

Why yoga is the one thing your children should do this summer

Telegraph, Linda Blair, 15 JULY 2019

The school summer holidays are a great time to reconnect and have fun with your children, but for many parents they also signal a long stretch of time to come up with a range of stimulating and healthy activities to fill the days.

If they haven't already tried yoga, this summer is a great opportunity to introduce your children to this hugely popular pastime, which offers the chance to experience an oasis of calm and stillness in our increasingly hectic lives.

Everyone from athletes to pensioners to stressed-out workers are embracing yoga - and with stress and anxiety levels among children and adults at an all-time high, increasing numbers of centres are offering classes for young people too, right down to toddler age.

I'm not the first to suggest this. In April, nearly 16,000 individuals signed an online petition asking for yoga and meditation to be included in the UK school curriculum.

However, before endorsing the idea, we need to compare yoga with the mindfulness programmes so strongly promoted by the current Government, to see if yoga offers anything more.

Bethany Butzer at Harvard Medical School recently reviewed the evidence that school-based yoga programmes promote student wellbeing.

She defined yoga as an 'holistic system of mind-body practices for mental and physical health', incorporating four primary components: physical postures to promote strength and flexibility; breathing exercises to enhance lung function; deep relaxation to release mental and physical tension; and meditation/mindfulness techniques to enhance mind-body awareness.

Taken together, these four improve attention and focus and help individuals learn to regulate their emotions.

Several studies have shown that yoga improves children's behaviour and focus in lessons, and emerging research is also demonstrating particular benefits for those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Yoga not only encompasses mindfulness, then - it provides additional benefits. It also offers more than the social and emotional learning classes currently on offer in many schools.

Both these and mindfulness classes focus almost entirely on the mind — whereas yoga also targets physical strength and flexibility at the same time.

One area in which it's particularly helpful is for healthy joints. Sadly, increasing numbers of children are being treated for musculoskeletal problems such as back pain, with experts blaming computer games, and phones and devices which mean we spend more time sitting with shoulders hunched.

A 2011 study by the University of York found yoga works better on back pain than conventional treatments recommended by GPs, and in some regions it is prescribed on the NHS.

Yoga offers further unique benefits for children. Because it often uses games and asks students to partner up for some postures, it encourages classmates to become more sociable in a supportive rather than a competitive way.

Overall, yoga for children — indeed for all of us — is an approach schools would do well to introduce into the curriculum.

The practice, when well taught, is unique in encouraging children to become fitter, more self-motivated, better able to self-regulate — to calm their own nervous system using physical as well as mental strategies — and more cooperative rather than always competitive.

Linda Blair is a clinical psychologist and author of *The Key to Calm* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99).