

# Diapers and Downward Dog:

## Yoga for Youngsters

By Debra Huron

The students are chanting their own mantras. The decibel level rises and falls as two students circumambulate the room at a fast, then slower, pace. It seems that at any moment a party could break out.

I'm in the midst of a yoga class with three pig-tailed two-year-olds. When the little girls decide it's time to plop down on their tiny, square yoga mats at Happy Seed Yoga, at least they have a soft landing thanks to their diapers. Their yoga teacher, Maripily Yera, appears to be somewhat exhausted at the end of the 20-minute class.

"I was scared to teach kids," she confides. "You really have to keep them interested. Their energy is very high."

### A focus on children

Yera and her business partner, Sue Ducros, are yoga teachers whose business focuses solely on teaching yoga to kids. They offer classes in their homes to children from age two to late teens. Both have taken Radiant Child Yoga teacher

training — all three levels. In fact, Ducros travels throughout North America and Europe as a facilitator for these training courses. She'll be offering the training this



fall (September 23-25) at Rama Lotus Yoga Centre in Ottawa.

"After I did my regular yoga teacher training, I adopted the idea, 'Don't say no to anything,'" says Ducros, a triathlete who also holds an MBA and a degree in Early Childhood Education. One of the first requests she had was from the Hintonburg Community Centre, where she taught yoga to a class that included teens with developmental disabilities. As a mother of three, she felt drawn to teaching yoga to young people.

In April 2010, Ducros and

Yera set up Happy Seed Yoga using a different business model. "We weren't sure we wanted to pay \$4,000 a month to rent a yoga studio space," says Ducros. "With young children, it seemed to make sense to have it in a home environment."

### The age to start

Most of Ottawa's yoga teachers specializing in children's yoga agree that four is the age by which children can attend a yoga class without having an adult to supervise the experience. At Happy Seed Yoga, the



Sue Ducros of Happy Seed Yoga and a flexible young yogini keep nimble with music.

Photos: Howard Sandler Photography

class with the two-year-olds includes Yera's daughter and two friends.

"Normally, for kids three and under, the parents are with the kids, and the class would be limited to five in total," Yera explains. Even so, a toddler's natural desire to mimic what others do allows Yera to convince the two-year-olds to belt out the mantra "MOOO" (the kids' version of Om?) as they sway their backs down and raise their noses to the sky in the flowing cat/cow pose.

"These days, even if parents don't practice yoga themselves, they've heard of it," says Yera. "Many moms are gym moms, but they want their kids to do yoga."

### How parents get involved

Jamie Reardon is another yoga teacher (and mom) who only teaches children's yoga. Her playground is *PranaShanti* Yoga Centre, where she has been offering yoga to youngsters since October 2008.

"A lot of parents coming to yoga classes want to do yoga with their child. They're looking for an activity they can do together. It's bonding time. It's quality time."

The owner of Windhorse Yoga, Sheila Craig, echoes those sentiments. She teaches a class called Family Yoga. "It's very easy yoga. The postures are all very basic poses that any relatively healthy adult can do," she says. "You don't have to be a yogi to do that program at all."

Family Yoga at Windhorse Yoga incorporates stories and adventures that appeal to children. "Because it's so exploratory, you get to crawl all over your parent. Sometimes you prop each other up," says Craig.

This physical contact adds something special to the yoga experience. "Some people are not naturally huggy, feely-touchy people...it's not that they don't love their children, it's just not how they bring that across," explains Craig. "In Family Yoga, the children have the opportunity to be just really tactile with their parents...we always include a hug-your-parent pose!"

"There's a lot of opportunity to show affection. It's just amazing for that reason, and there's never a child who does not want to just crawl all over their parent."



### The energizer that calms

In her children's yoga classes at *PranaShanti*, Reardon welcomes three-year-olds. Trained through a program called YogaKids®, she says that her classes often include students aged three to ten. "Yes, it's a big age difference," she concedes. "And, yes, it works! Often, the three-year-olds have parents who are yogis, or yoginis, and you can tell that they have been practising yoga with their parent since birth."

For adults who are simply looking for an activity they can do with children, Reardon's classes offer an experience that moms, dads, and grandparents can share with the youngsters in their lives. "I've had parents whose kids



are hyperactive seek out yoga. It's important for the kids to be able to release that pent-up energy and to be exposed to the tools that yoga gives them to calm themselves down."

Each class has a theme and ends with the children creating a painting or other artwork based on that theme. "The kids really look forward to the craft," Reardon says.

Originally trained to teach yoga to adults, Reardon outlines two main differences



Sheila Craig (far right) of Windhorse Yoga leads a Family Yoga class.



**The Pantry**  
Vegetarian Restaurant | 175 Third Ave.  
(corner Lyon)

Join us for lunch weekdays 11:30 am-3:00 pm.

For over 35 years, we have been serving organic vegetarian meals in a charming old world atmosphere.

Our imaginative and cross-cultural soups, daily specials, and desserts are **90% to 100% ORGANIC.**

We also serve a fine selection of sandwiches and teas.

*a cozy eating place  
in the Glebe  
Community Centre*



between adult and children's yoga. "A yoga kids' class has to be stimulating. And it has to be upbeat. However, one thing that is just as beneficial for a child as for an adult is shavasana [final relaxation]. They need it, they want it, and they enjoy it, so I give them a good ten minutes of shavasana, and we end with a song, as well as some chanting."

### Yoga and school-age kids

Because she understood the stresses and strains buffeting her own school-age children, Sally Waterfall of *WaterfallYoga* decided that the focus of her yoga teaching would be on that age group, and on teens. Waterfall taught at yoga studios and local schools.



"Yoga is amazing for kids," she says. "It provides them with a sense of mindfulness — being aware of the breath of the body, of the mind, of the spirit. It just keeps everything connected."

Not being connected is the sad reality in too many kids' lives. "What we're finding now is that there's a sense of disconnection with their body, with their mind, with the food they eat, with the environment. And they just go, go, go. They're just on autopilot."

Waterfall taught after-school classes, mostly to girls, at Surround Circle Yoga in Old Ottawa South. But in local schools where she offered yoga, boys were just as likely to show up for her classes as girls.

"The boys are starting to understand that you can partner yoga up with other sports. So, if you're into track or basketball or hockey or football, yoga is a wonderful accompaniment. It helps to strengthen your muscles, build endurance. It helps

with balance and flexibility. All of those things come into play with all the other sports they do."

The fact that the media has publicized major league baseball and professional hockey players doing yoga is a bonus for boys, she adds.

### Taking yoga skills off the mat

"Yoga is about self-regulation," says Waterfall. "You can self-regulate your emotions."

She encourages children to have fun as they move from pose to pose. "Yoga helps kids with their self-esteem because it's a non-competitive activity. You don't have to be number one. You're here to do yoga for yourself and for your own enjoyment."

Waterfall is explicit about this with the kids in her classes. "Yoga allows you to calm yourself and then you can take that into your everyday life, and it only enhances your relationship with yourself, and with others, as well."

Over at Happy Seed Yoga, Sue Ducros also reflects on the impact yoga can have on young minds.

"For tweens and teens, beyond the postures, yoga speaks to how they relate to themselves and others. I invite them to open up to how they feel when they do the postures. I also make it clear that anything shared in a yoga class is private."

### All the benefits, all the time

"The moms who come to yoga with their young kids see right away that it works," Ducros adds. "It calms the nervous system and balances the glandular system. There's nobody who can't benefit from yoga."

When she opened Windhorse Yoga, Sheila Craig knew she wanted to teach children's yoga. Her daughter was eight at the time. "Yoga was a huge part of my life, and it was something that I wanted her to be able to experience as well." Craig brought a YogaEd trainer to Ottawa and she was part of the graduating class of six teachers.

Like other yoga teachers, she uses the term "tools" to describe the diverse parts of the package that is yoga.

"The tools you get for living are more powerful than the tools you can get from anything else, and it can't help but enhance everything else you do," says Craig. "That's its purpose. Yoga isn't for itself. Yoga is to enhance the rest of your life when you're not doing yoga."

Sally Waterfall is clear about what teaching yoga to children means to her. "We're growing and evolving together. It's a really nice bonding experience." **HWO**



*Making the stretch together in Sally Waterfall's WaterfallYoga class.*

### Follow the Teachers to Kids' Classes

If you think your children might want to spend some time on a yoga mat, check out the places and people featured in this article by browsing through their websites.

Happy Seed Yoga (Maripily Yera and Sue Ducros): [www.happyseedyoga.com](http://www.happyseedyoga.com)

PranaShanti Yoga Centre (Jamie Reardon): [www.pranashanti.com](http://www.pranashanti.com)

Windhorse Yoga (Sheila Craig): [www.windhorse-yoga.ca](http://www.windhorse-yoga.ca)

At the time of printing, *Healthwise Ottawa* learned that Sally Waterfall has relocated to California. Tara Porter will continue the children's yoga program at Surround Circle Yoga ([www.surroundcircleyoga.com](http://www.surroundcircleyoga.com)).