

Yoga for Children--Now Proven Effective!
Experience of yoga meets experimentation of the West at SYTAR.
By Mira Binzen

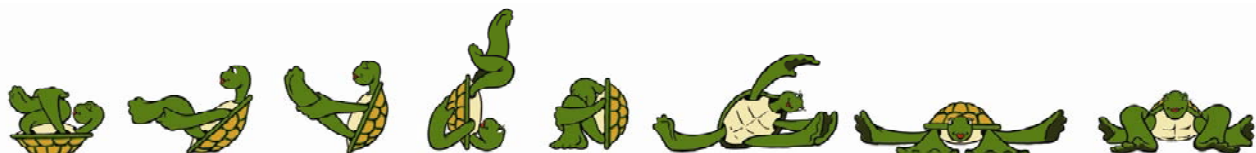
In The Yoga Tradition, Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D., describes the ancient sages as “seers (rishi) who ‘saw’ the truth, who perceived with the inner eye the hidden reality behind the smoke screen of manifest existence.” Today’s discerning Westerner wants a little more proof. We have been taught to rely on empirical evidence, clinical trials and statistically significant results. This “proof,” along with those ancient texts written by the rishis, is available to us now.

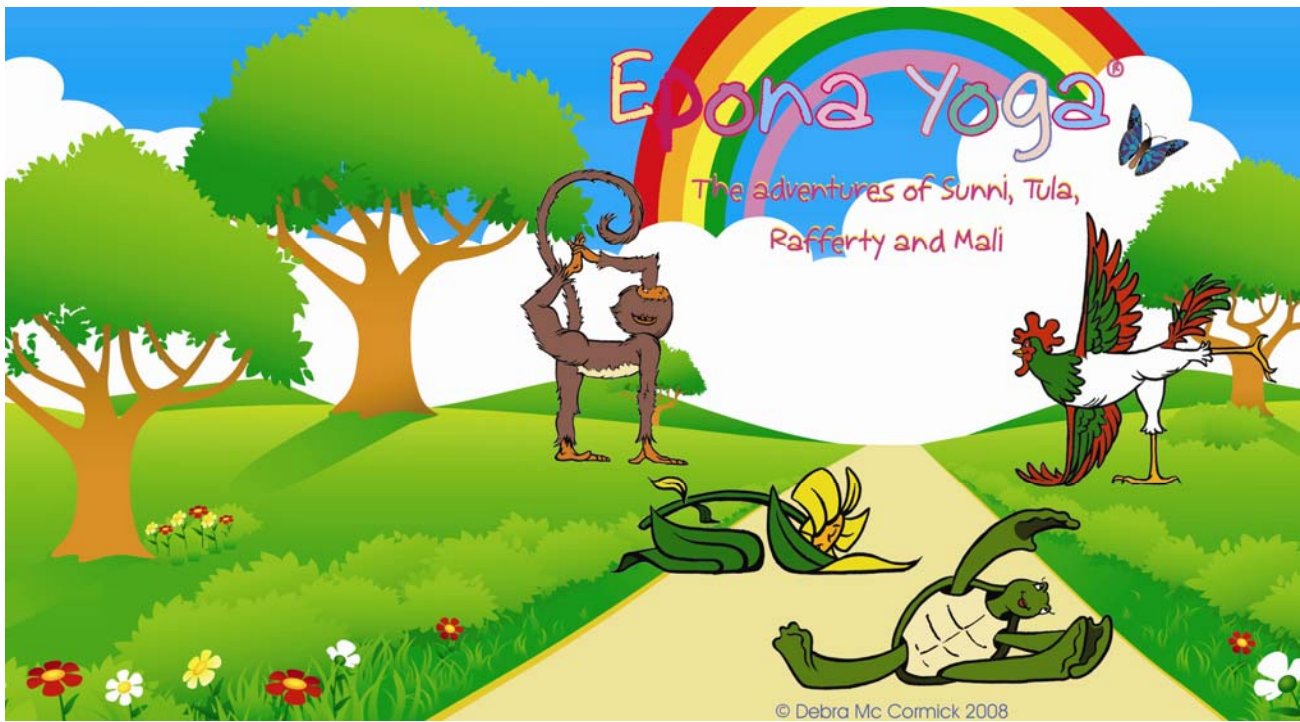
SYTAR, the first Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research, was held in Los Angeles in January to further define the field of yoga therapy, share research results and discuss methods for further inquiry.

My interest in being there was to learn about current research on the benefits of yoga for children. Experience has shown me that yoga is an excellent system for promoting healthy development and can be an incredibly effective means of facilitating wellness in children. It is noninvasive and its “side effects,” including improved self-esteem, emotional equilibrium, more energy and the ability to self-calm, are completely benign if not totally beneficial. Nearly a quarter of the abstracts submitted for the symposium focused on children and adolescents. The very same benefits subjectively seen in my experience have now been measured and reported.

Children who practice yoga may not only be better able to regulate their emotions, manage stress and calm themselves, studies now show that they may also choose better foods to eat and engage in more physical activity than children who do not.

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Whether over- or underweight, body image issues and poor eating habits plague our children today. Studies shared at SYTAR suggest yoga may help.

One study examined the benefits of yoga for adolescents with eating disorders. These teens attended yoga classes as part of their psychiatric day treatment program. Typically suffering from a lack of self-esteem, nearly 75% reported an increase in well-being. They used the words “relaxed,” “calm,” “energized” and “more awake” to describe how they felt after class. (M.J Fury, MA, RYT, and L.C. Kaley-Isley, PhD, RYT)

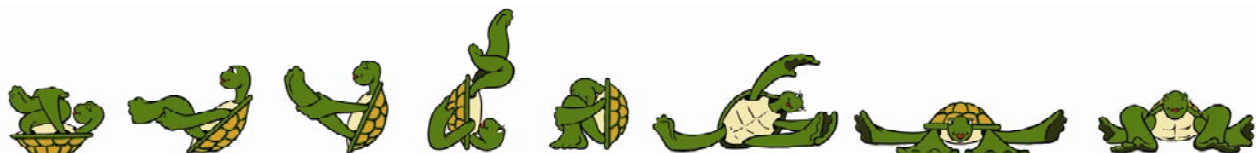
A case study on anorexic adolescents found that “focused breathing (pranayama), movement sequences (asana), meditation (dhyana), and alert relaxation (yoga nidra)...reduced starvation-induced stress, safely reintroduced physical activity for a weakened body, minimized fatigue and... corrected distorted self-perceptions.” (Susana A. Galle, PhD, ND, CCN, CCH, and Tomas E. Silber, MD)

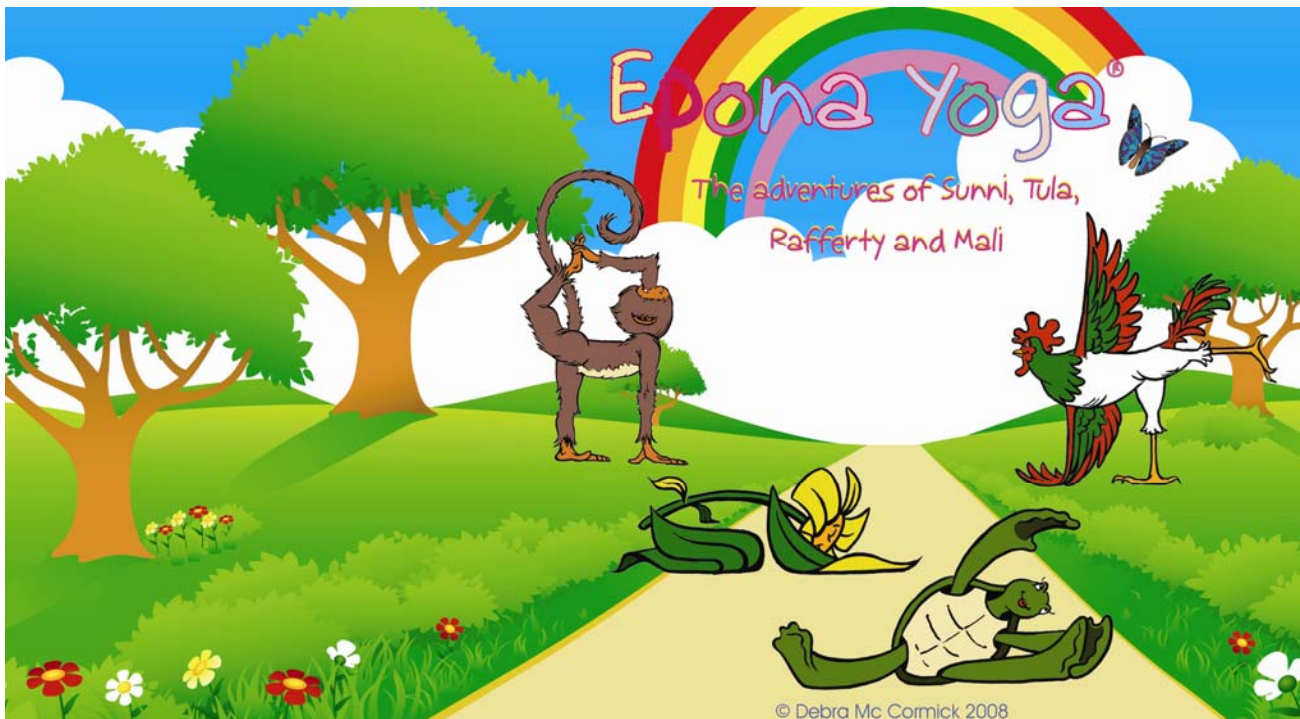
Other studies on children and adolescents included at SYTAR looked at anxiety, depression, trauma, mood regulation, sense of well-being, self-esteem and “increased wellness.”

R. Fridholm concluded from a small sample study that a systematic use of breathing exercises, yoga postures and guided relaxation “provided useful strategies for emotional regulation for children with autism spectrum disorders.” Subjective outcomes included “improved focus, strength, flexibility, and balance; improved sense of self-awareness and pride; and improved ability to calm themselves.”

Girls ages 14 to 17 who had suffered traumatic abuse attended a yoga class twice a week and showed “significant decreases in depression, anxiety, dissociation, and intrusive/avoidant symptoms.” It was further reported that “the girls overwhelmingly noted that they felt happier, more relaxed, less stressed, and more at

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ease in their bodies on the days they practiced yoga than on the days they did not.” (A. Bortz, PsyD, RYT and K. Cradock, LCSW, RYT)

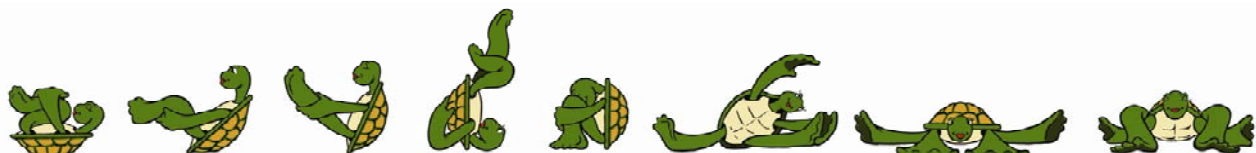
Perhaps one of the more interesting studies, submitted by Molly Kenny, MS-CCC of The Samarya Center in Seattle, Washington, suggested that the physical act of balancing might improve self-esteem in teens. The positive effects of “balance training” on the subjects’ concentration and attention were “immediately observable,” and she proposed that the effects on self-esteem might become more apparent over time.

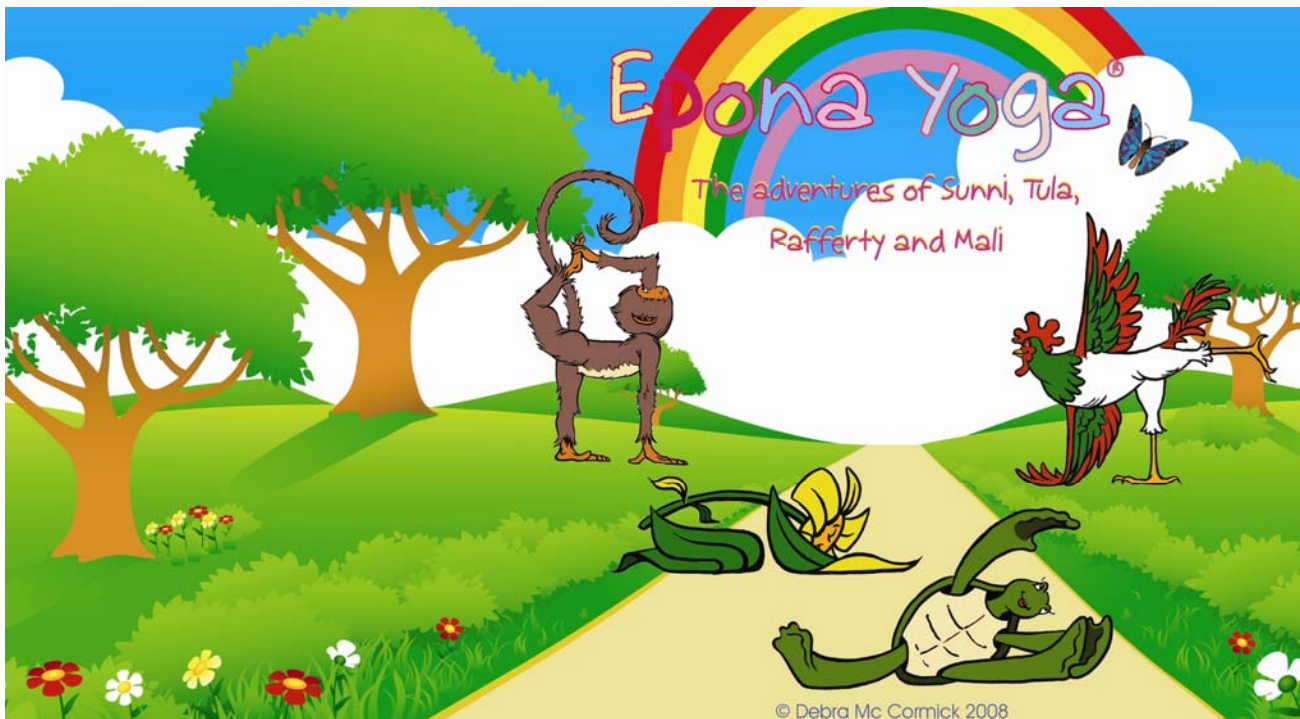
The scientific community recognizes measurement tools used in these studies. Research in the field of yoga therapy, however, is largely exploratory at this time and warrants further investigation. Many findings were inconclusive. Yet this first symposium is a landmark. It will likely contribute to the widespread acceptance of yoga as a viable system for preventive health as well as the treatment of specific health conditions. More evidence is now available to support what many of us know to be true from our own practice. This may convince those who have yet to experience its benefits to give it a try.

It seems simple. Children are suffering from a lack of connection to their own bodies, their environment and the food they eat. Yoga facilitates connection. It’s easy, low cost, accessible and anyone can do it. And now it’s being proven effective.

More and more teachers and other interested adults are sharing yoga with children. Kids have a natural tendency to share what they are learning when they get home, so this is an easy way to get the whole family involved. Parents may be practicing yoga themselves, and kids are always interested in what their parents are up to.

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Another way is for children’s yoga teachers to invite parents in for a first and/or last class of a yoga session. A child’s aunt sitting in on a kids class said to me, “They are doing real yoga poses! That is great.” I’m not sure what she thought, but now she knows what she can practice at home with her niece. Family classes are another great way to help everyone feel an increased sense of well-being while learning a practice they can enjoy at home. With wide age ranges and levels of ability, family classes can be challenging to teach but also especially rewarding.

Adenia Linker, Hyde Park mother of nine-year-old twins and longtime children’s yoga teacher, involves the parents of her yoga students by sending home a newsletter every few weeks. It’s a simple one-page letter with a picture and description of a pose learned that week and an inspiring quote along with a new children’s yoga book, a Web site or some other resource that may interest parents.

The more parents, teachers, doctors and other professionals working with children understand the practice of yoga and its benefits, the more likely it is to be seriously considered as a therapy.

In an era of children acquiring conditions and diseases previously unknown in childhood, proper breathing, exercise and deep relaxation may be the powerful healing force needed. Yoga resonates with children. ”They love the practice, and they love how they feel afterwards. With all of the research and “proof” now available, it may well be just what the doctor orders.

Mira Binzen is a certified yoga teacher, yoga therapist and co-founder of Global Family Yoga (www.globalfamilyyoga.org), a teacher training program based in Chicago, focusing on children and families. Her E-mail address is mira@globalfamilyyoga.org. She teaches children and family yoga classes at Yogaview, Bloom Yoga Studio and Om on the Range. Information about yoga-related research can be found at www.iayt.org.

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