastern philosophies believe our minds and bodies are interrelated, and specifically linked by energy or the breath (Rama, 1998, pg. 1-5). Swami Rama (1998) writes: “The result [of breath awareness] is an awakening of a whole part of ourselves that we didn't know was there before, a completely new aspect of our being to which our eyes had been closed (pg. 17).”

This chapter includes exercises to help children become aware of their breath. In my classes I have seen children learn how to be present through mindful breathing, even if just for one inhale and one exhale. This cultivation of breath awareness can help children become less impulsive. The practice of mindfulness may teach children the value of stopping before reacting and acting. If you can stop and be still for a moment to take a breath, you can become slightly clearer (Hanh, 2011, pg. 19). When taught to stop, children may be more inclined to demonstrate emotional stability, social tolerance, and are empowered to be less reactive (Jordan, 2009, pg. 3).

Helping children cultivate this awareness of their breath gives them a gift that will serve them throughout their life.
BREATHING BALL

Materials:

Hoberman Sphere (breathing ball) available at toy stores or amazon.com

Activity:

1. Hold the ball between your two hands
2. As you breathe in begin to open the ball, opening with the speed of your inhale
3. As you exhale begin to close the ball, closing with the speed of your out breath
4. Repeat five or 6 times
5. Ask children to think of the ball like their lungs, expanding as they take a breath in and shrinking as they let it out

Uses / Benefits:

The hoberman sphere is a wonderful tool to help children visualize the physical expansion and contraction of the lungs. Watching the ball grow and shrink as they inhale and exhale something concrete to focus their attention on. I have found in my classrooms that asking children to close their eyes and focus on the abstract notion of their breath is not so successful.

This is a great activity to do in circle time. Each child can have a turn leading the class through one breath cycle with the ball as it gets passed around the circle. Once the class becomes accustomed to the ball, seeing it as a breathing tool rather than a toy, it can be used individually. I have used it with students in an area of the classroom where children go to “take a break.” Most classrooms have a space like this. The presence of the breathing ball empowers children with a tool to compose themselves, and breathe through frustration with peers or themselves.
MINDFUL JAR

Materials:
Clear vase filled with water, different colors of sand or different kinds of beans/whole grains that will slowly sink in water, something to stir the water with

Activity:
1. Set the water filled vase in the center of the circle of children with the different colored sands nearby
2. The vase of water is our mind, and the different colors of sand are our thoughts and feelings. What kinds of thoughts and feelings do you have when waking up?
3. Have children share some of these thoughts and feelings. As each one shares, have them pick a color of sand that is right for their feelings and sprinkle a pinch into the vase.
4. Begin to stir the water slowly.
5. What thoughts do you have at school, in the evening, before going to bed?
6. Have the children share feelings here and sprinkle another color in the jar that seems right for that feeling.
7. Begin to stir faster: This is how our minds are when we are in a hurry, stressed, angry, or upset. Can you see things clearly in the vase? What does it feel like when you have all these thoughts and feelings swirling around?
8. Stop stirring. Let's breathe and watch as all the sand slowly settles to the bottom of the jar. This is what happens to our minds when we are mindful of our body and our breathing. What does the vase look like now? What happened to all our thoughts and feelings?

Uses / Benefits:
Unlike many of the breathing activities shared here, the mindful jar is not one that can be done on the fly, during a transition, or on a field trip. It requires a time of intentional sharing in a circle. This is a great exercise to do with a class in preparation for a new experience or after something that was particularly stressful or scary. It is also a great community building activity.

It not only gives children a visual of how calm and clear their minds can be if they remember to breathe, but it also creates a space of sharing helping children to feel comfortable verbalizing their own feelings and developing compassion for their classmates.

(Nhat Hanh, 2011, pg. 18-19)
BELLY AND HEART BREATH

Activity:

1. For this breath practice we will inhale and exhale for the same number of counts. You can do this practice sitting or lying down. If seated find a comfortable seat where you won't need to shift around, and sit as tall as you can.

2. To begin, take a few moments to tune into how the breath is moving in and out of the body. Where do you feel the breath the most in your body? (Chest, nose, stomach, back, toes). For the benefit of the children I like to make this part a little silly. I think it helps to get a few giggles out as children often find breathing to be a very funny business.

3. Place one hand on your heart, and one hand on your belly.

4. Begin to imagine filling your heart with air and then moving down and filling your belly with air. When you are filled all the way with air, squeeze all the air out of your belly then out of your heart.

5. Continue this way trying to keep the rhythm steady. You can also switch filling the belly first as you inhale then the heart.

6. If children are feeling particularly squirmy invite them to watch their hands rise as they breathe in and fall as they breathe out, noticing how each part of their body expands as they send the air to it.

Uses / Benefits:

Heart and Belly breathing helps children learn how to develop a steady, even, and deep breath. They learn that their breath can fill their whole body with energizing oxygen and not just the top of their chest. Like the breathing ball it can provide a visual of the body filling with air and then releasing it. Children can either watch or feel their hands lift and fall on both the heart and belly as they actively fill it and release air from them.

In my experience, children find this to be very relaxing. It can either be done sitting or lying down. It would be a good breathe to use seated in circle as a start to the day, as a quick reminder for children to steady themselves, breathe, and be present, or when the class needs to close their eyes and rest.

(Rechstchaffen & Cohen, 2010)
DRAW THE BREATH

Materials:

Drawing supplies: crayons, markers or colored pencils, colored chalk can be used on the sidewalk
Something to draw on (paper, sidewalk, etc)

Activity:

1. Place the crayon (or whatever drawing utensil you are using) on the paper
2. Close your eyes
3. As you breathe in draw upward and as you breathe out, draw down without removing your crayon from the paper.
4. Continue for a few breaths then open your eyes and see your breath.
5. Change colors and continue your breathing until you have a beautiful rainbow.

Uses / Benefits:

Drawing the breath helps children to actively engage with the breath. The finished product gives them a beautiful picture of how the breath is moving in and out of their bodies constantly. The drawing activity gives children the opportunity to close their eyes and focus on the process rather than what the end product will look like.

I like to have children sit in a circle and keep their eyes closed. Every few breaths I will ask them to pass their crayon to the right and continue drawing without knowing what color they are using. When children open their eyes they are often amazed at the beautiful rainbow of lines they have created.

Another lovely benefit is that when looking at all the children’s drawings together, we notice how no one child's breath is the same. Our lines and colors all form different patterns and shapes. It can be a nice activity to do when a class is having any issues of friendship, bullying, or accepting one another’s unique gifts. The pictures can be displayed as a reminder of how we are all beautiful in our own way.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 106)
INTERNAL AIR CONDITIONING

Activity:

1. Roll your tongue, curling the outsides toward the center making a tube-like shape.
2. Breathe in through it as if your tongue were a straw.
3. If someone cannot roll their tongue, place the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth for the same effect. (This might be the best way to approach this breathe with younger children)
4. Breathing in through the mouth and exhaling through the nose continue for a few breaths until you begin to feel the body cool off

Uses / Benefits:

While this breath is not as active as some of the other activities described here, it teaches children a tool to control their internal temperature. It is actually quite amazing that we have the capability of cooling ourselves down or heating ourselves up simply through breathing. Children usually find this quite exciting. In my experience they love thinking of themselves as just as powerful as the machines we rely on.

It can be a great way to cool a class down during those months of the school year when it is particularly warm, and children come in from recess over heated and sweating. I personally have not ever worked in a school with overhead fans or air conditioning. it has been quite helpful in cooling my class off in those first or last months of school when summer weather abounds.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 106)
LION’S BREATH

Materials:

Lion puppets or pictures (not necessary but a nice addition)

Activity:

1. Sit on your knees
2. Take a big deep breath in. The kind of breath a big king or queen lion would need to take
3. Exhale through your mouth with a loud ROAR, a WHIMPER, or a HISS
4. Be sure to stick your tongue as far out and down as possible.
5. Hands can either stay on your knees or come out like lion claws.

Uses / Benefits:

This is a wonderful breath to use with children when they are facing a new challenge, or something scary. It is a tool they can take and use anytime in their life that they are faced with a challenge. There is something empowering about letting out a loud powerful roar. For younger children this may be saying goodbye to a grownup or trying something new on the playground, for older children a good use might be before reciting a poem, or taking a test.

I mention the puppets as younger children love the visual of the Lion doing the breath. They then can imitate his roar. This is a wonderful breath to use as part of a yoga adventure, perhaps part of a long list of other animals you are imitating from the jungle.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 104)
PEACE BREATH

Materials:

Vocabulary Card

Activity:

1. Take a deep breath in
2. As you exhale sing the word "Peace" until all the air is released from your body.
3. You can choose whatever word to sing out as you exhale. It does not have to be peace, but it does work best with a one-syllable word.

Uses / Benefits:

This is a wonderful way to incorporate language into your breathing practice. The word peace may be how you introduce this breath to your class, and will hopefully be a word you come back to often. However, any one-syllable word will work. You can even let the children experiment with more syllables and notice how it sounds.

It would be a wonderful way to incorporate new vocabulary from a science or social studies unit or a new book. It can either be lead by the teacher or one student, or sitting in a circle each child can take a turn leading. Give the children the task of each choosing a different word from a classroom study to sing out on the exhale.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 103)
POM-POM BREATH

Materials:

Ample Floor Space  
Multi-Colored cotton pom-poms or cotton balls  
Straws

Activity:

1. place pom-pom or cotton ball down on the floor, find a space that has plenty of space in front of it.  
2. Get down on the floor and blow through your straw to move the pom-pom to the other side of the room.  
3. Count how many breaths it takes to get from one side of the room to the other or see how far you can move the pom-pom with one breath.  
4. If large open space is not available, view the classroom as a breathing obstacle course.  
5. Make sure that this does not become a race or a competition. The idea is to see how strong and powerful their own breath is not to compare it to their classmates.

Uses / Benefits:

This is a very active breathing exercise. It is something that I would use when I want my students to feel strong and powerful, to know how much power they store just in their own ability to breathe. If they can move a cotton ball across the classroom simply by breathing, what else are their bodies capable of?

I would also use this breath when I felt my class needed to move. It would certainly be an activity that required an intentional time and space, not something I would recreate during transition time or outside of the classroom setting.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 106)
STAIRCASE BREATHING

Note: You will need a group of at least 3 and plenty of floor space

Activity:

1. Most often as the teacher you will participate in the activities alongside your children, but for this one you will lead them separately.
2. Begin by having one person lie flat on the floor with his or her left arm out to the side.
3. Have the second person lie down with their head on the first's belly, and opening the right arm out to the side to receive the next person.
4. The third person will then lay his/her head on the belly of the second person and open the left arm out to receive the fourth.
5. Continue the pattern until everyone is part of the staircase.
6. Start with person #1 at the top of the staircase. Have him/her take a breath in and say "HA" as he/she breathes out. The second person will take a breath in and exhale saying "HA HA"
7. The "HA" will continue down the line adding on with each person.
8. They can also all say "HA" as a group
9. Be prepared for giggles and possibly uncontrollable fits of laughter!

Uses / Benefits:

Use this with your class only if you are all very comfortable with each other. There may be students who opt out, who do not want to be touching one another. Let that be an option. The staircase breath can be very fun and silly. When children observe this they may decide to join in on the fun.

This activity clearly needs a time set aside and a large amount of open space. It can be a good activity to do in an outdoor space or on the rug area in your classroom. It is a good end of day activity, when the class needs some space to have fun and relax with one another in a constructive way. It is not an activity I would use with a group that was not familiar with mindful breathing. It is something I might introduce later in the school year once a strong classroom community has been formed, and children have been practicing mindful breathing corporately and possibly even individually.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 106)
VISUALIZATION RELAXATION

Materials:

- Space to lie down or sit comfortably
- A story (book or told)
- Relaxing music (optional)

Activity:

1. Ask children to find their own comfortable space whether that be sitting or lying down.
2. If they are comfortable closing their eyes ask them to do so.
3. Ask them to begin to notice their breathing. They may put their hands on their belly and heart if that helps them settle into it.
4. Share a relaxing story with the children. This may either be from a well-loved familiar book, a told fairy tale, or a visualization journey.
5. Some visualization themes include lying in a field or on the beach and guiding the children to think peaceful thoughts, creating animals out of imaginary clouds, traveling to the stars, swimming or boating under a waterfall, finding a magical garden, climbing a worry tree where you can leave all your worries behind, be creative!
6. Be sure that all visualization stories allow children to create their own imaginary environments that are peaceful, calm, happy, and joyful.
7. Be prepared for giggles during this time as well. As children grow more comfortable with this, they will come to relish the time to dive into their own imaginations and feel less of a need to be silly.

Uses / Benefits:

Often during story time we are still asking children to sit up and listen. Story time often takes on important literacy lessons, asking children to infer, predict, pull out main ideas, or analyze characters. While this is all very important for developing readers, it can also take the pure pleasure and imaginative freedom out of stories. Creating the time for stories to simply be stories and nothing more, allows children to just enjoy and relax into the experience of the story.

The visualizations allow children to retreat into their imaginations creating a special place or experience that is just theirs, and one that is peaceful and happy. It may be a space you encourage them to go to at other times in their life when the world around them is stressful or turbulent.

(Laurie Jordan, 2009, pg. 43)
MOVE
Move

During the elementary years children are developing gross motor abilities as well as their understanding and interest in exercise and healthy habits. Practicing yoga can help children coordinate their movement in a more graceful, connected, and focused manner. Children are encouraged to use their bodies in imaginative ways, creating letters and words or representing ideas and objects. Movement provides another point of entry into learning possibly connecting with children for whom, verbal, visual, or auditory learning is challenging for.

Yoga in the classroom does not consist of isolated movements, but rather games and activities that partners or the whole class can participate in. Practicing yoga together makes movement and balance, both important gross motor skills, a group endeavor, children will learn best from the other children in their class (Jordan, 2009, pg. 5). This idea of learning with and from peers connects directly to Lev Vygotsky’s developmental theories on learning as a social construct. He (1971) argues that learning and development are most likely to occur when children collaborate with their teachers and peers (pg. 131). As you read through this section, you will notice how many poses have partner and group variations.

In these variations the movements take on an element of play they lack on their own. Kathleen Berger (2008) writes: “Active play benefits children in every way (pg. 256).” With partners and classmates yoga becomes less a routine of exercise and more an experience in imaginative play, helping them to cultivate a love for moving and ability to access it as a tool on their daily journey to health, happiness, and wholeness at school and beyond.
**WARRIOR POSES**

**Poses:**

**Warrior 1:** Stand with your right foot at the front of your mat with toes pointing forward and your left foot at the back of your mat with your left toes flat. Bend your right knee and reach your arms up over your head. Torso faces forward. Heart reaches toward the sky. Repeat on other side.

**Warrior 2:** From warrior 1 peel your arms open reaching your right arm out in front of you and your left arm back behind you. Keep your arms parallel to the floor. Feel the energy from your fingertips. Torso faces to the side. Repeat on other side.

**Warrior 3:** From Warrior 1 lean your weight into your front leg and lift your back leg out behind you parallel to the floor. Keep your arms extended out over your head as you balance on one leg. You may also reach your arms out to the sides like an airplane.

**Partner Variations:**

**For Warrior 1 and 2:** start sanding back to back with your partner. Come into the pose at the same time; make sure you are both stepping the same foot forward. You can hold hands, helping your partner to stretch long, press your outer legs together helping your partner to bend deeply and feel supported.

**For Warrior 3:** start in Warrior 1 next to one another and bring the inside arm to your partners' shoulder and bend forward from the hips, coming into a supported Warrior 3. Extend your outside arms directly out to the side.

**Uses / Benefits:**

The Warrior poses are an excellent tool to help children feel confident with their own strength and power. Something I like to do with children is discuss the different characteristics of a warrior. With some guidance, children often come up with some wonderful words: brave, confident, strong, peaceful, courage, love, etc. Whenever you come into these poses have the children shout one of the warrior traits they feel like they need or have a lot of. Ask if we ever have to be warriors in our own lives. This discussion helps children to realize that there are many different ways to be a warrior, and the poses are something they can always do when they feel the need for a little extra courage or strength.

Yoga has given us plenty of warrior poses to practice, but there can always be more! A great way to empower children is to have them create their own warrior poses. This activity gives them the freedom to create and explore how their own bodies move. They can test out what feels strong and teach their new pose to the class.

While it may take some time to teach the children how to do the warriors initially, once they know the poses and the many different words that can describe a warrior, a pose can be brought out any time a child needs to be reminded of his/her own inner strength and power.
CHAIR POSE

Pose:

Stand tall and reach your arms straight up over your head. Sit your bottom back and down as if you are sitting in a chair. Hold the position, and then straighten your legs to come to stand, or forward bend over your legs. Don’t forget to breathe here!

Variations:

Become a Rocking Chair: From chair pose lower your bottom to the floor and roll backward, with some momentum. Then roll forward and push into your feet to come back to chair pose.

Become a Rocket Ship: Bring hands to touch over your head. Lower your seat further and further down as you count down from 10. At 1, jump into the air, Blast Off!!

Become a Praying Mantis: Bring the palms together at your chest. Sit further back and twist to one side, resting your elbow outside our knee. Switch to the other side.

Group Chair: Stand in a tight circle so you are shoulder to shoulder. Everyone turn to the right and take a sep closer to the center. Make sure you can feel the person in front and behind you. At the same time everyone will come into chair pose so that you are sitting on the person behind you. You should be able to sit comfortably with all your weight on the person behind you. If not, stand up move closer, and try again.

Uses / Benefits:

Chair pose builds strength and focus. It is not the easiest pose requiring leg strength and core strength. It is an excellent pose to teach children how to persevere and stick with something even when it is a challenge.

The pose can be slightly altered in order to suit your needs, whether it is a rocket ship or a praying mantis, or something you create.

Group chair simply extends the challenge and displays how the community’s strength is achieved through the support of each individual.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 49, 53, 56, 97)
SEED TO TREE TRANSFORMATION

Pose:

6. Start in seed pose (child's pose): sitting on your knees fold over and rest your forehead on the floor. Imagine what it would feel like to be a tiny seed in the earth waiting to grow.

7. Take a deep breath in and begin floating your arms up overhead. Stretch your torso up towards the sky. Imagine the sun warming you and the wind swaying you.

8. Take a deep breath and begin to stand up. Stand tall with your feet slightly apart. Feel your feet firmly grounded on the floor as if growing roots to keep you strong and steady.

9. Slowly lift your left foot off the floor and place the sole of your foot inside your right leg. Your left leg will make a triangle shape. Find one thing to focus your gaze on to help with balance.

10. Lift your arms up to the sky.

11. Don't worry if you sway or fall! Trees often sway in the wind and sometimes fall down. You can always get back up and try again.

Variations:

Partner Tree: Stand next to a partner lift your arms toward the sky and hold each other’s inside hand. Come into tree pose and help each other balance.

Forest of Trees: Stand in a circle. Lift your arms up and hold on to the hands of the person next to you. Come into tree pose, notice how the whole group helps each other balance. Where is this forest? What kind of trees are you?

Uses / Benefits:

Tree pose helps develop children's ability to balance. In my experience, the balancing poses have been some of my students' favorites. They love the challenge, the chance to their skills, and do "adult" yoga. Some of my students have gotten frustrated when they keep falling, but this is an excellent opportunity to remind them that yoga is all about the process. It does not matter whether their foot is balancing on their thigh or if their toes are still on the ground, what is important is that we are learning what our body can do and we are strengthening it.

Seed to Forest transformation would be an excellent activity to incorporate into any study of nature. Children can create a physical representation of the process of growth and transformation from one thing to another. It is a wonderful time to talk about what makes trees grow and / or what kinds of trees and seedpods we see around our neighborhood.

(Rechtschaffen & Cohen, 2010)
BUTTERFLY POSE & FLOWER POSE

Pose:

2. Sit on the floor and bring the soles of your feet together making your toes "kiss"
3. Bring your fingers to either side of your head to create antennas.
4. Flap your wings (knees) up and down.
5. Bring your nose to your toes to take a rest.
6. Stretch one leg outwards at a time

Variations:

Open-Winged Butterfly: Make your butterfly fly by holding onto your big toes and lifting your legs into the air. This takes a strong core and balancing on your bottom. For an extra challenge try to roll backwards and come back into the pose without letting go of your toes!

Flower Pose: Come into your Butterfly Pose. With your toes kissing, lift your legs off the ground and balance on your bottom. Take your arms underneath your knees and let your legs rest on your elbows.

Group Flower Pose: Sitting in a tight circle, come into Flower Pose. Reach and hold onto the hands of the people who are next to you on both sides. You can try rolling backward and coming up into the pose as a group for a team challenge!

Uses & Benefits:

Flower and Butterfly poses are accessible by children of all ages and all abilities. They are both seated poses, therefore less physically demanding. Butterfly pose can be used as a means to encourage engaged sitting. Flower is a little more active, and is a wonderful way to build core strength. The act of rolling backward and forward is challenging, and requires practice and continued strengthening of the core. It is not something that can be easily mastered and therefore develops children's ability to persevere through difficulty.

I have used both poses with children to point out individuality. While in the pose, ask children to describe their butterfly or flower. What kind are they? What color? What makes them special? Children learn to listen to and appreciate their peers' choices and qualities. This exercise also fosters children's imaginative and creative thinking, providing the opportunity to wonder over the abundant possibilities that a flower or a butterfly could be or look like.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 33 & 95)
SEATED TWISTS

Pose:

7. Sit with your legs stretching straight out in front of you.
8. Bend your left knee and place the sole of your foot on the ground.
9. Cross the left leg over the right leg, placing your foot down just outside of the knee.
2. Reach your right arm up towards the sky and twist to the left.
3. Rest the Right arm against the outside of the left knee.
4. Place the left hand down behind your back using it to support you.
5. Repeat on the other side.

Variations:

Twist with a partner!
6. Sit down cross legged facing your partner, and stagger yourselves so your ankles and knees meet.
7. Reach your left arm behind your back, and with your right hand grab your partner's left hand. (The one behind his or her back)
2. Take a deep breath in and twist.
3. Release and re-stagger yourselves so you can twist to the other side.

Uses & Benefits:

Twists are incredibly restorative and detoxifying. Twists massage and cleanse our digestive organs. Children need these things just as much as we adults do. Seated twists can provide a much-needed relaxation and recharge for the rest of the day because they help to calm our minds and restore our energy.

Twists are a good pose to begin or end a rest period with, whether that period means nap time or quiet reading or choice time. They signal a change of pace and prepare children to move into a new activity with a calm and peaceful feeling, with restored energy.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 85)
**BOAT POSE**

**Pose:**

4. Balance on your bottom
5. Lift your legs and arms into the air making a "V" shape with your body.
6. You can also bend your knees bringing your shins parallel to the floor.
2. Try to hold for a few breaths.

**Variations:**

Give your boat a sail! Come into Boat Pose and begin to extend your arms straight up into the air. With every exhale switch your arms, they are your sails.

Partner Boat: Come to sit facing your partner with your legs stretched out in front. Bring your feet to touch your partners. Pressing your feet into one another's begin to lift them up in the air. Hold you partner's hands on either side of your lifted legs.

Group Boat: Sit in a tight circle, making sure you are hip to hip with the people next to you. Come into Boat Pose. You can either rest your elbows on the floor behind you for support or reach around the shoulders of the person next to you as if you are giving two side hugs.

**Uses & Benefits:**

Boat Pose is an active energizing pose, yet it does not take up very much space. It is an excellent tool to develop core strength and determination.

Children can do boat pose individually, with one partner, or as a whole group. If, for example, the class is going on a trip somewhere for a social studies unit, you could travel by boat pose! If you were studying transportation, boat pose would be an excellent addition helping children to learn new vocabulary through kinesthetic experience. Have the children create poses for the other modes of transportation you are studying. This will make them think about how these things move, what sounds they make, who rides them, etc.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011 pg. 95, 84, 47)
CHILD’S POSE

Pose:

3. Sit on your knees
4. Bend forward and place your forehead on the floor.
5. Let your arms rest at your sides.

Variations:

Another variation of this pose is to sit on your heels and open your knees out wide. Then bend forward and place your forehead on the floor letting your chest rest between your thighs.

Uses & Benefits

Child's pose is the ultimate relaxation pose. For children who need to take a break from the classroom momentarily, child's pose offers a solution. In this position you physically turn into yourself. For children who are easily distracted by stimuli, child's pose offers a reprieve as it muffles sounds and cuts off vision.

Sometimes mindful breathing, or checking into our feelings is just too hard to do without giggling at our friends across the circle or fiddling with the blocks nearby. In child's pose, children immediately experience freedom from all the goings on, and can find a sense of peace. I have found it is easier for some children to listen to their breath for a few inhales and exhaltes, when cut off from so much stimulation.

Calling children's attention to the breath in this pose is interesting, as when they inhale it fills the back of the body rather than the chest and heart. Ask children to notice their breath, where does it go? How does it feel different than when they are sitting or standing or lying on their back?
Connect

When practicing yoga with my class, what I noticed most was the sense of community and connectedness it generated. The practices of yoga and mindfulness can encourage children to develop an inner awareness. They learn to use the breath to understand how they are feeling and experiencing any given moment. I witnessed how this increased sense of self-awareness translated into an increased understanding of others’ feelings and ability to reach out in compassion to their peers. After our morning mindful minutes, we always discussed our feelings. I was consistently surprised how honest and insightful my students’ comments could be. This short minute created a feeling of trust and understanding amongst the class, a unique ability to share emotions, and to recognize that we each experience the same thing differently. Thinking this way about others’ thoughts and feelings is a milestone for young children. According to Jean Piaget (1972), children operate from a definitive egocentric point of view in early childhood. They need scaffolding in order to extending their thinking to include others’ feelings and perspectives.

This section includes games and activities that can help children connect with one another, learn valuable communication skills, and develop compassionate attitudes. Mindfulness in particular teaches children to stop and breathe, respect and love themselves as well as others; it can set up the child with powerful communication and conflict resolution skills. My hope is that through using some of these yoga and mindfulness practices you will experience the same rich community experience my class did.
BELL GAME

Materials: Hand bell (you can test different bells, some ring with out much effort and others are quiet)

Activity:

12. Sit in a circle
13. Start by introducing the bell, ring it loudly for all the students to see and hear
14. Stand up with the bell and walk across the circle.
15. Place the bell down in front of someone else.
16. Do all of this without letting the bell make a sound.
17. If it rings, you have to go back and start again.
18. Each person gets to ring the bell loudly before having to silently deliver it to another classmate *Delivery has to be ACROSS the circle, not next to you.

Uses & Benefits:

I like to use this game during share times. Each person gets to ring the bell and share their story, object, or comment. The bell clearly defines who the speaker is and helps the other students to focus their eyes and ears on them. Additionally, the challenge of delivering the bell without it ringing requires students to move slowly, deliberately, and with focus.

I like to remind children that it is not simply the responsibility of the child holding the bell, but the group is responsible for sending silent energy to the bell each time it passes through the circle. This prompt takes pressure off of the child making it a group accomplishment. My students usually take it quite seriously. I have been amazed how still and silent my classes have been during these games.

(Rechtschaffen & Cohen, 2010)
MINDFUL COMMUNICATION

Activity:

3. Sit cross-legged, facing your partner and decide who will begin as the leader.
4. Hold up your hands so that they are close but not quite touching. Lock eyes with your partner and do not look away.
5. The leader will begin to move his/her hands in different directions and varying speeds.
6. The person who is mirroring will make the exact same movements as the leader without breaking eye contact.
7. After a minute or two switch roles so that each child has a chance to lead.

For a fun challenge try mirroring feet!

Uses & Benefits:

This game is a great morning meeting activity. It is a different kind of greeting, learning how to communicate without our words. Children have to intently focus on their partner, how and where they are moving.

Maintaining eye contact is one of the biggest skills derived from this game. I have noticed that children have a hard time looking each other in the eye when speaking to one another directly especially during morning greetings. The mindful communication game makes keeping eye contact a fun challenge rather than a potentially scary demand.

Because each child leads, the game instills confidence in children's ability to successfully be a leader. Many children do not feel comfortable or natural taking on leadership roles with the whole group, this game allows these children to lead in a non-threatening environment building their sense of confidence so that they may begin to take on more of those roles in the future.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 134)
THE ARTIST & THE CLAY

Activity:

8. There are two ways to set up this activity. As the teacher you can be the only artist and have your class all be lumps of clay or you can have your class partner up so that everyone has the opportunity to be the artist.
9. There are three ways the Artist can mold the clay:
   - Physically moving the person
   - Giving only verbal instruction
   - Attaching an invisible string (a la marionette) requires no talking or touch
3. Once children have decided who will be the Artist and who will be the Clay, have the Clay come into child's pose and prepare to be "molded"
4. You can decide to either direct your children to mold their "clay" into a specific pose or give them creative control.

Uses & Benefits

This activity requires children to listen and follow directions from either their teacher or their classmate. Because the instructions are directed toward body movements, children cultivate body awareness. It can be a great game to help children learn the different parts of their bodies and how they move.

Because one child acts as the leader or artist, it fosters a sense of confidence in their ability to lead as well as their creative thinking. Giving children time to mold their partners into interesting poses or shapes inspires teamwork and creative movement.

This activity requires some time and space. It is best used when it seems like your class needs to get off the floor or out of their seats and move. It is also a wonderful activity to build a sense of community and teamwork. Although one child is the leader, the partnerships develop a sense of camaraderie as they connect with one another using different modes of communication.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 109)
BALL PASS GAMES

**Materials:** A soft or squishy ball (The size of a small beach ball)

**Activity:**

1. Begin by sitting in a circle with your group, a little less than arms distance apart.
2. As the leader you will begin the game by using your feet to pass the ball to the person next to you.
3. The group will continue to pass the ball around the circle. If the ball drops it can only be picked up with someone's feet.
4. It can become more challenging by: changing directions, adding a second ball, passing it across the circle, rolling back to a plow pose before passing it.

**Uses & Benefits:**

Children have to communicate with their classmates as they pass the ball. It fosters teamwork and a sense of collaboration.

Balancing on their bottoms and lifting the ball with their feet builds core strength, coordination, and gross motor skills.

This game can be used during a morning or afternoon meeting. You may decide to add a comment when you have the ball: something you are thankful for, something you are excited about, something you enjoyed about today, something you are proud of, a vocabulary word connected to your curriculum, a prediction about a book, the variations are endless. The ball pass game can provide a way to think about learning differently, to go about a normal classroom routine or exercise in a way that is imaginative, kinesthetic, and inspiring.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 112)
DRUMBEAT HANDS

Activity:

6. Sit cross-legged in a tight circle.
7. Have everyone place their right hand on the floor in front of the person to their right, and their left hand in front of the person to their left. Everyone should now have two different hands in front of him/her.
8. Explain that we will be making music with our hands. We will be going around the circle in "hand order" making beats.
3. As the leader start a drumbeat by tapping your hand on the floor loud enough for everyone to hear.
4. The person whose hand is next to yours should continue the beat, and so on around the circle. The beat is passed around the circle not in order of people, but in order of hands.
5. Don't worry about errors, just keep going!
6. To make it more challenging, move the beat along faster or introduce the double tap to change directions.

Uses & Benefits:

This game helps kids to concentrate on the task at hand. The 'hand order' introduces a different type of pattern, encouraging children to be flexible and adapt to new scenarios.

Children have to develop patience as they cannot beat away as they please, but wait for the beat to come all the way around the circle until it is their turn to tap their hands.

Children also practice with their left and right, a skill that is important to continuously reiterate and integrate into the day.

This game can be used during meetings on the rug perhaps as a "brain break" during longer lessons. Children have the opportunity to take a break while still fine-tuning their ability to focus and attend to the present moment.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 121)
WHEN THE BIG WIND BLOWS

**Materials:** Something to mark places in a circle i.e.) yoga mats, carpet squares, masking tape, etc. (you will need one less spot than the number of children as someone will always be in the center)

**Activity:**

7. As the leader, start the game in the center of the circle
3. say: "When the big wind blows, it blows everyone who...." it is up to the person in the middle to decide how to end this sentence.
4. If the sentence applies to you, you must move off your mat making windy sounds and moving your body as if you are experiencing a strong wind.
5. The person in the center will try to find an open mat, sending someone else to the center.

**Uses & Benefits:**

This game gives the children an opportunity to move freely and "run" a little bit in the classroom, something I think is a very important part of the day.

Because the sentences are often personal in nature (about likes, dislikes, families, favorites) the children will get to know one another in a fun dynamic way. This game, like the bell game, poses a structured and different way to incorporate share into the classroom. Each student should get to be in the center at some point, helping them to feel in control and like the leader. Students will experience a sense of belonging in the classroom community and a security that their voice is valued and essential. Noticing who is running around in the “wind” at the same time as they are will help students make connections with their classmates who share likes, dislikes, common experiences, or characteristics.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 165)
WATERING THE FLOWERS

Materials: pencils, colored pencils, or markers, large drawings of flowers (one for each child) with as many petals as children of class

Activity:

6. Pass out flowers and pencils to each student.
2. Each student will write his/her name in the center of the flower and write one thing they like about him/herself on one of the petals
3. Have the children pass the flowers to the right
4. The next person will write something they like about the person whose flower they received on another petal.
5. Continue passing the flowers around the circle until they reach their original owner.
6. Children can read to themselves or share to the class some of the nice things their classmates wrote about them.
2. Hang the flowers up in the room as a reminder to children how loved they are and the many good qualities they have.

Note: If writing is challenging for your age group have the children draw a picture in the petals.

Uses & Benefits:

This activity is a wonderful thing to do as a class at a time when relational issues are frequently occurring. Classes often go through periods when the children are not so nice to one another for a number of reasons. This practice of watering each other's flowers helps to build children's own sense of value as well as compassion for others.

This activity can also be done without the writing component. Sitting in a circle children can verbally share their thanks, respect, and compliments. Verbally sharing may be more appropriate for older ages.

(Nhat Hahn, 2011, pg.112)
MY LITTLE LIGHT SEES YOUR LITTLE LIGHT

Materials: scotch tape, a blank sheet of paper for each child, writing utensils

Activity:

3. Have children tape a blank sheet of paper to each others' back so everyone (including the teacher!) has a blank piece on his or her back.
4. Have everyone write anonymous compliments to their classmates on their backs
2. Sit in a circle, ask students to take the papers off their backs and read it to themselves
3. Let students share at least one item from their list they especially liked reading and maybe why it seems important to them
4. Culminate the experience with a discussion: What did you learn about yourself that you did not know before? What are some of your strengths? What was it like to think of compliments for all your classmates? Did it make you think about your peers differently?
5. You can do a number of things with the list: you can find a place to put them up in the classroom or encourage children to tape it somewhere where they often look i.e.) locker, bathroom mirror, homework notebook, etc.

Uses & Benefits:

This activity is similar to watering flowers, but adds an element of movement and mystery as the children will be writing on each others' backs. Reading their peers' compliments helps to build self-confidence and self-esteem. It develops a sense a trust and friendship among your group. It builds awareness of how it feels to be complimented and respected and the importance of reminding your classmates how much you like and respect them.

Like watering flowers, this activity is a great way to bring the class together when connection and relationships seem to be strained. It might also be a good thing to do at the beginning of the year. Once you have been in school long enough to know one another. It can help set the tone for the year, creating a warm, loving and open environment where children feel valued and safe.

(Vilchez-Blatt, 2011, pg. 137)
LEARN

LEARN
READ
THINK
PLAY
Learn

The practices of yoga and mindfulness engage children in a variety of learning experiences through breath, physical movement, self-exploration, and connection. This section suggests ways yoga and mindfulness might be incorporated into the curriculum to enhance classroom learning.

Howard Gardner (1988) emphasizes the teacher’s role as one who can “stimulate crystallizing experiences which play into and support and give students a chance to develop their particular profile of abilities (pg. 2).” I believe that the variety of activities listed in the section that follows can provide children with these experiences in which learning becomes meaningful, exciting, and boundless.

These experiences involve a large amount of imaginative play and creative expression through the body. David Elkind (2007) writes that “Play is not a luxury, but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age feels…Play allows humans to realize their highest aspirations and ideals.” It is with the belief that play is an essential element to children’s development, that the activities were chosen for this section.

The onset of formal schooling often coincides with the departure of free and imaginative play. Yoga offers an opportunity to expend energy and be silly in curricular related ways as well as develop self-discipline allowing them to attend to the important matters of learning. Children are able to process and solidify their learning by experiencing it in their bodies.
STORY TIME YOGA

Stories are an excellent place to incorporate yoga movement. Story telling and read aloud inspire children’s imaginations to create visual images and action. Incorporating yoga and movement allows the story to come alive in a new and different way. When children embody their version of the characters or actions through poses, it connects and extends their imaginative thinking.

When incorporating yoga into a story, movement does not have to resemble exact poses. When I do yoga stories with my students, the poses are often interpretative or created on the spot. The yoga practice in these scenarios is playful. I am encouraging children to play with their bodies, but also think with them. If our story involves a crocodile, how do we think a crocodile might move? What would crocodile pose look like. It almost always looks different for every child, and that is all right! When doing story time yoga with your class it is important to be flexible and open to all possibilities as long as they are safe. I often have to remind myself that it is not the same as regular read aloud time; it can easily get loud and a little chaotic. Sometimes if it feels like the energy level is too high, I will incorporate a few breaths into our story, allowing children to steady their bodies and to orient themselves to the story experience.

Any story can be used in story time yoga because every story has characters and action. Books with animals are an excellent choice because the children love to imagine and embody animal movements and shapes. I do not use yoga books for this activity as they are not generally stories. Yoga books are wonderful, but usually lead children through specific poses or visualizations. My goal during story time yoga is to allow children to imagine and be creative in their movements, often with stories they know and love. Try taking some of your classes' favorite books and adding yoga!
ALPHABET ASANA

As a class come up with different poses for every letter in the alphabet. This is a great activity for children who are just learning their letters as well as beginning readers and writers. Children have to think about how the letter is formed and how their body can move to mimic its lines and shapes. Alphabet Asana provides another entry point for children to learn this important language skill. The physicality of the process may be very helpful for children who are not visual learners.

There are a couple extension activities possible for Alphabet Asana. After forming the letters with their bodies, children can draw stick figures of each other in the poses. They can match each pose drawing with the actual letter it represents. This provides practice with writing letters and creates a new classroom alphabet. The alphabet can be hung on classroom walls, or compressed to one page and photocopied for students.

A second possibility is to spell words as groups using only the children’s bodies. You might chose to do this with curriculum related vocabulary, names, spelling words, field trip related words, or anything. Divide the class into groups and give them words with the same number of letters as children. Once they have spelled their word, have the other class members try to read it. This extension helps children realize that they can use the alphabet asanas to help them remember what letter they need and how to form it. You might see children standing up to do an asana pose as they write their name or a spelling test throughout the year. For some children knowing information in their body helps them to use it successfully in their work.
POSE THAT NAME

One of my students' favorite yoga activities is to create poses for different things. They love the idea that they are adding to the library of yoga poses that have existed for thousands and thousands of years. Creating poses is very playful and imaginative, but can also lend itself to more purposeful imaginative thinking.

Often when studying a curricular unit, children learn a lot of vocabulary. Pose that name provides the opportunity to think about this new language in a deep, sensory way. For example, I student taught in first grade classroom that was studying waste and sanitation. Some of our vocabulary included: garbage barge, sanitation worker, street sweeper, and the different parts of a garbage truck. The children were divided into pairs and given one or two different words to create poses for. They had to do some serious thinking about the role of a sanitation worker, or the action of a street sweeper in order to come up with a pose that would communicate their meanings. The children worked together moving and discussing the meanings of their different words, and testing out how their bodies could successfully display this new language. Later on in our study, I was surprised to see children putting themselves in these poses as a means of finding the word they were searching for. Committing the language to their physical memory helped some children access it more readily in later situations.

To incorporate this activity into a curricular unit, talk to children about how the yoga poses they already know represent something or someone (animals, warriors, etc). There are so many yoga poses already, but there is not a pose for everything. Brainstorm a list of language that is new or central to your unit, and model together how you might come up with a pose for one or two of the words. Then pair your class off and give each one a piece of paper with a couple of the words from your brainstorm list. Finally have the class teach each other their poses. Teaching the class is a wonderful extension and application of leadership skills. This element helps children take ownership of their creative process.

Pose that name can also be used in a less structured way. Let the children create poses for anything they want to and teach them to the class. If that is too open ended for you, try giving them themes i.e.) types of candy or storybook characters.
TAKE A YOGA ADVENTURE

Take an imaginary adventure as a class to a particular place or time that is related to a curricular unit of study. Children love creating vivid worlds in their imaginations. Give them the opportunity to create a world collaboratively, and explore that world using their bodies. In my experience it makes a particular study come alive in the classroom. It provides the place for children to use their knowledge in an active exciting way. They learn from one another's contributions and arrive at a deeper sense of meaning as a group. The adventure could even be a pre or post trip lesson for a field trip predicting what you would see or reflecting on what you did see. If field trips are impossible, perhaps the adventure is in lieu of leaving the classroom.

To take an adventure, stand or sit in a circle. Talk about where you are going to "go" today. Your location may be preselected or child directed. Guide the children on this adventure, prompting them to think about each encounter or experience as a movement or yoga pose. When going on an adventure it is helpful to think about:

19. How do we get there? (move your bodies like the selected mode of transportation)
20. Do you need to pack any bags?
21. What do we see? (maybe you are at the zoo, move your bodies like different animals) It is important to let all students' contribute here. I have found it to be a good opportunity to assess what my students know and understand.
22. Do you need to make a snack?
23. What other things do you experience with your senses (sounds, smells, touch)?
24. Will you get home the same way you came?
25. As you explore remember the importance of stillness and breathing, maybe incorporate one of the breathing activities.

Remember that the adventure is all about movement, and it is not an adventure unless it is fun! Let children be playful and silly. It is through this playful interaction with the material that it becomes meaningful.

Adventures can be tiring, as children are engaged in very active imagining and moving. It is nice to end the adventure with a breathing activity and possibly even a visualization exercise. Let the children close their eyes and guide them through an open-ended reflection of what they just "saw" or "experienced" on their adventure.
MINDFUL SNACK

Guide your class in a mindful eating meditation. So often we all, children and adults, mindlessly put food in our mouths not noticing what it looks like or even tastes like. Tell children that it is important to eat slowly and mindfully taking in the appearance, texture, smell, taste, and even sound of the things we eat. This will help us get the most nutrition out of the foods we eat.

Mindful eating can be done with any food really, but it is good to choose a food that can be held in the palm of a child's hand, and awakens as many senses as possible. I like to use clementines, as they are small, smell strong, and the peel adds an active element to the eating process. Raisins are also a good food to do this with because we often eat them in huge handfuls or as just one part of another food (cookie or muffin). Your children might be surprised by the taste after mindfully eating one.

4. Hold the clementine out in front of you.
5. Look at it, what color is it? What size is it? What shape is it?
6. Smell it. How does it smell? Does it smell like anything familiar?
7. Feel its texture. What do you notice about the peel?
8. Slowly peel the clementine. Notice how the fruit awakens your senses differently as you peel it. Does the color, texture, smell, shape change at all?
9. Close your eyes and very slowly break off a wedge and bring it to your mouth.
10. Notice all the sensations: how it tastes, where you taste it on your tongue, how it feels between your teeth and going down your throat, in your stomach.
11. After several wedges have the children open their eyes and share what they noticed: Was it hard to eat so slowly? Did being mindful make it taste different? Do you normally eat this way?

In addition to helping children be more aware of what they put in their bodies and think about the senses food triggers, this activity is a wonderful way to teach descriptive language. After leading a workshop for other teachers, a colleague of mine used the mindful snack meditation as an entry point to writing haiku with her class. She said that both her children's writing as well as drawing were much more descriptive and detailed than in the past. Because each child experienced the meditation differently, their language was unique and varied in ways it had not been in previous lessons.

Try a mindful snack meditation with something that has many different tastes, feels, and textures such as trail mix. See what kind of language the children use to describe something that is so varied.

(Rechtschaffen & Cohen, 2010)
APPLICATION

I have practiced yoga and mindfulness with children in a variety of settings: after school programs, my K-3rd art classroom, a yoga studio, and as a student teacher. This coming fall as I head into my own classroom for the first time I will have the opportunity to share these practices with my students in the ongoing way I have described in this paper. I am looking forward to witnessing how incorporating yoga and mindfulness into our daily routines will affect children’s perception of themselves, relationships amongst students, and our overall classroom environment.

I envision starting each day with a mindful moment. I will be working at a Quaker school, which values beginning and ending the day in silence. The mindful moment will help create a sense of structure and direction for children in the silence. This mindful moment will likely be one of the breathing exercises I listed in the resource for example: the breathing ball or heart and belly breathing. My hope is that after practicing these mindful exercises as a whole group in the mornings, students will begin to use them as tools when needed: when struggling to concentrate, when frustrated by a situation or peer, or when nervous. Developing children’s ability to access mindfulness on their own as a tool will be an ongoing process and one that will take consistent prompting and reminders that their breath is always something available that they can return to.

In addition to meeting time, transitions are a space I plan to use both breathing and movement exercises. Transitions can be a challenging time for
children: concentration and steadiness is broken. Types of activities will be chosen based on what the class needs in a given moment: something more active and energizing or something calming and centering. I know many teachers shy away from movement as they worry it will rile children up and render them incapable of what is considered “acceptable” behavior. It will be interesting to see how this unfolds in my classroom. In my past experience, children have a variety of responses to the exercises just as they do to all aspects of school. It will be important for me to create an atmosphere in which we can playfully explore movement and the co-creation of ideas within a structure that allows productivity and learning.

The activities described in the Connect section will be more useful in specific instances rather than as daily routines. I will use the partner and group activities to help my class create a safe and connected environment. Through these activities we will discover about each other and ourselves and experience our interdependence. We will incorporate these connecting exercises during regular community meetings as well as when specific situations arise that necessitate class reflection or reconciliation.

Finally I plan to use the practices of yoga and mindfulness to affectively enhance academic curriculum. We will be studying our community in social studies throughout the year. I plan to incorporate yoga adventures, story time yoga, posing vocabulary words to increase the differentiation. For some children movement may be their access point to understanding new information and
concepts. By adding these activities, the learning will become more layered and accessible to each type of student.

It is important to me to think about how these practices can truly be structured in a way that they provide the highest benefit for the students I share them with. While the resource I compiled is a collection of a variety of activities, my hope is to share them in a way that is connected to children’s developmental stage and curriculum. I do not plan to use yoga and mindfulness as simply another classroom management strategy or social awareness exercise, but as a practice that can serve children throughout their life, far beyond the ins and outs, ups and downs of first grade.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


