

## Yoga for kids is more than for fitness

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Pre-K students at the Memorial Elementary School in Montvale, from left, Bhakti Shukla, 3, Jaclyn Pawlyk, 3, and Riley Butler, 3, lie back to take the shape of cupcakes as part of their exercises, in a session taught by yoga instructor Allison Morgan.

Kids yoga is not just giggling through downward dog or a way for the younger generation to hop on an ongoing adult fitness passion. More and more educators and yoga instructors now see yoga as a tool to help kids learn, focus and manage stress and emotions.

"A lot of people think it's just the physical – they do the poses," said Lauren Chaitoff, co-owner of Yogi Beans, a Manhattan-based children's yoga studio that came to Bergen County in the fall. "It's so much more than that."

Yogi Beans class descriptions talk about building self-confidence and encouraging individuality and creativity. It's also about self-control and managing anxiety.

Allison Morgan is an occupational therapist from Montvale who discovered these benefits of yoga by accident more than a decade ago. The Montvale resident went to a yoga class about 13 years ago and felt better, different. Eventually she settled on the word "connected" to explain what she was feeling — and that got her thinking about the kids she saw as an in-school occupational therapist.

"If anybody was to ask me, how would you describe all of these kids who come to you in the schools, the word that comes to me is disconnected," she said. "They're disconnected from themselves, their own bodies, their own thoughts, disconnected from their peers, disconnected from their families and their teachers."

What if she brought yoga — the breathing, the mindfulness, that "connection" — into her sessions at the Hillsdale elementary school where she worked? Occupational therapy typically works toward functional goals — writing better, speaking better, interacting more with peers



Morgan leading the Montvale Pre-K class.

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and teacher. When she added yoga to the sessions, she didn't expect it to directly meet those specific goals, but soon noticed its impact.

"I started seeing little miracle upon little miracle," Morgan said. "Kids [making] eye contact. Kids smiling and engaging and paying attention. Kids being able to focus more in class. Kids actually speaking more than they did before."

Teachers noticed too and asked what she was doing. Morgan quickly learned that using the word "yoga" created a problem of its own. Teachers wanted something more scientific and concrete from their OT. When the supportive principal wanted a way to help all the kids in the school deal with their stress and anxiety, Morgan proposed training the teachers to incorporate a two-minute yoga break in the classroom. To limit the eye-rolling and get teachers' cooperation, Morgan called it "stressbusters" and "brain breaks."

She immersed herself in research about neurology, the way kids learn and yoga. About six years ago, she started Zensational Kids, a company that creates programs to help "integrate the evidence-based science of yoga and mindfulness into pediatric therapy, education and caregiving."

She began in-school classes for pre-K, kindergarten and self-contained classrooms of special needs students. She aligns the in-house program — done in Montvale, Hillsdale and River Vale — with the curriculum, reinforcing what they are learning but teaching it in a different way than having the children sitting in chairs just listening. They are physically active but mentally relaxed and, therefore, better able to learn, according to Morgan. The classes also offer tools to control behavior, and to help kids calm down and focus.

Two years ago, she stopped being an occupational therapist to focus full time on Zensational Kids programs. In addition to the classes, Morgan trains teachers across the country, including in many North Jersey districts, in a program she calls "Educate 2B! Tools for Engaged Learning and Living." Montvale Elementary School second-grade teacher Clarisse Nicol uses the Educate 2B program about three times a week.

"It's a great transition thing to help them refocus," Nicol said of the students standing up and stretching and doing basic poses for about 10 minutes. "It's also a way, honestly, for some students that struggle with writing, with math, with reading, this is where they shine."

On a recent Tuesday in Montvale, Morgan took a preschool class through a lively yoga session before moving on to a class of first- through third-graders with various development challenges. The yoga session focused on owls, which the kids were learning about, and the children guided Morgan, who adapted the yoga to the students' answers to her questions. They eagerly repeat what they have learned and work hard to balance in their owl-inspired poses. It's a much-needed break for many.

"Kids nowadays are over-stimulated, sometimes have a difficult time focusing, this really helps them get back on task," Montvale School Superintendent Darren Petersen said. "Yoga is an opportunity to step back and be reflective, gives them that mechanism to be reflective."

At a recent Yogi Beans class in Harrington Park, the controlled chaos of attempted poses turns to quiet focus when the elementary-aged kids sit in a circle to share how they feel and what they are grateful for.

"I am feeling ignored," one girl says, and instructor Jen Burke asks why before suggesting a different way to think about the situation.

The group then does poses with partners that stress trust and communication. Sisters Eliana and Maya Apter, ages 6 and 4, work together in class and sometimes use what they learn at home.

"Sometimes in our family, if you are overcome with an emotion, we will say, let's stop and take a yoga breath," said their mother, Rachel Apter of Englewood.

Apter said she is pushing their elementary school to make yoga part of the curriculum. It is a hard sell at times, something Morgan still comes up against.

"They don't get the true benefit, partly because [yoga is] misrepresented," she said. "It's really tools for life — so you can become what's in you, feel good about yourself, think clearly and not [be] so tight and stressed."

For more info: [zensationalkids.com](http://zensationalkids.com); [yogi beans.com](http://yogibeans.com).