

Celebrities do it, professional sports teams do it—and now yoga is gaining popularity with New York City teens.

Yoga has long been credited with increasing focus and concentration while reducing stress, benefits that can be especially important for teenagers who are juggling school, sports and active social lives.

THAT'S A STRETCH

Teen Yoga in NYC is the Next Big Thing

By Caitlin Nish

"They often come into the studio exhausted," says Jennifer Ford, a certified yoga instructor and director of Karma Kids Yoga, who has been teaching teens since 2003. They usually need more restorative work than younger children, so she starts her classes with at least 10 minutes of relaxation.

It's time that her students appreciate. "The best thing about yoga is all the stretching and relaxing," said 12-year-old Emily Allen, who added that she and her twin sister Katherine had been studying yoga at Karma Kids since they were 4.

"Exercising is a form of stress relief," Vilchez-Bliatt said. "Our effort is for them to leave feeling good about themselves and feeling relaxed."

Jennifer Ford, a certified middle and high school yoga instructor, said that as a public school teacher working with at-risk teens, she started doing yoga with her students in the classroom.

The benefits were both instant and noticeable, she said. Starting the school day with even five minutes of meditation can help teens shrug off the stresses of commuting and make them more ready to face the day.

She went on to co-found Bent on Learning, a non-profit organization that offers yoga instruction primarily in under-served public schools. "We want to provide yoga to kids who generally may never hear the word 'yoga,'" she said.

Bent on Learning, now in its ninth year, used yoga to help children in downtown schools manage post-traumatic stress after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.



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After doing her own yoga training with the students, Zamilia said, "Zamilia developed yoga moves that students can do with students during 'brain breaks,' or two-minute breaks between subjects during the school day."

"Yoga is a great way for them to clear their minds and help them focus," she said, especially as they prepare for standardized testing. "There are many ways to do this physically and how well they'll do under assessment."

Zamilia started a program this year where teachers do a small amount of yoga with their students before and after test preparation.

"If you don't have these proper channels to get rid of your nervous energy, you won't do as well," she said.

But the benefits of yoga in schools extend outside the classroom, Ford said many schools are willing to offer yoga as a gym alternative. It's a great activity to do with all different students before and after test preparation.

"The nice thing about yoga is that there are variations on all the poses," said Vilchez-Bliatt, whose classes combine students of

all ability levels. "It's a very non-competitive environment."

Emily Henning, age 12, said, "It's really fun out with your friends while getting exercise that's good for you."

"There's no succeeding or failing. It's just trying," Ford said. She added that kids often

aren't used to that concept. In basketball, for example, "You either make the basket or you don't, where in yoga that's not even part of it at all."

In yoga, the competition is with oneself. However, yoga can be beneficial for students who also participate in traditional competitive sports.

"Yoga is a complement to any sport," Vilchez-Bliatt said. It helps to increase strength, coordination, flexibility and balance, which you, for example, a better runner or a stronger football player.

"I like to do the 'wheel' because you have to be really good at balancing," she said.

"With any sport, you need cross-training and different methods of exercise to develop your body and develop your mind," she added.