



BY TERRI FINCH HAMILTON
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNY QUIRIN

This yoga class is child's play

Music, movement and merriment aid child brain development and ease the stress of school studies and tests.



Deb Weiss-Gelmi leads her young students in her Yoga class specifically created for children.

Ahh, yoga — a peaceful, quiet pursuit. Until somebody suddenly hisses like a snake while in cobra pose or hollers “ribbit!” in frog pose.

It happens, when you’re 5.

This is Sing Song Yoga, a kids yoga program that uses songs to teach the poses. And the occasional ribbit.

Its creator, Deb Weiss-Gelmi, 38, is a Zeeland yoga instructor, early education teacher and mom.

Yoga offers all kinds of benefits to

kids, she says.

It strengthens, stretches and tones the body. It helps children gain self-confidence while building coordination. It increases blood flow to the brain, boosting brain power.

Yoga also helps alleviate stress, which kids need just as much as adults, Weiss-Gelmi notes.

It all started when her now 8-year-old daughter, Lia, was 3, and she wanted to enroll her in a yoga class for kids. But she couldn’t find one.

One night, lying in bed in the dark, inspiration struck. She routinely used songs to teach reading to her students at Zeeland’s Innocademy. Why couldn’t songs also teach yoga poses?

“It came to me at midnight,” she says with a laugh. “I turned on the light and wrote words for the first song. Then I just kept writing. I stayed up all night.”

She has no music background, she says, but she didn’t need it. She used existing tunes — “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” for instance — and substi-

tuted yoga instructions for the lyrics.

Weiss-Gelmi knows the benefits of yoga. She got hooked at her first class in 2001. "At the end of every class, I was in such a state of calm, but at the same time energized," she says.

The last 20 years of brain research has shown children aren't getting the kind of physical movement optimal for brain development, Weiss-Gelmi says.

For instance, cross lateral movement — moving a limb across the torso to the other side of the body — works the brain in different ways.

"When kids are playing outside, swinging from tree branches, they get that kind of movement, but kids now are often sitting in front of screens."

The mix of yoga positions and music "seemed a perfect fit for brain development," she says.

"Life can be so stimulating, kids have a hard time finding a place and time to just sit and relax. This lets a child focus, allows them to let go of the baggage and garbage all of us have going on in our brains."

What does she see happening on the mats?

"Self-confidence," she says. "Kids will come for the first class nervous, not sure if they can do it. But soon, they let go of their fear."

"They also become more aware of their bodies," she says. "At first, they don't seem to know where their body begins and ends. Soon, they learn how to direct it."

Parents tell her the yoga classes help their kids to focus.

"After a class," she says, "they're feeling calm."

She's not the only one who likes the idea. Weiss-Gelmi won \$5,000 in startup money from Start Garden, the venture capital team led by Rick DeVos, then won an additional \$20,000 in the second

round to continue her business.

Weiss-Gelmi's original plan was just to teach a yoga class in the community that her daughter could attend. But things started to snowball. A friend knew someone in video production, which led to a DVD. The teacher in her started thinking about yoga as a teaching tool, to calm kids and get their brains ready for a test. Now she offers a school curriculum.

Educational researchers are finding a link between music and movement and success in school. Weiss-Gelmi talks about researcher Shirley Handy, who discusses the 3 M's: music, movement and merriment.

Used together, they naturally increase the positive neurotransmitters and peptides in the brain, she says, which are associated with memory, new learning and the ability to pay attention.

Next up: a Sing Song Yoga iPad app. Weiss-Gelmi envisions teachers calling up a "three-minute brain break" — maybe four yoga poses — to engage kids before a test or between activities.

How did the mother of three young children manage all this?

She laughs.

"I have a very supportive husband who takes over as parent of the hour," she says. "I'll sneak away to a coffee shop and get a lot done."

She and husband Michael Gelmi have daughter Lia, 8, and twin sons Everett and Emerson, 15 months.

Weiss-Gelmi is currently on maternity leave, but teaches her program at The Yoga Studio in Grand Rapids and through Zeeland Recreation.

For more information, including a class schedule, visit singsongyoga.com.

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Terri Finch Hamilton is a freelance writer living in Grand Rapids, and a former Grand Rapids Press reporter.



Weiss-Gelmi helps children with basic Yoga stretches and poses.

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