



Remain Calm...

By Julie Kane Pfitzinger

Local teachers are using yoga to help kids stay focused at school.

Imagine trying to hold the attention of a classroom full of energetic kindergarten students who are perpetually distracted by their little friends, their favorite things and the random bursts of imaginative ideas they can't wait to share. Even for the most seasoned teaching professional, this can occasionally be a daunting task. What if there was a way to bring these bundles of energy to stillness and encourage them to focus on their surroundings in a more peaceful manner, preparing them to both listen and learn more effectively?



Minneapolis public school district employees Kathy Flaminio and Julie Hurtubise believe the best way to settle restless spirits is through yoga. The two women devoted the past school year to a sabbatical spent training more than 500 staff members in over 35 Minneapolis schools on how to bring stillness into the classroom by teaching students simple yoga techniques they can easily use to calm themselves during a busy school day.

This pilot program is known as *Yoga Calm for Children: Educating Heart, Mind and Body™* and was originally created by Lynea and Jim Gillen of Oregon. According to Flaminio, the goal of *Yoga Calm™* is to “get kids in their bodies which is so beneficial in physical, social, emotional and cognitive ways.”

“When kids can bring themselves to their centers, they will listen more effectively and will be able to learn more complex ideas,” says Hurtubise, who has worked as an occupational therapist for over twenty years. “Just by giving them the tools they need to be still within themselves and let go of background noise, teachers can make a significant difference in their learning potential.”

Flaminio, a school social worker, and Hurtubise are also certified yoga teachers and mutually saw a natural fit between their personal health practice and the ways yoga could impact young students in the classroom. “When we first met about 15 months ago, we discovered that each of us had been trying to integrate some yoga techniques into our curriculum,” says Flaminio. “This kind of physical movement, done in a regulated way, has so many benefits.”

In her work over the years with special needs students and their families, Hurtubise says she has frequently emphasized using stillness as a means to achieve goals. When that area of strength is enhanced, other areas can be more easily developed. “The physical practice can help change their nervous systems,” she explains.

During the course of their sabbatical, the pair did extensive research on *Yoga Calm™*, attended workshops and organized many training sessions for district teachers. “Our training sessions were very experiential,” says Flaminio. “All the techniques that we gave the teachers were very simple and accessible. This is a program that they can tailor to their own needs in the classroom. Although there is no need for teachers to have any previous yoga background, many have told us that they are starting to use our yoga techniques for themselves and for their own children.”

The first step towards stillness, according to Flaminio, is to set up the classroom environment. “This can be done in a variety of ways including dimming the lights, putting on soft music, and setting out a special item like a flower, a leaf or a rock to signify that this is yoga time,” she explains.

The teachers then go on to demonstrate simple breathing techniques, often using the popular Hoberman Sphere that Flaminio says is “a great visual aid for kids” along with low-key stretches and positive affirmations to students. In this atmosphere, students will often hear calming words from teachers and fellow students that can make a significant emotional impact. “Some of these students come from a place where they have never been told that they are kind or that they have special gifts to offer,” says Flaminio.

Yoga Calm™ can effectively be used for many classroom situations; from a centering time before a test to a calming boost after a large muscle recess period. “Teachers are free to use the techniques in whatever way they see fit, for a few minutes every day or a few times during the week,” says Hurtubise. “Our only suggestion is that they are consistent about the practice so the students become more aware of its meaning and impact on the classroom.”

Both Flaminio and Hurtubise will be heading back to school and to their usual jobs this fall as their sabbatical has come to an end, but they intend to continue to offer workshops and training to those interested in learning more about *Yoga Calm™*. They are also available to speak to community education and parenting groups. “The program has gotten lots of exposure through word of mouth and we’re very happy about that,” says Flaminio. “It’s really blossomed.”

“The best part of all this is we’re helping students to be successful, which is what they all want,” says Hurtubise. Flaminio agrees, “When kids are taught how to bring themselves to a quiet place of focus, they are able to transform themselves into a whole different kind of learner.”

For more information about the *Yoga Calm™*, visit www.yogacalm.org.

For more information about Children’s Yoga Company for the Twin Cities, contact Kathy Flaminio at 1000petalsyoga@comcast.net.