

S-t-r-e-t-c-h Your Storytimes

Exercise Programming Flexibility with Yoga

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While books are rightfully the biggest and best-known tool in children's literacy, storytellers and parents may find themselves looking for ideas to inject new life into old routines and reinforce what children see in stories.

Adding yoga to a library storytime increases children's opportunities for imaginative play and may help them control their emotions. With a little flexibility, you'll soon be embracing movement as a regular element in your programs (when in-person programming returns, post pandemic!)

Michelle's program at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's Cornelius Branch came about when she took over responsibility for offering a monthly evening storytime, while Victoria's at the Allegra Westbrooks Regional Branch evolved from her love of yoga and a desire to shake up the weekly storytime routine. The idea that yoga storytime would have lasting benefits for both health and literacy encouraged us both to give it a try.

According to yoga practitioner and teacher Brianna Randall, kids reap the same physical and mental benefits of yoga as

adults, including "improved flexibility, balance, strength and cardiovascular health," as well as "decreased anxiety, boosted concentration and memory, improved confidence and self-esteem" and increased self-awareness and emotional regulation.¹

Resources

Library programmers can do yoga storytime without a huge budgetary strain. Yoga mats will likely be the costliest supply, but you can ask that participants bring a towel or blanket. We have cut yoga mats (or fleece) into smaller sizes (you can get cheap mats at some discount stores). Your library may already own titles about yoga for kids, which is another excellent starting place in yoga storytime programming.

We also relied on the *Yogibrarian* blog by children's librarian and certified yoga instructor Andrea Cleland. Victoria often pulls yoga poses from here to incorporate into storytimes, and Michelle loves this resource for breathing exercises. We both



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A sampling of items for yoga storytime.

use *Yogibrarian* themes, and we love *Yogibrarian's* full body stretch Open Shut Them!

Storytime Outline

Yoga storytime includes stories and songs, but yoga poses replace literacy extension activities. Guided breathing exercises and closing meditations are used in place of additional fingerplays, songs, or flannel stories.

We strive to create a consistent yoga routine, expanding the books and resources we can use. Consistency increases a child's opportunity to retain how to do the poses for storytime and day-to-day practice. Here is a general outline:

- Opening song or fingerplay
- Breathing exercise
- Book #1
- Song
- Book #2
- Song
- Yoga poses
- Closing meditation
- Closing song or fingerplay

Yoga Storytime Twists

Just like any other recurring program, go-to strategies can start to feel repetitive after a while. Here are some fun twists to incorporate a little excitement.

- **Yoga Cards:** Gravitating to the same poses over and over? Try mixing it up with a set of yoga cards. There are free options online, or invest in a set if this is a regular program offering.
- **Add a Game:** Play a game of Duck-Duck-Goose with the yoga cards. Whoever loses picks a yoga card and teaches everyone to do that pose.
- **Incorporate a Manipulative:** Try using drumsticks to drum on the yoga mats and following along to a beat or glow sticks for meditation and glow-stick dancing. *Yogibrarian's* Breathing Buddies exercise with stuffed animals is another great option.
- **Change Your Yoga Mats:** Bubble-wrap, felt, and carpet squares are all inexpensive DIY alternatives to yoga mats.
- **Take It Outside:** When the weather is nice, you can increase the amount of people allowed into a yoga storytime by hosting the program at a local park. We asked families to bring a towel or blanket and offered the program in the morning before it got too hot.

Using songs that encourage dancing can set the tone for movement throughout the entire program. When utilizing a book that encourages practicing the poses in conjunction with reading and looking at the illustrations, such as *You Are a Lion! And Other Fun Yoga Poses* by Tae-eun Yoo, you may choose to adapt this structure to accommodate poses outside of your normal routine by skipping your traditional poses completely and adding another book, or spending more time exploring the book and poses.

Best Practices

Here are some tips we learned to make storytimes easier for us and safer for kids.

Mention the rules at the beginning, including physical safety rules for our little yogis, like making sure to be far enough away that we can't touch our neighbors and not doing any flips or tumbles. We often have children knock on the floor so they can feel that it's hard underneath the carpet. Space in the programming room is something to consider when planning because yoga poses take a fair amount of room.

All storytimes work best with presenter participation, and yoga storytime is no exception. Doing the poses with children helps them see a model of the pose and understand that our group is focusing on this pose right now. The same can be said for caregiver participation in all storytimes, but especially for yoga storytime. For younger yogis, mimicking adults' actions is natural, so seeing grown-ups they care about practice yoga with them helps set the tone for the activity. Many of our little yogis may need extra adult support in some poses.

References

1. Brianna Randall, "Why More Kids Are Learning—and Enjoying—Yoga," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/why-more-kids-are-learning--and-enjoying--yoga/2020/01/03/1f2b78be-de32-11e9-8dc8-498eabc129a0_story.html.
2. Helen Garabedian, *Itsy Bitsy Yoga* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

Supporting some yogis means being prepared with adaptations and modifications for the poses being shared. Our yoga storytimes are marketed to a family audience with a wide age-range of participants. For Michelle, this meant for the first year or so, attendees skewed toward the preschool and early school-age groups, while for Victoria attendees were anywhere between two and five years old.

The younger the yogi, the more support is needed, and it was clear we needed to prepare for babies to attend. For babies, caregiver support is essential because they will be helping move babies into simplified versions of poses. Babies can't do mountain pose or downward dog on their own, but a caregiver can help baby lift their hands above their head or help balance them on their hands and feet. Yoga has incredible benefits for babies, including aiding in digestion, helping them sleep better, increasing movement awareness, and bonding with caregivers.²

Preparing for an audience that includes those with disabilities is important to ensuring accessibility. Many poses can be done in a modified form from a wheelchair. Cat and Cow are perfect examples—in seated position with your feet hip width apart and your hands on your knees, inhale and broaden your chest and lift your chin and chest towards the ceiling for Cow. You will exhale, round your spine, tuck your chin and release your neck for Cat. You can utilize adaptive yoga poses with caregivers and reluctant participants, too.

Here is a link to Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's list of yoga storytime resources: https://cmllibrary.bibliocommons.com/list/share/1176084117_cmllibrary_victoria/1846546139_family_storytime_yoga_storytime_favorite_read-alouds?page=2. &

