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Health

WELLNESS, FITNESS & MEDICINE

STRIKE A POSE

Yoga offers kids physical perks and stress-busting benefits in a non-competitive setting

By ERIKA PRAFDER

BOOK bags stuffed with homework, a jam-packed school-day schedule and a laundry list of extra-curricular activities is enough to drive most kids' stress levels through the roof.

But for 11-year-old New Yorker Alexa Tavoularis, an ancient, time-tested practice helps her cope. Once a week, the sixth-grader hits the mat at the Lexington Avenue Yogi Beans yoga studio (yogibeans.com) for a Tweens yoga class.

While her mother has long practiced the mind-body discipline, "Alexa started at about 8 years of age," says her father, Ted. "She's become so in tune with her body. Her flexibility is amazing. The environment that the classes are given in is very soothing, safe and clean.

It's a happy place," says Ted.

Such positive benefits are routinely told to Lauren Chaitoff and Alexa Klein, co-owners of Yogi Beans, which opened its New York City Upper East Side studio in 2012. The business has since expanded to offer classes at satellite locations in Long Island and New Jersey.

"In this city, kids are very stressed," says Chaitoff. "They interview 2-year-olds for preschool here. Our classes started taking off quickly."

The studio offers post-natal Mommy-and-Me bonding classes (6 weeks old and up), plus tweens and teens classes. The Yogi Beans' curriculum focuses on Asanas (postures), but, "it's not about perfect posture — it's about feeling good in the poses," says Chaitoff.

For little ones, classes are playful.



Amie Wernick/NY Post

"We play 'Freeze Yoga,' 'Yogi Bean Says' (like Simon Says) and 'Om, Om Toes' (like Duck, Duck Goose). Each of our games incorporates Asanas [into it]," says Chaitoff.

Even at an early age, the perks of yoga are evident.

"For those [children] who have a hard time going to sleep, the deep belly breathing that we do can help. And learning to accept themselves when a pose is too challenging is important, too," says Chaitoff.

For tweens and teens, "It's more about correct alignment and yoga's philosophy of empowerment, love, kindness, and treating those around you with compassion," she adds.

To cultivate this, balance poses,

including Tree, Dancer and Crow, are introduced. But the most important one is Corpse, says Chaitoff. In this resting pose, "Kids learn how to soften, be still and silent."

Journaling is also incorporated into the older kids' yoga sessions.

"We pose questions to write about, such as 'What does meditation mean to you?'" says Chaitoff.

For test-taking anxiety specifically, "Yoga teaches kids how to self-regulate and self-soothe," says Chaitoff. "We teach a Take Five breathing technique, through which kids inhale and exhale to the count of five. If a child feels trepidation, they can use this to calm down."

Children with ADHD also attend

Yogi Beans co-owner Lauren Chaitoff teaches Alexa Tavoularis the Tolasana pose. The discipline has helped Alexa's school work along with her wellness.

classes, says Chaitoff.

"Yoga is a wonderful tool. A child might not sit on the mat at all, but that's okay." Eventually, "Even with a more-resistant child, the class gets quieter over time," she says.

"The unique benefit here is that yoga is a physical activity that's non-competitive," adds Chaitoff. "Even if your child is very competitive, yoga is a great outlet. Stretching, mindfulness and self-acceptance are important skills."

The discipline can also help socially. Says Ted: "Alexa's an only child and a little shy. Yoga has made her more extroverted. She's come out of her shell. She's now into team sports, but she's now confident to show those who do participate in such activities that she's as strong and flexible as they are."

Another notable change has been Alexa's increased ability to decompress and exercise self-discipline.

Says Alexa: "Yoga helps me with my concentration. I'm able to more quickly focus on studies."

Alexa is also assisting in teaching the weekly Mini-Beans class (3- to 5-year-old set) at Yogi Beans.

"I like helping the kids to feel welcome and to enjoy yoga," says Alexa. "I get really excited. The environment is very welcoming. I'd advise other kids to be open-minded and try it out."