

YOGA

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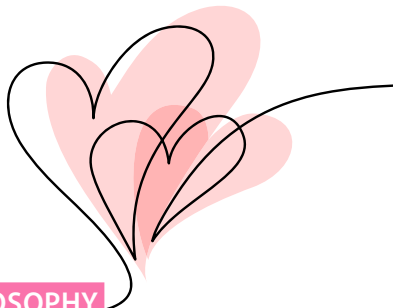
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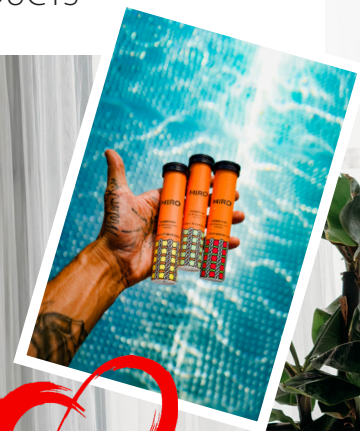
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Understanding

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND HOW YOGA AND MINDFULNESS HELP



Words: Christiane Kerr, BWY Tutor for Children's Yoga

Children's mental health has become a growing concern in the UK, with one in six children from 5 to 16 experiencing mental health conditions (NHS Digital, 2020). Anxiety disorders, stress, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are some of the most common challenges, affecting children's ability to learn, connect with others and thrive in their daily lives.

However, there is hope. Research shows that early interventions, particularly on a whole-school level, can make a big difference. Many schools are leading the charge, integrating mindfulness and yoga practices to support children's mental health. This proactive approach aligns with the growing availability of Educational Mental Health Practitioners and the expansion of mental health support teams, set to benefit even more students this year.

In this article, we explore how yoga, mindfulness and self-compassion can empower children to manage anxiety, stress and ADHD.

WHAT IS ANXIETY DISORDER?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health conditions in children. They involve persistent, excessive worry or fear that disrupts daily life. In children, these can manifest as separation anxiety, social anxiety or generalised anxiety disorder.



Symptoms of anxiety in children

- Constant worry about everyday activities
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Sleep disturbance
- Avoidance of certain situations or places



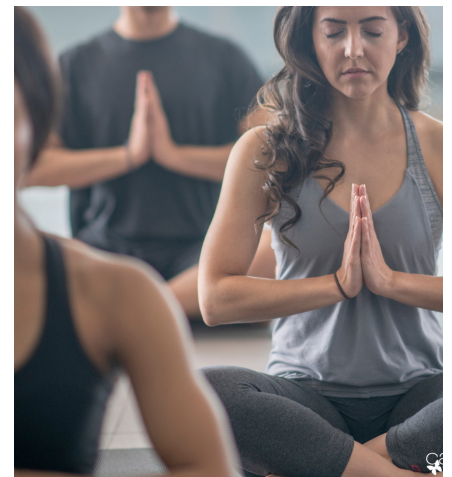
How Yoga and Mindfulness Help

Breathing techniques – Practices like *Nadi Shodhana* (alternate nostril breathing) can regulate the nervous system and reduce the physiological symptoms of anxiety.

Sit comfortably. Focus on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving the nostrils. Use your thumb to close your right nostril and inhale through your left nostril. Close your left nostril with your ring finger, release your thumb, and exhale through your right nostril. Inhale through the right, then switch nostrils to exhale through the left. Repeat slowly and mindfully.

Grounding exercises – By bringing attention to movement and sensations in the body when walking or through a relaxing body scan, children can learn to anchor their awareness in the present and break cycles of worry.

The body scan: Lie down and mentally scan the body from head to toe, noticing areas of tension. See if you can relax and release any tension into the ground or whatever is supporting you.



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•**Self-compassion practices** – Guided meditations focusing on kindness can help alleviate negative and self-critical thoughts which can often be a common feature of anxiety. Linking breath with movement that encourages self-compassion is also useful.

The butterfly hug: Inhale and open your arms out wide to the sides, exhale and cross arms over the chest and tap the shoulders. Repeat crossing arms alternately.

Studies show that yoga and mindfulness interventions in schools reduce anxiety symptoms. A study published in 'Frontiers in Psychology' (2018) found that school-based yoga improved emotional regulation in children with anxiety.

TACKLING STRESS

Stress is the body's response to both real and perceived challenges or threats. While short-term stress can be motivating, chronic stress can have harmful effects, including sleep problems, weakened immunity and poor mental health.

Symptoms of stress in children

- Irritability and mood swings
 - Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and physical symptoms
 - Withdrawal from social activities

How Yoga and Mindfulness help

Mindful movement – Gentle yoga poses such as Child's Pose (*Balasana*) or Cat-Cow stretches (*Marjaryasana-Bitilasana*) can release physical tension and calm the mind.

Child's pose (*Balasana*): Kneel on the floor, sit back on your heels, stretch your arms forward as you lower your forehead to the mat. Breathe deeply and relax your body.

Cat-Cow stretch: Start on all fours. Inhale, arch your back, lifting your head and tailbone (Cow). Exhale, round your back, tucking your chin and pelvis (Cat). Repeat slowly with your breath.

Viewing (reasonable) stress as a growth opportunity – Mindfulness teaches children to view stress as manageable, reframing it as an opportunity for learning rather than an insurmountable threat.

Kindness practices – Group activities focusing on compassion for others can encourage social connection and a sense of belonging which mitigates the harmful effects of stress.

Research backs this approach. A systematic review in the 'Mindfulness Journal' (2022) highlights that mindfulness programmes reduce stress



SUPPORTING ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. It affects approximately 5% of children worldwide (*National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2022*).

Symptoms of ADHD

- Difficulty sustaining attention
- Impulsive decision-making
- Excessive energy or restlessness
- Struggling to follow instructions

How Yoga and Mindfulness help

Focus and attention training – Practices like *Trataka* (candle gazing) and *Hakini* Mudra can enhance concentration and reduce impulsivity.

Trataka: Sit comfortably with a lit candle at eye level. Focus on the flame without blinking. Close your eyes when tired and visualise the flame.

Hakini Mudra: Touch fingertips and thumbs together, keeping palms slightly apart. Inhale while pressing the fingers, and exhale while easing the pressure, maintaining contact. Repeat for a few minutes

Breath awareness - can train us to focus on the breath, to notice when our attention has moved from the breath and bring our attention back to it. Slow, deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth can also activate the calming side of our nervous system helping us to relax.

Lion's Breath: Take a deep inhale, then exhale forcefully with a roar – helps release excess energy in a controlled way.

Movement-based mindfulness – Active yoga poses, such as Tree Pose (*Vrikshasana*), channel hyperactivity constructively while enhancing balance and focus.

Stand tall with feet together. Shift your weight onto one foot and place the sole of the other foot on your inner thigh or calf. Bring your palms together at your chest or raise your arms overhead. Focus on a point for balance and breathe steadily.

Self-regulation strategies – Mindful breathing helps children pause and respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively. Colouring mandalas is also useful as it combines mindfulness and creativity to improve attention and calmness.

Studies show that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) can improve ADHD symptoms. Research published in *the Journal of Attention Disorders* (2016) found that mindfulness reduced hyperactivity and improved executive functioning in children with ADHD.

THE ROLE OF COMPASSION

Self-compassion, the ability to treat oneself with kindness during difficult times, is a powerful tool for mental health. Dr Kristin Neff, a leader in this field, has research showing that self-compassion reduces anxiety, stress and feelings of inadequacy. Here are some ideas on how to cultivate self-compassion in children:

- **Affirmation exercises** – Encourage children to write and repeat kind words about themselves. For example: “May I be kind to myself and others” or “My mistakes show that I am growing and learning.”
- **Compassionate imagery** – Visualise a supportive figure offering encouragement and understanding.
- **Common humanity reflection** – Remind children that struggles are a shared human experience, reducing feelings of isolation.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH NEUROPLASTICITY

Teaching children about the brain's ability to change, known as neuroplasticity, helps them see that their thoughts and habits can improve over time. This understanding encourages positive behaviour. Research by Yeager & Dweck (2012) found that teaching neuroplasticity reduced depressive symptoms and enhanced academic performance.

Neuroplasticity in practice

Growth mindset: Teach children that challenges are opportunities for growth, not fixed failures.

Skill-building activities: Encourage hobbies that challenge the brain, like playing an instrument or learning a new language.



A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO YOGA

By embedding yoga, mindfulness, and kindness practices into their curriculum, schools can create a supportive environment for both students and staff.

Research backs the effectiveness of these approaches: The Mindfulness in Schools Project found that mindfulness training improved emotional wellbeing and reduced anxiety, while the My Resilience in Adolescence (Myriad) Trial, one of the largest UK studies on mindfulness in schools, emphasised the importance of voluntary participation for better engagement.

During Children's Mental Health Week (3-9 February 2025), BWY is launching a yoga pilot at a Leicester school, supporting year 11 students in managing pre-exam stress. With high rates of self-harm, the school is confident that incorporating yoga and mindfulness will positively impact student's mental and physical wellbeing.

As concerns over children's mental health continue to grow, interventions like this offer hope. Integrating yoga

and mindfulness practices into schools helps children better manage anxiety, stress, and ADHD.

By working together, teachers, yoga instructors, parents, and mental health professionals can make a lasting impact and equip children with the tools they need to flourish. Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive.



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British Wheel of Yoga (BWY) Children's Yoga Tutor **Christiane Kerr** has more than a quarter of a century's experience sharing yoga and mindfulness with children and young people through her Calm for Kids enterprise. As a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teacher and yoga mentor, Christiane has written six books and produced an array of audio relaxation CDs to help children and young people develop a calm and creative approach to everyday challenges.

Christiane's next course – Learn to Teach Mindfulness to Children – starts on 5 February. Check her website for further details: <https://calmforkids.com/> or email: info@calmforkids.com



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