

Why Yoga?

Yoga is a Hindu practice consisting of controlled breathing, simple meditation, and the assumption of body positions. Yoga has become increasingly popular in the pediatric population, and specifically for children with special needs due to its therapeutic qualities.

Yoga can...

- Improve strength
- Increase body awareness
- Improve motor planning
- Improve postural control
- Increase endurance
- Improve sensory processing skills
- Increase attention and focus
- Improve social skills and communication

Yoga is fun and invites a multi-sensory experience into the classroom. Yoga helps children regulate their arousal level so that they are ready and available to learn. Yoga allows for collaboration with speech therapists through chanting and deep breathing exercises.

Yoga at Alcott

An occupational therapist leads yoga in each classroom every week. Children become familiar with the routine and are able to improve their performance in assuming the various positions. The teachers are encouraged to also incorporate yoga techniques in the classroom routine. The children sit either on the floor or in chairs. The routine is initiated with warm-up exercises, breathing or ringing of a triangle bell and concludes with a yoga-themed song and chanting. The OT models the positions and the children imitate them to the best of their ability. The yoga routines typically follow themes of the classroom and seasonal events (ex: apple picking, going to the beach, holidays, etc.) and are presented in a child-friendly and age-appropriate manner. A variety of props are also brought into the yoga routines to help engage the children (ex: leaves are used for the “tree pose” in the fall).

Yoga as a form of Sensory Integration

Sensory integration (SI) refers to children’s ability to take in and organize sensory information from the external environment and respond appropriately. Research suggests that yoga itself is a form of sensory integration.

How does yoga affect the sensory system?

All yoga sessions at Alcott aim to include:

- Positions in both sitting and standing
- Flexion (bending the joints)
- Extension (straightening the joints)
- Lateral movements (side to side)
- Rotation (twisting)
- Proprioceptive input (deep pressure to the joints) and weight bearing
- Vestibular input (balance and movement of the head in space)
- Bilateral movements (using both sides of the body)
- Chanting of vowel sounds (using oral motor muscles, in collaboration with the speech therapist)
- Relaxation and deep breathing

Examples of positions and activities during a typical yoga routine at Alcott include:

- **Warm-up Activity:** The OT leads the children through a full body warm-up to “wake-up” the different parts of their bodies (ex: “Wake up your shoulders...wake up your elbows...wake up your hands, etc.”) This warm-up also includes waking up the muscles of the mouth and face, as well as deep breathing. This activity helps:
 - Alert and orient the children to the yoga routine
 - Improve motor planning through copying the OT’s movements
 - Improve body awareness by focusing on individual parts of the body
- **Ringing of the Triangle:** The chime of the triangle signifies the beginning of yoga. The children take turns holding the triangle in one hand and lightly tap it with the other hand to ring the bell. This activity works to improve:
 - Proprioceptive input through the vibration of the bell
 - Bilateral coordination from holding the bell in one hand and using the striker with the opposite hand.
 - Auditory input from hearing and responding to the sound of the bell ringing
 - Modulation of strength to hit the bell hard or softly
- **Reach Up High:** The children’s feet are about shoulder-width apart and they reach up with both arms toward the sky. This position works to improve:

- Postural control and endurance from standing upright against gravity
 - Bilateral coordination by lifting both arms simultaneously
 - Upper body strength through raising both arms against gravity and holding them overhead
- **Downward Dog:** The children put their hands on the ground and walk their legs back. The weight of the child's body is on open hands with straight arms and legs. The children are instructed to look at their feet when in this position so that their head is upside down. This position is great for:
 - Weight bearing through upper body to improve hand development for prewriting and grasping skills.
 - Postural control and endurance by stretching of the back, hamstring, and calf muscles.
 - Vestibular input from their head being upside down
- **Shake Each Leg:** From the downward dog position, the children lift one leg up and shake it in the air and then do the same with the other leg. This move works on:
 - Balance and core strengthening from the child maintaining the position while lifting one leg off the ground.
 - Weight bearing through the upper body
 - Postural control and endurance
 - Vestibular input
- **Chanting:** The OT and/or speech therapist lead the children in chanting vowel sounds (ex. "eee" "ooo", etc.). This oral motor activity is great because:
 - Gives a calming effect through the feeling of vibrations in the child's body.
 - Improves speech through the movement of the mouth and tongue.

Sun Salutation

This is an easy to follow routine, which many of the children are familiar with and that you can do in your home.

1. "I reach up high"



7. "Belly buttons down."



2. "I dive down low"



8. "Push up and howl to the moon"



3. "I walk my feet back nice and slow"

4. "Bottoms up! Wag your doggie tail"

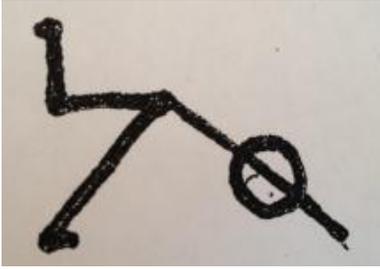


9. "Bottoms up!"



5. "Shake your doggie leg.
Shake your other doggie leg."

10. "Walk your feet to your hands."



6. "Roll forward to a plank... like a push up"

11. "Stand up tall.

12. "Let it out. Take a deep breath in"



Namaste!

Yoga Themes

Yoga at Alcott follows along with classroom themes to keep it relevant and fun for the children. Examples of themes:

Halloween

- Ghosts: The children stand with their arms extended out to the side and wave their hands up and down.

- Mummies: The children stand up with their arms out straight in front of them while shifting weight from one leg to the other.
- “Black” Cat Pose: The children position themselves on hands and knees while arching their back up and down.

Winter Holidays

- Kwanzaa Kinara: The children hold their hands up above their head and bend at the hips to light each of the 7 candles.
- Chanukah Dreidel: The children put their hands up above their head and spin like a dreidel.
- Christmas Tree: The children stand while opening and closing their hands to symbolize blinking lights on the Christmas tree. The children also can reach across their bodies with each arm so that arms are crossed to look like garland.

Summer at the Beach

- Swimming: The children lay on their stomachs while simultaneously moving their arms and legs as if they were swimming.
- Crab Walk: The children walk on their hands and feet with their stomachs facing up.
- Building a Sand Castle: The children sit on the floor with legs straight in front of them while they pretend to collect sand from both sides of their body to build a sand castle.

How can you incorporate yoga into your home?

Yoga can be carried out at home and is a great activity to do with your children to reinforce the skills practiced at school. It is a useful and fun technique to use in preparation for activities to help your child regulate their arousal level so that they will be available and ready to participate in whatever else you have planned. There are a variety of books and games that have wonderful ideas and routines that can easily be done in the home

- Books:
 - *The Yoga Zoo Adventure: Animal Poses & Games for Little Kids* By: Helen Purperhart
 - *Yoga Games for Children: Fun & Fitness with Postures, Movements and Breath* By: Danielle Bersma & Majorke Visscher
 - *Little Yoga: A Toddler’s First Book of Yoga* By: Rebecca Whittford & Martina Selway
 - *Waddle* By: Rufus Butler Seder
 - *Gallop* By: Rufus Butler Seder

- *Yoga Kids: Educating the Whole Child Through Yoga* By: Marsha Wenig & Susan Andrews
- *S.M.I.L.Y: Sensory Motor Integration and Learning with Yoga* By: April Merilee
- Games:
 - *Yoga Pretzels: 50 Fun Yoga Activities for Kids & Grown-ups* By: Tara Guber & Leah Kalish
 - *Yoga Kit for Kids: Fun & Fitness – Imaginazium*

References:

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2Merrilee, A. (2006). *SMILY: Sensory Motor Integration and Learning with Yoga*. Bloomington, IN: Author House.

3White, L. S. (2009, October). Yoga for children. *Pediatric Nursing*, 35(5), 277-295.