Into the Jungle: Kids Yoga Story Time

Jenine Durland

It is a regular day at Wilkinson Public Library in Telluride. Adults are flipping through newspapers and magazines in the periodical room, others are browsing the new books and DVDs, but there’s a very strange noise coming from the children’s area: quiet. Upon closer inspection, the colorful space which normally plays host to an average of 80 excited youngsters is actually full of kids, but they are stretched out on their backs in a mish-mashed circle, faces half-covered with eye pillows, mouths breathing in and out.

“It’s a pretty remarkable thing to see 24 preschoolers in a circle, completely quiet,” says Maggie McNally, Youth Services Assistant at Wilkinson, and one of two leaders in the children’s yoga program. “Usually when the kids come in, they’re really rowdy, but when they leave after yoga story time, they’re much more centered and focused.”

Since Youth Services Manager Elizabeth Tracy began kids story time yoga over a year ago, the program has become wildly successful, attracting little ones as young as 3 and occasionally, even the children’s grandparents. Following a series of initial outreach story times Tracy and McNally offered at the local schools, pre-school teachers began requesting weekly classroom visits from the librarians. “The teachers loved it!” says McNally. “The kids were much more centered and productive for the rest of the day.”

Now, Tracy and McNally offer yoga story times twice per week, on both library and school premises while continuing to offer traditional story hours in the children’s area. But like anything, the program started small, eventually evolving into its current form. “We wanted to try something different,” says Tracy, “and we had the fortune of having Marie Green, a passionate yoga teacher, who is also a parent, offering yoga classes at the library. It just seemed natural to offer a children’s class while the parents were practicing.”

And so yoga story times were born. As a way of engaging the energetic children, Tracy developed stories to accompany the many

Maggie McNally and her daughter Anna practice yoga poses at the Wilkinson Public Library. (Courtesy of Wilkinson Public Library)

Jenine Durland is the Program Coordinator at Wilkinson Public Library, where occasionally, if she’s lucky, she gets to work on her yoga poses with the kids. Jenine earned her BA in English: Creative Writing from Colorado College before moving to Telluride three years ago.
popular yoga poses. Instead of just hearing about the mountain in the distance, kids were told to become the mountain, pushing up into what is regularly referred to as downward facing dog. Just as the sun came up in the distance, the children rose into the sun salutation pose, their fingers reaching towards the sky. Next, they were on their backs, riding imaginary bikes up Bear Creek, a popular hike in the area.

"Not only do these structured adventures benefit the body," says McNally “but leading research now shows that physical activity, particularly balance, helps stimulate the brain.”

Much of the research linking learning patterns to physical activity can be credited to Paul Dennison, Ph.D., a remedial educational specialist and founder of the Educational Kinesiology Foundation and Brain Gym. Indeed, all of the local teachers who have introduced story time yoga into their classrooms have noticed significant improvement in students’ abilities to focus.

“It’s a win-win situation,” says Tracy, who furthered her own yoga education with Storytime Yoga™ founder Sydney Solis, the leading regional educator on the subject. Solis, a native of Boulder, Colorado, founded Storytime YogaTM in 2000. Since that time, Solis’ work has grown to include classes, performances, trainings and workshops internationally, as well as a children’s show on PBS.

“Solis is the biggest proponent of the marriage between story and yoga,” says Tracy. “Her approach inspires imagination in children who might only be interested in the physical aspects while encouraging physical activity in the children who are naturally drawn to the story. The main difference between our approaches is that we make up the story as we go, allowing the kids to use their imagination throughout, rather than having it provided up front.” Solis’ website, storytimeyoga.com, includes resources for teachers, as well as information on upcoming classes and workshops.

For libraries looking to start similar programs, Tracy recommends partnering with a local yoga studio, or if possible, taking a workshop from Sydney Solis. Wilkinson Public Library offers yoga story time catered for the pre-school through elementary age group twice a week, making sure that course schedules do not compete with the local yoga studio’s programs. Teachers are invited to bring their classes to the library, and Youth Services staff regularly facilitates programs at local schools, which has been one of the best methods of publicizing the program.

Beyond the initial time investment for training staff, Wilkinson also purchased a set of 25 yoga mats and eye pillows for the
program. As Tracy explains, “having the proper equipment allows the children to experience a real yoga class. Getting to pick out and roll up their mats is an important element of that.” Parents are also on hand to help or participate due to the library’s policy requiring children under the age of 8 to be accompanied by an adult.

Ultimately, there is no doubt that the yoga story times are having positive impact on the children. McNally, who has been practicing yoga on and off for 15 years, has involved her four-year-old daughter in the story times. “Now she’s more avid than I am [about yoga],” says McNally. “She just took a riding lesson, and at the end, when I asked her what should she say, instead of ‘thank you’ she raised her hands to her heart and said ‘Namaste’.”

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