

Yoga Prevents Bullying in School

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“*Jivatam Jyotiretu Vidyam*,” “True education (self-knowledge) enlightens human life,” according to Shrii Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar the founder of the international Neohumanist Education System and the Ananda Marga Schools.

“If we wish to create lasting peace we must begin with the children.” ~ Mahatma Gandhi

Abstract

There is a growing concern throughout America regarding the increase in childhood stress, bullying, and violence. Living in Colorado, we are haunted by the incident at Columbine High School when two students felt the need to take revenge and take action in a violent manner leaving 15 dead and creating fear and sadness in the hearts of students and parents. This was the first wake up call that affluent, suburban schools were not always safe places. Violence and bullying continue to escalate according to statistics. Seventeen states across the United States report having instituted laws to reduce or eliminate bullying in schools.. In Colorado, each school district is required to have a bully prevention policy and program. This paper will discuss a classically based yoga program incorporated within an upper elementary school system in Boulder, CO. The main hypothesis of this project was to evaluate whether yoga training would effectively decrease bullying and increase anger management for 4th and 5th grade students. The rationale for this hypothesis was based on the first vow of raja yoga, *ahimsa*, that one vows to be non-violent to self and others. The yoga curriculum was presented for six, 45 minute sessions during the academic school day for 101, 4th and 5th grade students in 2004, repeated for 108 students in 2005 and reviewed again for 105, students in 2006. The children learned yoga philosophy, practiced yoga postures, learned breathing and concentration techniques, as well as, traditional conflict resolution strategies and dialogues. Through the use of pre and post questionnaires the program was evaluated and statistics obtained. The program proved to be successful and effective. Boulder students' self reported a decrease by 60% in their own bullying behavior and a 42% decrease in regard to being bullied by others at school. A comprehensive yoga program can greatly reduce violence and bullying, but, the long term lasting effects are still unclear. The results of this intervention acknowledge yoga as an effective method for increasing anger management skills and decreasing physical outbursts of violence for upper elementary school age children during the time of implementation.

Introduction

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average child by the end of elementary school (approximately age 11) will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts on television and in the media.¹ Studies by the American Medical Association show that there has been an increase in violence and bullying in American schools.² The National Center on Education Statistics reported that 29% of schools considered bullying to be the single most disciplinary problem.³ According to the Boulder County Treasurer, Bob Hullinghorst, violence is the most *costly* preventable disease in Boulder County, Colorado. Early intervention holds the most promise for reducing violence. It is mandatory for all school districts in Colorado to have a violence prevention and anti-bullying unit during the school year.⁴ It appears that the current systems are not effective, since the violence, aggression and bullying in schools continues on an upward trend.⁵

Bullying can be defined as a behavior which is repeated by a person or group of people for the purposes of trying to belittle or harm someone who is weaker, more vulnerable or different in nature. The behavior can be direct such as hitting, name-calling, malicious teasing, threatening, intimidating, stealing or damaging belongings. The bullying can also be indirect such as spreading rumors, excluding or influencing others to reject someone.⁶ In Colorado, "bullying" is defined as "any written or verbal expression, or physical act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to cause distress upon one or more students."⁷ Although definitions may vary, there is often one concept in common: bullying is a subtype of aggression.⁸

Surveys have reported that bullying increases throughout the elementary years and peaks in middle school.⁹ A study of 3rd through 8th grade students in 14 schools throughout Massachusetts reported that almost one half of the students had been bullied at some point and the abuse lasted six months or longer.¹⁰ The National Center on Education Statistics found that 6th graders (12 year olds) were at a risk seven times greater than 12th graders (18 year olds) to be bullied.¹¹

Developmentally, during the early adolescent years, the role of the peer group changes. Children look towards their peers to discuss problems and seek advice to help gain autonomy from their parents. Social status becomes increasingly important at this age. Issues such as popularity, acceptance and a need to "fit in" are the focus during the early adolescent years.¹²

For boys at this age, toughness and aggressiveness become important status considerations, whereas appearance is the main social status for girls.¹⁴ Direct aggressive bullying is more prevalent for boys while indirect verbal bullying is what girls experience most often. No matter the type of behavior, the common reasons for bullying are always the same: "to be popular" or "to get your own way."¹⁴ Those who are the bullies tend to get in trouble more frequently, and generally do poorly in school. Bullying becomes a way to deal with their problems. As bullies become adults, they are four times more likely than non-bullies to commit crimes.¹⁵

As for those who were the targets for bullies, researchers report that “years later, long after the bullying has stopped, adults who were bullied as teens have higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem than other adults.”¹⁶

Although this is not a new problem, the concern is escalating. There is a great need to step in and take action against this anti-social behavior in children, since the effects of bullying are not only during the school years but are long lasting for both sides, influencing the adult. The yoga intervention program discussed in this paper was specifically designed to diminish both physical violence and verbal aggression, as well as, to increase the students’ ability to control their own anger. The central hypothesis was that a two week, comprehensive yoga curriculum in school can decrease bullying and increase anger management in 4th and 5th grade boys and girls during and immediately following exposure to yoga intervention. The secondary aim of this project was to create a calm, relaxed body and mind, developing inner peace for upper elementary students.

The target audience for this anti-bullying project is upper elementary and middle school age children between the ages of 9 and 14 (4th-8th grade.) This group is more receptive to guidance, has less peer pressure, has a higher percentage of bullying than older teens and is on the verge of developing high risk behaviors. Jean Piaget, child development psychologist, states that children between the ages of 7-11 are able to understand abstract concepts and function accordingly during this phase of “Concrete Operations.” While youth between the ages of 11-15 have begun to function as adults during this time referred to as “Formal Operations,” and are expected to understand conceptual reasoning.¹⁷ This anti-bullying yoga program entitled, “CALMING KIDS (CK): Creating a Non-Violent World,” was designed for a preadolescent population, in order to teach the abstract concept of a peaceful approach toward life.

The CALMING KIDS program’s objective is to convey a philosophical and scientific, nondenominational yoga program to school age children as a lifestyle choice in order to decrease bullying and aggressive behavior. The curriculum is designed to inspire a positive, peaceful, physically strong, and self confident attitude with a system of how to communicate in a relaxed way. The concepts are yoga philosophy: kindness, compassion, communication and forgiveness; combined with yoga science: moving energy with a high level of body and breath awareness. Ultimately, the goal is to empower children to manage their own feelings and feel safe within themselves and their surroundings to give them a greater capacity for success in and out of school. To quote Shri Swami Rama, “Once compassion comes in, the desire to retaliate goes.”¹⁸

The teachings of classical yoga as described by Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, is a useful guideline for reducing bullying. Children educated in this method of yoga are taught self respect, stress management and compassion towards oneself and towards others. It provides a system to help cope with and control aggressive behavior. In the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras, II 29, Patanjali describes the eight components of yoga which lead towards a peaceful state. These components are the *yamas* (self control for social harmony), the *niyamas* (personal discipline), *asana* (physical postures), *pranayama* (regulation of the breath), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *dharana* (contemplation), *dhyana*

(meditation), *samadi* (absorbed into spirit-bliss/enlightenment). In Yoga Sutra II 30, the *yamas* are discussed. They consist of five principals which are considered the “great universal vows” to be extended to all beings in nature: (*ahimsa*) non-violence, (*satya*) truthfulness, (*asteya*) not stealing, (*brahmacharya*) behavior that respects the divine as omnipresent, and (*aparigraha*) freedom from greed.¹⁹ The first universal vow *ahimsa* (non-violence) is the basis of this anti-bullying program CALMING KIDS (CK): Creating a Non-Violent World. For acceptance of this violence prevention method and mainstream integration of yoga into the public school system, the CK program does not introduce the concepts of contemplation and enlightenment.

Methodology

CALMING KIDS was taught for three successive years, October 2004, 2005 and 2006, in Boulder, Colorado, during national SAVE week--an acronym designated by the American Medical Association which refers to Stop America's Violence Everywhere. The curriculum was presented during the academic school day for 101, 4th and 5th grade students in 2004 and repeated for 108 students in 2005 and reviewed again for 105 students in 2006, with a sex ratio approximately equal. Children ages 9 – 11 ranging from middle to upper middle class status were instructed for six 45 minute sessions which totaled four and one half hours of yoga training per year.

The 45 minute yoga class was added into the daily academic curriculum, every other day, for a two week period. Each class was crucial since the students only had six sessions:

- 1 Day one, Monday, the children were introduced to the concept of *ahimsa*: non-violence to self and toward others. After a discussion regarding this ethical standard, a 20 minute *asana* practice followed introducing gentle joint freeing movements and *surya namaskar* (salutation to the sun).²⁰ The class ended with a brief transition of rest before returning to their classrooms.
- 2 Day two, Wednesday, the students were visually stimulated with props, imagery and games to represent the three types of breathing (chest, abdominal and inter-costal) and their effects on one's mood and energy. After that a ten minute *asana* session was followed by a long relaxation in *makarasana* (crocodile pose, a position lying prone) which consisted of one-to-one breathing practice (*sama vritti ujaye* breath) using numbers and phrases.
- 3 Day three, Friday, the entire session focused on conflict resolution strategies with role-playing scenarios composed of subject matter volunteered by the children, i.e., real life bullying situations they had encountered. Homework for the weekend was given directing the students to teach a family member anything they had learned during the first three yoga classes.
- 4 Day four, Monday, a third of the class time was devoted to an open discussion about their homework: what the students chose to teach and to whom. The remaining time was an *asana* session introducing classical *asanas* for strength and balance such as *virabhadrasana 2* (warrior 2), *utthita trikonasana* (extended

triangle pose), *vrikshasana* (tree pose), etc... ending with systematic relaxation in *savasana* (corpse pose), and a review of the concentration and breathing practices taught previously.

- 5 Day five, Wednesday, a 30 minute session combining *vinyasa* (flowing postures) and classical *asanas* was taught followed by more complex concentration and breathing practices, as well as, creative visualization techniques. The students ended on the floor in the relaxation pose of their choice (supine, side-lying or prone).
- 6 Day six, Friday, a review of all material was covered with active participation by the students, followed by more role-playing and non-violent communication techniques. Questions and closure finished the class format.

A booklet was designed and written for the children entitled **YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT & FOCUSED**. The booklet was written between the first and second years of the program. It was used as a reference during the 2005 and 2006 presentation of the material covered during the classes. The objective of using this booklet was so that the children had another visual tool to use while discussing breathing, body awareness and yoga postures. In a generation where visual stimulation is status quo, it was vital for the study to have a guide book for each student to utilize. The booklet also allowed the teachers and parents to have a tangible medium to view at school and at home.



Learning From the Booklet



Vrikshana (Tree Pose)



Teaching Alignment of Body, Mind & Spirit



Ustrasana (Camel)



Demonstrating the Movement of the Diaphragm



Balāsana (Child's Pose)

Measures

The children were given pre- and post-questionnaires all three years to determine their levels of anger, aggression, and violent behavior before and after the program. Dr. Grace Wyshak, a professor of biostatistics, designed questions which were used in the survey. The proposed research project was discussed with the principal of the school. Parents signed an "informed consent" form before commencing the study. The school staff and families were told that participation was voluntary and the questionnaire answers would be anonymous as the data would be presented in statistical form. This authorization was considered satisfactory; there was no need for an ethics board nor human review committee.

The students were asked questions regarding their feelings of anger, their ability to control anger, whether they have been bullied at school, if they bully others, whether they have ever hit anyone, or if they have ever been hit, how well they handle their stress, how well they handle their anger, and what strategies the children use to handle disagreements. All of these points were addressed within the surveys both pre- and post-yoga. The post-yoga questionnaires directed the students to report if using the practice of yoga changed their interactions and experiences at school or after school during the two week training period. In order to assess the efficacy of yoga as an intervention technique, the questions allowed for a specific profile of each child's outbursts of anger towards schoolmates, bullying of others, perception of being victimized and understanding of anger management.

The participants were given the first questionnaire the day before the CK yoga program began. Each year the teachers informed the students that the questions related only to the time frame between the start of the current school year, approximately the 3rd week of August, and when the yoga program began, the second week of October. These surveys were given to the students with a number written in the upper right corner. At that time, the children were instructed to write down this "special" number on a separate piece of paper and place it in their desks for later reference. The teachers explained to the participants that this questionnaire would not affect their grades in any way, nor would the information be used against them. It was strictly anonymous, and they were to be as honest as possible when answering the questions. When the post-questionnaires were handed out the students were instructed to label the papers with their "special" numbers.

The same questions were presented as in the pre-surveys, but the students were to answer them regarding their experiences after the six yoga sessions.

For this project, there was not a control group of students. The children themselves were their own control. A control group would not have allowed all of the students to be involved with the yoga training. For the CALMING KIDS intervention it was best to have all students involved. This might possibly be considered a limitation; in the future a control group may be included. At this time, it would have been a greater handicap to leave students out of the project since the school staff and families were excited about the outcome of this study and wanted all students to participate.

Results

The SAS 9.13 software package²¹ was used to perform statistical analysis of the results. Chi-square tests were used to test the significance of changes in the responses in pre- and post-surveys. The questions reported in Table 1 were the first eight asked within the 35 question survey. The yes or no answers to these questions were the most significant results obtained. The findings are presented in Table 1 below. Although the answers to the remaining questions showed a trend in overall improvement in regard to fidgeting, headaches, self esteem and ability to sleep, the results were not statistically significant and did not address our main hypothesis.

Both years show a decrease in aggressive behavior after yoga and an increase in anger management.

Table 1: Responses pre- and post- yoga intervention. Years 2004, 2005 and 2006

	2004					2005					2006				
	% Yes					% Yes					% Yes				
	Pre- %	Post- %	◆ %	Chi-sq	P- value	Pre- %	Post- %	◆ %	Chi-sq	P- value	Pre- %	Post- %	◆ %	Chi-sq	P- value
1) Do you have trouble controlling your angry?	14.14	5.95	8.19	6.75	<0.01	17.59	8.82	8.77	4.88	<0.05	15.94	3.08	12.86	9.6	<.002
2) Do you ever feel angry for no reason?	23.23	7.92	15.31	7.53	<0.01	27.62	10.78	16.84	5.63	<0.02	21.74	7.96	14.05	4.74	<.05
3) Do you ever feel as if your friends are angry at you?	59.60	10.89	48.71	5.04	<0.05	50.48	21.00	29.48	12.31	<0.01	54.55	12.70	41.85	4.32	<.05
4) Have you ever hit anyone at school?	20.20	5.20	15.0	25.24	<0.0001	15.75	0.97	14.78	6.42	<0.02	24.64	5.80	18.84	13.00	<.0004
5) Have you ever hit anyone at home?	45.45	12.24	33.21	9.57	<0.05	44.76	13.86	30.90	15.19	<0.0001	30.30	8.06	22.24	6.31	<.02
6) Has anyone ever hit you at school?	38.54	16.32	22.22	10.00	<0.002	46.23	22.33	23.90	17.25	<0.0001	39.71	20.00	19.71	16.79	<.0001
7) Do you ever feel kids at school bully you?	27.84	16.16	11.68	5.43	<0.02	28.97	15.84	13.13	16.84	<0.0001	30.43	16.92	13.51	4.10	<.05
8) Do you ever bully others?	6.40	2.46	3.96	1.83	.18	5.10	2.04	3.06	1.36	.24	7.46	3.08	4.83	30.47	<.02

Qualitative Reports

Each time the session ended the teachers were asked to observe the children for the remainder of the day and report if the class dynamics changed after the yoga class.

Comments from the teachers were,

“The children are so much calmer after the yoga classes.”

“The atmosphere in the room after yoga is more peaceful.”

“The students seem to be less fidgety and more focused on the daily work even on non yoga days.”

“My students sit still and listen to me after yoga days.”

“Fewer negative interactions”

“They seem to be working out some of their differences more effectively!”

“I have personally benefited from the six sessions of yoga and so have my students.

Their focus is so much better and I really think they are kinder and more patient with each other.”

“I’ve noticed my students can calm themselves a lot more which makes learning better.

It’s given me great ideas on how to help them not only to work out their problems with the breathing and the quietness, but also, how to help them focus and learn better and to listen to the person they really are, instead of trying to keep up with the fast paced world.”²²

The best report came from the principal:

“I feel that it has made a difference in our school community and climate with our 4th and 5th graders. In the fact that there have been less incidences of behavior (problems) outside at recess. It’s brought a different type of atmosphere to our school. CALMING KIDS is teaching some wonderful skills: problem solving and bully proofing, talking about self esteem and how students feel and feel about themselves and how they can continue to be proactive and be successful both academically and socially in our school. Hopefully, we can continue with the yoga program here.”²³

The most endearing words came directly from the students in their comments written to me:

“This really helps my breathing and now I am a lot calmer.”

“That yoga class was super fun! My favorite part was the Salutation to the Sun. I also liked the funny skits we did. My favorite one was when the bully, bullied the littler kid on the bus. Hope you come again.”

“Thank you for teaching me yoga. It was really fun. My favorite exercise was the breathing practice 1,2,3--1,2,3 and the cobra. I hope you will come again to our school.”²⁴

Discussion

The CALMING KIDS anti-bullying program addresses all of the various learning styles children possess: some children absorb subject matter audibly, others visually, and others interactively. It is deemed that the positive effects of CALMING KIDS: Creating a Non-Violent World are due to the variety of methods in which the information is conveyed to the students.

There were several factors that went into designing the CALMING KIDS curriculum. The first being the eight limbs of classical Ashtanga yoga as described under the Introduction section of this paper. The second consideration was the incorporation of educational components that are part of other bully proofing programs. The combination of both of these elements created the CK success.

There has been a continual increase on the amount of analysis and study regarding bullying in schools over the past 10-20 years. The most successful research had been done by Owleus of Norway **in 1991**. Owleus intervention decreased bullying by 50%.²⁵ The program consisted of:

1. A parental awareness campaign through newsletters and meetings.
2. Intervening individually when crisis emerged.
3. Increasing school staff supervision during recess and lunch times.
4. Role playing exercises.

Although the outcomes of this study were successful, the same positive results and statistics have not been able to be replicated outside of Norway.²⁶

In trying to replicate Owleus's results, there have been 13 evaluative studies that are relevant to reducing bullying among young children. Studies were done in a wide range of countries, Australia, Belgium, Canada, England, Finland, Norway, Spain, and the U.S. The results were obtained by the students' perceptions of bullying before and after intervention. On average the reduction of bullying was only 15%.²⁷

There are various after school yoga programs available for children of all ages. One long term program in Los Angeles, California entitled "Y.O.G.A. for Youth" teaches yoga and meditation to preschool through high school age children. After 9 years of follow up, this group declared that every year 85% of their 125 participants report that yoga helps them, "relax, sleep better, control their tempers more easily, concentrate for longer periods of time on their school work, and feel better about themselves as individuals."²⁸

There is a yoga program, entitled YogaEd located in southern California which is currently part of a 36 week Gym curriculum at elementary and middle schools. The classes focus on a wide variety of yoga postures, team building games and centering exercises. There has been no research to date on the effects of this work and the primary purpose is not for anti-violence and bullying. Yet, the program has been well received in this area within the schools and families.

Therefore, the fundamental pieces which compose the CALMING KIDS curriculum were designed as follows:

1. In depth discussions of the yogic philosophy regarding *ahimsa*, non-violence to one-self and others.

2. Instruction about the physiology of breathing, exploring how the quality of our breathing can affect our mental clarity and our actions. Then practicing yogic breathing techniques.
3. Role playing scenarios for explaining conflict resolution strategies and skills.
4. Increase strength for a comfortable and controlled body using body awareness methods, yoga postures, movements and balancing exercises.
5. Relaxation practices assisting the discovery of the body and its ability to armor itself or yield under confrontation.
6. Concentration methods and creative visualizations for calming and focusing the active mind.
7. School support: principal, teachers and staff committed to changing school climate.
8. Teacher participation in the yoga classes with the children.
9. Increased supervision and immediate intervention during high risk period, i.e., recess and lunch.
10. Parental awareness through hand outs, homework, newsletters, and the yoga booklet that went home in the students' backpacks.

The results obtained in this study confirm that classical yoga which addresses the body and mind and how they influence our actions is an effective tool for implementing behavioral changes when presented to upper elementary age children. Unexpected benefits that the students reported were fewer headaches, less fidgeting, and an overall improved ability to sleep. Although we were not studying these symptoms, this could suggest a relationship between physically comfortable children and less bullying. The CK program presented along with the yoga booklet, *YOGA KEEPS ME CALM, FIT & FOCUSED*, gave them insight about coping with stress. This booklet helped reinforce the yoga they learned in class and allowed them a reference at home. Each year the students reported the same results: a decrease in aggressive behavior and an increase in the ability to control anger which supports the original hypothesis. This study demonstrates that when upper elementary students are exposed to yoga for only 4½ hours over two weeks, a consistent decrease in bullying behavior occurs by 60% and greater.

Fekkes et al, have shown that their anti-bullying program which was applied for two successive years was effective, but without continuous implementation it lost its effectiveness.²⁹ A longer commitment to yoga training within a school curriculum with a focus on non-violence, can positively affect, the consistent problem of aggression in school age children, and thus decrease the amount of daily bullying.

Future plans are to introduce this program into other elementary and middle schools each year during national nonviolence time, i.e., SAVE week. CALMING KIDS is now offering a training program for yoga teachers, school teachers, counselors, health care providers and all those working with children, to allow this information to be implemented into the school systems nationally. If you are interested in supporting this project, becoming involved or learning more please call **303-530-3860**, email info@calmingkidsyoga.org or visit the website www.calmingkidsyoga.org.

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