

# The Power of Yoga

Innovative After School 4-H Fitness and Nutrition Programming  
By: [Alexander Diaz, 4-H Extension Agent, Miami-Dade County](#)

Your body tingles with energy like a radiant beacon guiding a ship to safety, while your arms and shoulders reach deeper into your stretch, and your mind slowly detaches. The enigma of one's own destiny becomes but a mere drop of water in a vast sea of tranquility as one's own inner worries and fears wash away like the receding wave that exposes an unlikely beautiful seashell on a summer sunset stroll. Your thoughts slowly dissolve into the sound of your rhythmic breathing; the warmth of your heart flows through your veins while your awareness becomes infinitely present.

It is impossible to describe a color, and I believe that it is equally impossible to fully describe yoga in its total form. One could never truly appreciate a Van Gogh if you could not see color nor if the only way to grasp the essence of his paintings was through written description.



Most of us hear the word yoga and visions of people sitting in the lotus position, in silent meditation, or repeatedly chanting “uuuumm” come to mind. We may have preconceived ideas of yoga practitioners as physically fit people who wear tie-dye T-shirts, and in their spare time braid friendship bracelets and grow their own organic vegetables. However, that is not the case. In fact, yoga is a form of exercise and meditation that can be practiced by people of all ages, body types, and walks of life. There are various forms of yoga; some are purely meditational while others are more physical.

Ashtanga Yoga, also known as “Power Yoga,” is one of the most popular forms of yoga in the U.S. This form of yoga involves synchronizing one’s breathing with a series of postures; this process produces intense internal heat and a profuse, purifying sweat that detoxifies muscles and organs. The results are improved circulation, a lighter and stronger body, and a calm mind. The most important benefit of Ashtanga Yoga is that it requires one to exercise not only physically, but also mentally through concentration. Some of the major physical benefits of Ashtanga Yoga are:

**Flexibility:** The stretching movements help lengthen and strengthen muscles.

**Improved Balance:** The balancing poses and postures help improve balance.

**Tones Muscles:** Ashtanga Yoga works more muscles than any another form of workout; as a result, you strengthen and tone muscles while building endurance and stamina.

**Relaxation:** You learn how to relax your body through breathing and muscle relaxation, which spills over to your day-to-day life.

**Improves Muscle-to-Fat Ratios:** The intensity of Ashtanga Yoga practice is self-regulated by the practitioner, however no matter what shape you are in, your body will definitely see improved muscle-to-fat ratios due to the intense workout required by Ashtanga Yoga.

**Reduced Stress:** Through Ashtanga Yoga you learn how to use breathing techniques which help reduce stress.

**Eliminate Self-Imposed Limitations:** Ashtanga Yoga participants take their bodies past the limits of prior abilities, which gives you a feeling that you can move past other limitations in life.

**Gain Tranquility:** At the end of each practice Ashtanga Yoga practitioners have 15 or so minutes to lay still in complete non-judgmental meditation, which provides a sense of tranquility. The end of each practice may be the most rewarding part, because we live our hectic lives giving others our precious time, and for a few minutes you actually give yourself time to be alone with yourself.

Yoga exists in a variety of forms. In addition to Ashtanga Yoga, there is Vinyasa (or “flow” yoga making use of “sun salutations”), Hatha (“basic” or occurs in a more slow-paced, relaxing style), Bikram (uses intense heat) and Kundalini (designed to explore the effects of breathing on postures) as well as numerous other more eclectic types (developed by specific institutes and individuals, such as Kripalu). Knowing about the different types of yoga enables a person to select the one that best fits your lifestyle and preference.

Yoga is a great form of physical and mental exercise for anyone, especially stressed out 4-H agents! However, children can also greatly benefit from youth yoga programs. Not only can yoga help increase strength, flexibility, coordination, self-esteem, stamina, and confidence among children, but it has also been proven an effective alternative to treating attention deficit disorders, and behavioral problems among children. Yoga is also an alternative that allows children to participate in a non-competitive, carefree physical fitness program.

Yoga as a sports program is highly effective and once a student learns yoga he or she can continue to practice yoga throughout his or her life with minimal effort; it's not like one has to buy a home gym or have a large backyard to practice yoga. Plus, yoga requires very little equipment investment compared to other sports such as: soccer, football, baseball, and basketball to name a few. However, yoga is not implemented in the public schools due to the lack of awareness of its benefits among school administrators and the general public.

4-H Extension agents can play a pivotal role in introducing yoga programming to youth through a variety of delivery systems in their counties. Most public school boards are not quick adapters to innovative programmatic shifts. On the other hand, local after school programs are normally run by grassroots not-for-profits that are providing extended educational and physical fitness education to children; and are highly adaptive to novel approaches to youth programming. After school institutions are more likely to embrace 4-H programming because they are more likely to be asked by their funders to provide enrichment activities in addition to simply providing a safe place for children to hang out during the after school hours. Thus, after schools are a great fertile ground to grow such programs as 4-H Yoga health and nutrition programming.

Miami-Dade 4-H, in cooperation with Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR), has been developing a 12-week yoga for kids pilot program in Miami-Dade County with South Florida Urban Ministries (<http://www.sflum.org>). South Florida Urban Ministries is a dynamic non-profit organization that empowers people to move from poverty to prosperity through holistic youth development, small business development and hunger relief programs in South Florida. We will evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot program for youth participants by administering pre- and post- exams on: body mass ratio, breathing capacity, resting heart rate, flexibility and knowledge and practices gained on healthy nutrition.

The 12-week program will encompass health and nutrition classes administered by Ivette Valentin and Alex Diaz on portion control, label reading, snack preparation and the new food pyramid. The new food pyramid educational component will utilize an educational tool developed by Ivette and Alex: a large 5 foot tall food pyramid in which children can learn about the food groups and food density through interactive Velcro pieces.

More and more, 4-H is playing a vital role in our local educational community by providing institutional after schools with innovative programming to better help diverse young people discover and develop their potential and grow into competent, contributing, and caring citizens.



The Interactive Velcro Food

Pyramid is used by Miami-Dade 4-H children to teach other children at an health and nutrition outreach program that is organized by Sandra Canales, Miami-Dade EFNEP Agent.

For more information on how Miami-Dade 4-H can help you develop fun hands on educational programming for your after school, summer camp, or class room, please contact: 305-592-8044 or <http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/4h>.

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4H is a volunteer lead youth development program managed by The University of Florida & The Miami-Dade County Cooperative Extension Service. Our organization is open to all youth, ages 5 to 18, without regard to gender, race, religion, national origin, or physical disability.

Vision: Florida 4-H aspires to be the leading youth development program that creates positive change in youth, families, and communities.

Motto: "To make the best better."

Pledge: "I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living. For my club, my community, my country and my world."