

Yoga in Your Library

There has been a lot of attention lately on the use of yoga and mindfulness with children and teens. Quality research on yoga, mindfulness, and the benefits of each abound.

Dr. Catherine Bushnell of the National Institutes of Health made headlines this year with her research proving that yoga increases the amount of grey matter in the brain, which helps to regulate pain tolerance and recovery. **The Atlantic** recently published an article about using mindfulness in the classroom as a way to focus student attention and combat reactive words and actions. Even **School Library Journal** published an article about yoga in the library.

If you're interested in yoga but uninitiated, it can be tough to know where to start. This article will walk you through setting up a yoga program, from soup to nuts.

In September of 2014, I worked in a busy, urban branch located within a larger "Community Action Agency," a collection of assistance programs for low-income families all housed in one space. The teens that I worked with at this branch came from very frustrated and insecure households, with single parents working multiple jobs, and the teens were often expected to pitch in on household expenses. They could be charming and funny, but were often quick to react to any perceived slight. As the teen librarian and recently certified yoga instructor, I wondered if bringing yoga and mindfulness to my teen population might help.

I began adding yoga to my weekly teen programming lineup. I got some loaned mats from my yoga studio and on Monday nights guided the teens through forty-five minutes of focused breathing and movement. We started slowly, as none of them had ever tried yoga before. Over time, I started to notice that

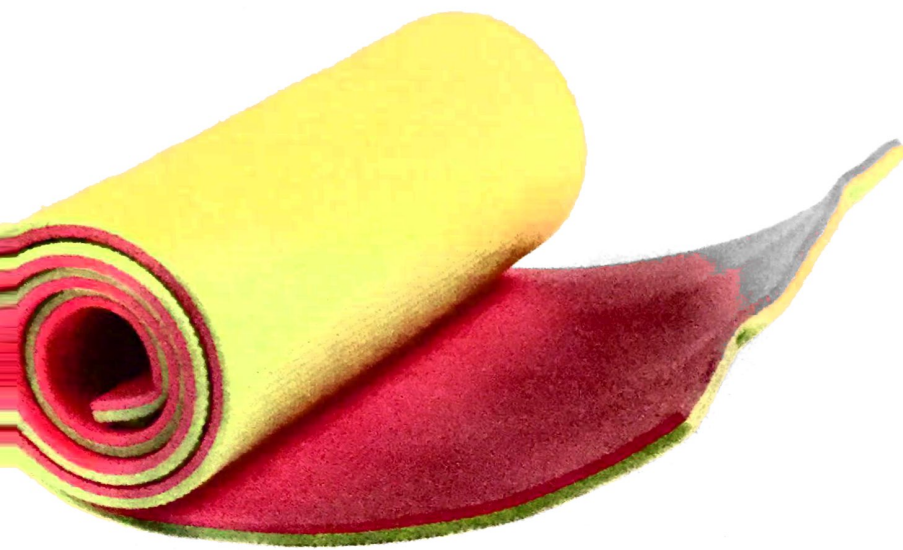
they were more mindful of their noise levels in the library. They also began to react more slowly when they felt anger and showed consideration for the feelings of others, including library staff. We could have conversations, rather than confrontations.

YOGA AND MINDFULNESS

Yoga and mindfulness have been building a separate but equal following steadily for the past decade or more. Once the turf of hippies and communes, mindfulness programs and practices have gone mainstream, cropping up in places as diverse as **Facebook** and **Forbes**, General Motors and U.S. House Subcommittee meetings. The Seattle Seahawks famously credited yoga with helping them to maintain focus on their path to Super Bowl XLVIII, and LeBron James credited yoga with helping him through his NBA championship performances in 2014 and 2015. What, exactly, is everyone talking about?

Yoga and mindfulness are both methods used to quiet the mind. Both have Eastern religious roots, but have undergone transformation in the West in ways that allow them to be practiced in any context, regardless of one's personal religious viewpoint. Mindfulness refers to a mental practice of focusing on the moment at hand, using meditation techniques to still the mind and thereby bring calm. Yoga uses the motion of the body rather than stillness as a means of focus. They are simply two pathways to the same destination and can be practiced concurrently or separately.

"A yoga program can be the least stressful program you plan all year, and the rewards are tangible and long lasting."



PLANNING YOUR PROGRAM

Yoga and mindfulness programs are among the easiest to set up and run. All you really need is space and a teacher.

1. *Find a teacher:* An hour of yoga in your library is probably not as pricey as you expect. Look for a local yoga studio that offers teacher training programs—newly graduated teachers are often hungry for experience and less expensive than master teachers. While talking to the studio, ask about community outreach options. Some studios are strongly committed to community service and will charge less, or even nothing, if a class will be freely available to the community.

2. *Consider your space:* The biggest consideration for teen yoga is creating a space where teens can feel safe as they practice. First and foremost, you'll want to find a setting that allows your teens to practice away from prying eyes. If you have a program room, cover any windows or glass doors, just for the duration of the yoga session. Music can be great, especially if you're in a louder area. If you're planning for the summer months, take it outside. Outdoor yoga events offer a unique opportunity to plug in deeply to your surroundings.

3. *Equipment:* Don't worry too much about purchasing mats for all of your participants. Ask your friends, colleagues, or even local sports equipment stores for gently used mats they would lend or donate. If you hire a teacher through a traditional yoga studio, they may have mats that they could lend for the session. If you're heading outside, an outdoor yoga session doesn't really require mats—beach towels work better for grass and sweaty hands. Traditional props, such as blocks and straps, are nice but really not necessary for a beginner class. Mindfulness classes require no equipment at all.

4. *Liability and insurance:* Yoga is a physical exercise. If your library requires waivers for other sports or exercise programs, check with your administration/legal—the same language could be used for a yoga class. Practicing yoga instructors are required to carry limited liability insurance, which covers them in case of a lawsuit. Any teacher should be able to provide you with a copy of their insurance certificate. Yoga Alliance is the certification body for yoga teachers in the United States. The minimum level of certification is RYT-200, which means that the practitioner has attended a 200-hour teacher training at a registered yoga school. If you have any questions about a yoga teacher's certifications, or would simply like to locate a local school, visit <http://www.yogaalliance.org>.

5. *Schedule the yoga:* You have a few different scheduling options to think about, based on your budget and timeframe. You can always schedule a one-time yoga class. Classes are usually an hour. Other options include scheduling a weekly session, for one month or longer, with the same teacher, or on a rotation through a

studio. Another consideration is scheduling a once-a-month class session over a series of months. If all that works in your schedule and budget is a single class, schedule one class.

6. *Promote the program:* Consider promoting to areas of your community that are especially interested in health and wellness programs. Does your high school have a Healthy Choices club? Find your local sports teams, both in the schools and outside of them. Local dance and karate studios may have students that would also be interested in yoga. Also, ask the yoga studio you're partnering with to help you cross-promote. Their students may have children in your target age range who would be interested in a class for them. You may also consider "athleisure" stores, like Lululemon or Athleta, if you have them in your area. These are places that take pride in being fitness hubs in the community and are very popular with teen girls.

7. *During the program:* Have fun and practice. What this looks like for you depends on your own comfort level. During the class, the most important factor for their enjoyment will be that they feel comfortable enough to relax. The presence of a familiar adult will almost certainly help with that. I highly recommend practicing along with your teens, especially if you're a novice—let them see you trying something new, being vulnerable. You'll almost certainly take away some tips

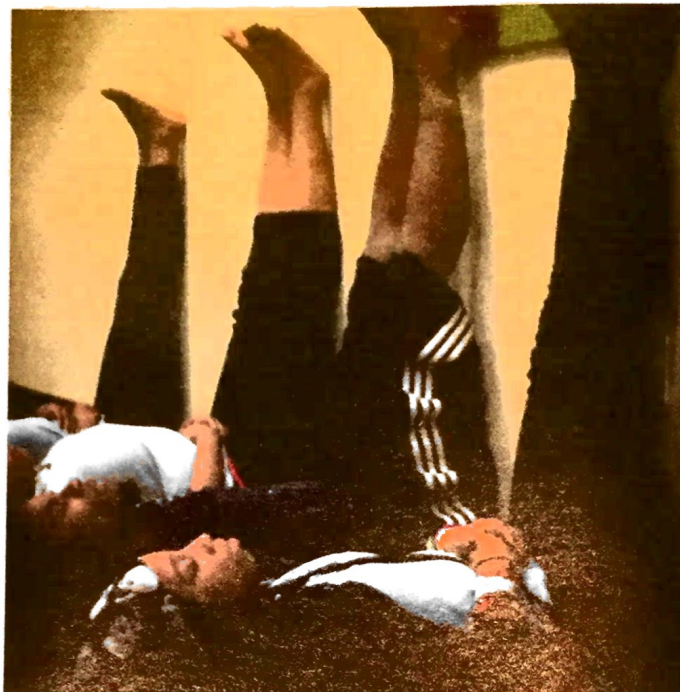


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TEENS ENJOYING LIBRARY YOGA PROGRAM

on mindfulness to use in the library.

8. *After the program:* Have books and DVDs available for teens who would like to continue learning about yoga. If there is time, see if you can take a moment for reflection and discussion with the teens who were present—what came up when they were trying to quiet their minds, how easy or difficult was it (and candidly share your own struggles). This is also when it will be most evident to you whether there will be continued interest in your library.

A yoga program can be the least stressful program you plan all year, and the rewards are tangible and long lasting. Don't let fear or perfectionism prevent you from sharing this experience with your teens. As Krishna says in the **Bhagavad Gita**, "On this path effort never goes to waste, and there is no failure." Even a little bit can go a long way. ■

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