

Freelance Articles
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OM IN THE HOME

by Kristen Fewel

Imagine your entire day was rushed from the start and the family is barely hanging onto their sanity. In close quarters, cabin fever sets off anxiety with rampant frenetic energy, and arguments can erupt like spurts from a rice cooker letting off steam. For damage control everyone scatters to their rooms for self-imposed solitary confinement. When everyone emerges for the long evening hours into the family room, a new possibility presents itself: connecting with your family through yoga.

Imagine that all electronic devices are silenced and put away. Sitting in a circle, you take turns leading the family in some breathing connected with simple movements and gentle stretches. A satisfied calm descends upon the family and even a few giggles when arms and legs reach out across the rug and lay upon another. Afterward, you place your hands at your heart in gratitude for everyone who participated, and invite them to sing an “OM” with you—taking a deep inhale, then sounding a prolonged “o” with an “mmmm” at the end. Chanting the om several times in a long and slow manner will lengthen exhales while creating beneficial vibrations and a little incidental smile that lifts the spirit.

Yoga is good for everyone regardless of age when adapted to the needs and capabilities of the individual. Even teenagers say they enjoy yoga (although you will not believe it by the expression on their face!). Younger children enjoy yoga, too, although we may need to adjust expectations of how they participate and the duration to meet their attention span.

Although the practice of yoga is a personal thing, sharing it with the family should not be complicated or strenuous. Keep it simple so everyone can participate. If you need guidance, there is no shortage of resources that will keep everyone engaged in the process. Before the internet many people learned yoga and meditation from richly illustrated books and video tutorials which are still available through libraries and bookstores today. Another option is having weekly or biweekly direct virtual instruction from an experienced yoga and meditation teacher who can customize a class for you and your family from anywhere in the world!

Yoga is a path to a healthy body, an open mind, and a compassionate heart among many other benefits. It is generally a safe activity that can be practiced indoors, or out in the yard under a shady tree. An experienced certified teacher can help you develop your own practice as well as guide the family through safe practice, especially if anyone in your family has special needs. So, while we all are figuring out what it means to live together-- and apart-- make yoga, mindfulness, and conscious breathing a part of your daily or weekly reconnection with yourself and your family.

CONTINUE THE STORY: READING ALOUD TO OLDER CHILDREN

by Kristen Fewel

Reading stories aloud are a treasured tradition in the bedtime routine, while some parents read aloud in fervent hopes of genius-level literacy. Shared reading comes along when a child needs help decoding unfamiliar words, and still enjoys the closeness of being read to. But it is the middle school child in the 8-14 age group that gets left behind as we raise our expectations of independent academic reading for school.

In the early 1980's, millions of teachers embraced and modeled the read-aloud in schools when educator Jim Trelease authored a book, *The Read Aloud Handbook* which emphasized "broadening the menu," by encouraging parents and teachers to read aloud the rich world of literature that a child cannot yet read or enjoy by themselves. A 1984 study by Dr. Thomas G. Sticht supported Trelease's book with the finding that most children's listening comprehension, especially those of auditory learners, exceeds their reading level until about the 8th grade at approximately age 13.

Although many parents know the value of reading aloud to their children, the rigor of academics has slowed its occurrence at home, especially for students between the ages of 8-14 when school demands increase. Both authors reported that children would greatly benefit from hearing stories that they are unable to decode themselves. According to Dr. Sticht, "You have to hear it before you can speak it, and you have to speak it before you can read it. Reading at this level happens through the ear."

For children who have processing delays or learning disabilities, the greater the need for audio books, reading aloud, and shared reading to broaden their menu of reading. According to Dr. Jessica Voigts, a homeschooling parent and founder of Wandering Educators, a website and world travel blog, shared reading makes reading more pleasurable for she and her daughter who has dyslexia. "Reading together – with her watching the words as I read, and then her reading to me – is a way to be together, to experience the world, to enjoy a common pleasure. I read to her about two-thirds of the time, and then she takes over for one-third of the time. We pass the book back and forth, although we're usually right next to each other,"

A more recent nationwide study in 2014 by Scholastic Inc.'s Kids and Family Reading Report revealed 59% of parents read aloud to their babies and toddlers, 38% read aloud to their grade-school children, but only 17% of parents read aloud to their middle grade children. The main reason parents cited for not reading to their older children was their increased expectation of reading autonomy by age 8, an educational standard echoed by public schools nationwide. Unfortunately, when scholastic demands increase and autonomous academic reading becomes paramount is just about the time family members go their separate ways to find peace and solitude at home in the evenings. The evening hours are a golden opportunity for a read aloud!

Reading the likes of Dickens or Kipling aloud make even challenging prose accessible to an elementary school aged child, which can help them academically in the long run. Introducing elevated vocabulary to a preteen through a read-aloud of classic literature or poetry can make learning those words even easier for them to learn and use correctly once they get into high school and college. Reading a story or text aloud models good reading to teens, and has powerful emotional and academic benefits to improve vocabulary and literacy, and to foster family bonding.

Parents can help bridge the gap between competent reading into enjoyment of the drama and characterization by reading a text aloud. Trelease says, "A nine-year-old who's just finished two solid years of drill and skill testing, and a lot of work, they're thinking in terms of reading as a sweat experience. When a teacher reads a good book above student reading level, he shows students that the good stuff — the really great books — are coming down the road, if they stick with it."

Older children also enjoy being read to -- 83% report loving or liking it a lot! --and benefit a great deal from it. In addition to academic improvement, here is why you should invite your older child to sit down for a read-aloud:

- Opportunity to discuss life lessons that emerge from a story
- Improved communication through teachable moments
- Emotional connection

Here are some suggested books that have been winners for my family and educator friends and their grade-school children. Characters, like people, have personalities, dilemmas, and unique perspectives. Happy reading, parents, and don't forget to use the voices!

- Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, especially "The Cat Who Walked By Himself." (*I was captivated by read-alouds at nine years old when my father read this during a camping trip.*)
- *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling
- *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *A Christmas Story*, by Charles Dickens
- *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis
- *The Cay*, by Theodore Taylor
- *Holes*, by Louis Sachar