



The Family AcroYoga Teacher Training Manual - part 1

Online module

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31. HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY

1.1 FAMILY ACROYOGA

WHAT IS FAMILY ACROYOGA

Family AcroYoga is the practice of AcroYoga with children and their parents (or an adult friend/family member). Yoga, acrobatics and thai massage come together to offer a world of possibilities for families to play, bond, connect with their bodies and take care of each other. Family AcroYoga creates bonding through movement, playfulness and joy. With the practice of these disciplines we aim to help develop confidence, trust in each other, and to teach communication skills that everyone can apply within their own family inside and outside of class.

We believe everyone can fly! As AcroYoga Teachers we developed Family AcroYoga to stimulate playfulness and bonding and clear communication with the joy of physical movement for small families or large mixed age group settings.

1.2. ACROYOGA HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY

Acrobatics. Acrobatics can be traced back more than 7000 years to the Neolithic period. Images of acrobatics were found in stone cuttings and statues from ancient Egypt, Greece and China. From then on in every period acrobatics existed in many forms; from the formal sports during the Roman empire, to the medieval gypsies' performances and the first official circus in the eighteenth century in the USA. In the first olympics in 1896 in Greece gymnastics was one of the seven official sports. Modern competitive acrobatics began in the 1930ies in Russia and spread widely and internationally in the 1970's. Dutch acrobatics was developed and taught by the legendary Como brothers and the Osmani sisters in 1970. It was taught on a professional level but also as a hobby for the broader public.



Nowadays gymnastics and acrobatics are popular sports and acrobatics festivals are organized worldwide. Circus schools are popping up in many places as well as acrobatics teacher trainings.

AcroYoga. There are now many schools of AcroYoga. The original two schools were AcroYoga Montreal and AcroYoga Inc. AcroYoga Montreal was founded by Jessie Goldberg and Eugene Poku in 1999 combining acrobatics, yoga and dance and is more focussed on performance. AcroYoga Inc. was founded by Jason Nemer and Jenny Sauer-Klein in 2003 in California USA. This practice blends acrobatics, yoga and healing arts, with the focus initially mainly on therapeutic flying and yoga. Jason and Jenny were the first to codify the AcroYoga practice in 2006. They trained and made practice manuals for the public, trained teachers and still travel the world sharing the practice. By literally writing the book of AcroYoga, they unified the language between acrobats and yogis in different communities around the world. AcroYoga Inc. certified around a thousand AcroYoga teachers worldwide. The focus of the practice has shifted more to the Solar - acrobatic - part of AcroYoga¹.

1.3. YOGA HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY

HISTORY

Yoga is believed to have been born over 5,000 years ago. The actual word "yoga" was first mentioned in the "Vedas", a sacred book from approximately 1,500 BCE. This collection of hymns or mantras defined yoga as a "discipline". From approximately 500 BCE to 800 BCE, yoga played an important role in the Upanishads, the sacred scriptures of ancient Hinduism. The Upanishads are a collection of ancient Sanskrit texts that contain some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism and more than 200 Upanishads are known. The text teaches to sacrifice the ego through self-knowledge, action (karma yoga) and wisdom (jnana yoga). In the Upanishads knowledge is a means to freedom, and the philosophy is to pursuit the wisdom by a way of life. There was little that we would call yoga

¹ Source: Jenny Sauer-Klein & Jason Nemer 2008, Acroyoga Flight manual



asana practice in the Upanishads. In fact, yoga can be more accurately described as a form of discipline and philosophy.

THE 4 TYPES OF YOGA

Swami Sivananda taught that according to our own individual nature/personality, we may be drawn to going deeper into one or another path of yoga. All paths can bring us to enlightenment if we commit to them. Here are four of the paths of Yoga:

Jnana Yoga: Jnana Yoga is the path of knowledge, wisdom, introspection and contemplation. It involves deep exploration of the nature our being by systematically exploring and setting aside false identities.

Bhakti Yoga: Bhakti Yoga is the path of devotion, emotion, love, compassion, and service to God and others. All actions are done in the context of remembering the Divine.

Karma Yoga: Karma Yoga is the path of action, service to others, mindfulness, and remembering the levels of our being while fulfilling our actions or karma in the world.

Raja Yoga: Raja Yoga is a comprehensive method that emphasizes meditation, while encompassing the whole of Yoga. Often called the "royal road" it offers a comprehensive method for controlling the waves of thought by turning our mental and physical energy into spiritual energy. Raja Yoga is also called Ashtanga Yoga referring to the eight limbs leading to absolute mental control. The chief practice of Raja Yoga is meditation. It also includes all other methods, which helps one to control body, energy, senses and mind.

8 STEPS OF YOGA

Between 500 BC and 200 BC Patanjali wrote the Yoga Sûtras. His parents were also yogis and it is said that his grandfather Hiranyagarbha was a disciple of the philosopher Kapilá, founder of the Sankhya philosophy. Patanjali wanted to bring to this philosophy a practical chapter which will serve as the base in the path of self-realisation. Ashtanga means eight branches or eight steps that will lead to Samadhi (a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation)

1. YAMA | Attitudes to the world

- Ahimsa: compassion with all living things
- Satya: commitment to truthfulness
- Asteya: non stealing
- Brahmacharya: control of the senses
- Aparigraha: take only what is necessary

2. NIYAMA | Attitudes to oneself

- Saucha: purity, inner and outer cleanliness
- Santosa: contentment, being in peace with what we have and who we are
- Tapas: disciplined use of our energy
- Svadhyaya: self study
- Isvarapranidhana: celebration of the spirit

3. ASANA | Body in harmony

4. PRANAYAMA | Control of the breath

5. PRATYAHARA | Absorption of the senses, internal attention

6. DHARANA | Concentration, attention of the senses and thoughts on one object

7. DHYANA | Meditation, no concentration, no thoughts, direct understanding

8. SAMADHI | Union, enlightenment, fusion of the observer and the observed object

There are several ways to understand the yoga Philosophy. Two of the main schools and texts are listed here:

Name	Patanjali	Sivananda
Year	Between 500 and 200 BC	
Texts	The Yoga Sûtras.	Yoga of Synthesis
Principles	Ashtanga Yoga, 8 limbs of yoga: 1. YAMA 2. NIYAMA 3. ASANA 4. PRANAYAMA 5. PRATYAHARA 6. DHARANA 7. DHYANA 8. SAMADHI	4 TYPES OF YOGA Jnana Yoga Bhakti Yoga Karma Yoga Raja Yoga

The aim of the Yoga is to find our own inner self. There is only one truth, the one that beats in our heart. Inside we know everything that we need, where we come from, where we go and what we need to do. Yoga is a state in which we can remember our truth.

1.4 THAI MASSAGE

Traditionally practiced in Buddhist monasteries, Thai massage is regarded above all as a spiritual practice, a meditation in movement, closely connected with the teachings of the Buddha. The massage is practiced in a meditative state, with sensitivity and compassion, tuning into the receivers needs, and supporting them on their own healing journey.

The roots of what is known as “Traditional Thai massage” date back to some 2500 years ago in India, in times of Ayurvedic and Yogic healing. It was brought over to Thailand, with the migration of Buddhism, as a medical practice by a famous Indian doctor “Jivaka Kumar



Baccha”, the Buddha’s personal physician and doctor of the monks in the monasteries of that time. The teaching and sharing from generation to generation and from master to student has made this massage the intuitive hands-on healing art that it is.

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

When giving a Thai Massage there are some principles that will improve our skills and our technique. Understanding these principles is the key to offering the best massage you can possibly give:

Comfortable position. Where am I? How do I feel? The best way to give comfort to your receiver is if you feel comfortable yourself too. Being open and facing from our centre to where we need to go, paying special attention to our lower back, observe the distance to the body and use straight, locked elbows, no tension in shoulders and no muscle power.

Full participation. Fully engaged in what we are doing, mind and hands are one, heart and hands are one. Listening, waiting for the opening and sinking, aware all the time of their reactions and needs and of our wandering minds and the gift of the present moment, coming back to it again and again.

Moving from the Hara. Every move is initiated from the center or Hara. Connected to the earth, grounded and understanding that all movement and stillness comes from this one place.

Using Gravity. Using body weight, not muscular power, to go deeper and sink into the body. When we use force we create resistance, when we pour the weight and lean and lean some more and sink and sink some more we can go deep with grace.



Dance. The transitions between moves are part of the dance. It all becomes a continuous slow motion flow. Finding smooth ways to move their body and ours with grace and care.

Fullness of touch. Using the whole hand to touch fully. Precision, care, love, sensitivity and security to make the person feel safe. Firm and gentle touch, palms fully engaged, fingers relaxed and present.

Perfect fit with our hand, foot, elbow, knee. Wherever we touch and sink into we are moulding ourselves together as one. Not hitting on bones, flicking nerves, sliding on muscles. Assessing the gap and filling it accordingly with the most perfect fit.

Prayer in motion. Asking for guidance. Leaving your own story at the door, holding space and remaining detached and compassionate, not jumping into the emotional soup, but being involved in the process of release.

Less is more. Understanding that we don't need to rush through sequences, we simply need to respond to the needs of the moment, no agenda, no boxes to tick off. The sequence is a guideline, the rest is your own poetry and often less is more.

THE 4 ASPECTS OF LOVE IN THAI MASSAGE ²

Thai Massage is based on Buddhist philosophy and there are aspects of this philosophy that we can take in classes and develop with the massage, with storytelling or simply by talking about it with the families. According to Buddhism there are four aspects of true Love. These four aspects can give us a lot of inspiration to take as focus points for our workshops. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh explains them as following:

Metta or Maitri. It can be translated as loving-kindness or benevolence. Loving-kindness is not only the desire to make someone happy, to bring joy to a beloved person; it is the ability to bring joy and happiness to the person we love, because even if our intention is to love this person, our love might make him or her suffer.

² Thich Nhat Hanh



Training is needed in order to love properly. To be able to give happiness and joy, we can practice deep looking directed toward the person we love. Because if we do not understand this person, we cannot love properly. Understanding is the essence of love. If we cannot understand, we cannot love. This is the message of the Buddha.

What can we do in order to understand a person? We must have time; we can practice looking deeply into this person, without judging, without labeling, just objectively observing. We can be there, attentive; we can observe. And the fruits of this attention is called understanding. Love is a true thing if it is made up of a substance called understanding.

Karuna. This is the desire to ease the pain of another person and, most importantly, the ability to do so. We must practice deep looking in order to gain a good understanding of the nature of the suffering of this person, in order to be able to help him or her to change. Knowledge and understanding are always at the root of the practice. This practice of understanding is the practice of meditation. To meditate is to look deeply into the heart of things.

One compassionate word, action, or thought can reduce another person's suffering and bring him joy. One word can give comfort and confidence, destroy doubt, help someone avoid a mistake, reconcile a conflict, or open the door to liberation. One action can save a person's life or help him take advantage of a rare opportunity. One thought can do the same, because thoughts always lead to words and actions. With compassion in our heart, every thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle.

Mudita. If there is no joy in love, it is not true love. If we are suffering all the time, if we cry all the time, and if we make the person we love cry, this is not really love - it is even the opposite. If there is no joy in our love, we can be sure that it is not true love.

Upeksha. Equanimity or freedom. In true love, we attain freedom. When we are able to stay equanimous through pain or sadness we achieve a sense of love for life and for ourselves even in the darkest times. Equanimity gives us freedom, we are not a slave of our emotions anymore, we can have pain, but not suffer; we can feel enthusiastic, but not



lose our focus. We can practice the same with others. When we love, we bring freedom to the person we love. If the opposite is true, it is not true love. We must love in such a way that the person we love feels free, not only outside but also inside. "Dear one, do you have enough space in your heart and all around you?" This is an intelligent question for testing out whether our love is something real.

2. PEDAGOGY

As teachers it is always good to reflect on what our students are like, what they need and what is their potential in order to offer them the content within a language they will understand. Studying the physical and spiritual development of children can help us understand who they are and what is their starting point. From there we can build a common ground and help them reach their potential. If we don't understand them, we can not love them. And all uplifting education starts with love.

2.1 STAGES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Yoga tradition is based on the premise that we are not only flesh and bones. We have a spiritual body, an immortal energy that can not be destroyed, that keeps evolving from lifetime to lifetime, growing in consciousness.

Anthroposophy is a philosophy founded by Rudolf Steiner that postulates the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world that is accessible by direct experience through inner development. Both the yogic philosophy and the anthroposophy are distinguishing the evolutive stages of beings in septennials, stages of 7 years. In each septennial a specific part of the evolving being is dominant and wants to fully develop in order to move to the next stage. This evolutionary process can be described as stages in an ascending spiral that will gradually fulfil the physical, psychic and etheric aspects of the being. Every seven years, a "crisis" happens that



generates important awareness. The experiences that we as human beings go through during the first stages of our lives will have an effect on us for the rest of our lives.

Steiner's method is based on providing each child with what they need for their own and unique evolution, taking into account the different forces working in each septennial and creating an environment that would help develop their full potential, at their own pace. It is about an integral education in which the intellectual, artistic and physical activities are combined harmoniously.

"Childhood equals a period of playing...while playing children are developing their ability to relate to the world, to act, feel and think. Children should be entitled to a number of rights in the different phases of the game, and only then can they develop the capacity for personal action, an abundant emotional life and a strong mind. Only this way can their individuality unfold." Rudolf Steiner

These pedagogical theories and educational experiences can help us as a framework. But the true pedagogy is the one that arises from within when confronting external ideas with our own personal experience and with the way we feel.

0-7 Physical Body

The embryo and the newly born child do not have consciousness, they do not know who they are. From the moment of birth until the appearance of the "I". Children, until the age of three, remain closely attached to their mothers and do not yet think of themselves as separate individuals. In this primary phase, children require all their energy to develop their organs and physical bodies. At the same time, they will develop their own energetic body, it is the beginning of the process of individuation. This individuation and transformation lasts until 7 years old. Until then a great deal of the developmental forces are focusing on shaping the physical body of the child. At 7, the energetic body is formed. From then on, the forces that were dedicated to the physical growth are set free, transforming into thinking forces; this means that the vital forces which were helping the growth will transform into the child's consciousness and from that moment on these vital forces are directed to the intellectual development. For this reason it is very important not to accelerate the intellectual energy as we would interrupt the physical growth. By bringing these forces to the intellectual field prematurely, we would be undermining the development of the child's motor skills, individuation and will.



To make this happen, the child needs free time in order to play, explore and move, and the presence and warmth of adults who allow them to be the children they are.

Children learn through non-self-conscious imitation in a nurturing environment. Rather than being directly 'taught', the imagination and thought processes are allowed to develop through singing, playing, stories and puppet shows at their own accord and pace.

Deciding when the time is right to bring a child into slightly more formal classroom settings where they can begin to learn the alphabet and numbers depends on how formed their character is. In the Rudolf Steiner tradition they say that when children are losing their milk teeth, it is the body's indication they are ready for the next stage of development.

7 to 14 Etheric body

The teeth growth process is completed and the nervous system is formed. The child is awake to the world, and predisposed to learn. This is possible because the forces that were at play when developing organs and systems can now transform into thinking forces.

During the course of this seven-year period children acquire habits, not just eating and sleeping habits, but habits of self-inquiry and conduct (such as the Yamas and Niyamas). Therefore, the behavior of the adults around them becomes critical.

Age seven to fourteen represents the coming of age and reason. The pituitary gland becomes dominant, correlating with the appearance of the permanent teeth. The action of the pituitary is in the realms of education, socialization, individualization, and choice. The action, or analytical brain, develops with thinking, reading skills, mathematics, communication. Children discover the self or "I" through peer interaction and begin to integrate into the world.

14 to 21 Astral body

During this period a 'soul body' develops. The child gradually becomes independent.

Gender differences become more marked. The Being begins to have new feelings and sensations, beginning to learn to love oneself. The youth lives the desire, is immersed in a sea of sensations.

In the adolescent stage the child has a lot of energy and desire to discover the world and oneself.

Overview of the different seven year stages of child development

0-7 YEARS	7-14 YEARS	14-21 YEARS
Goodness	Beauty	Truth
Body	Soul	Mind
Willing	Feeling	Thinking

2.2 PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT STAGES

The physical body, as well as social and emotional skills develop fastest during the first years of the child. We never again experience such a drastic transformation. Until around 21 years old the body is growing and changing day by day. Child development charts can help us identify these changes and developments year by year giving us a general understanding of what children are able to do (physically and emotionally) and what skills are not yet there. Therefore it can give us some understanding of what we can expect from them and with what skills we need to be less strict. For example, at around six years of age, it is physically very hard for children to stay still. Knowing this we can be less strict when we see them moving in the circle or during exercises and we will need to adjust our content to their needs.

It is very important not to take the charts as the “good way to grow”. Please, take it as a mere reference and notice that every child has different rhythms and ways of developing and this is fine. We do not need to be comparing their development with other children or with any charts. Charts are only tools to understand them better: we need to always accept, respect and honor their natural rhythm.

3 YEARS

- Legs grow faster than arms
- Can jump from a low step
- Can stand up and walk around on tiptoes
- Walks up and down stairs unassisted, using alternating feet; may jump from bottom step, landing on both feet.
- Can momentarily balance on one foot.
- Jumps on the spot.



- Enjoys swinging on a swing.
- Enjoys stories with riddles, guessing, and "suspense".

4 YEARS

- Walks a straight line (tape or chalk line on the floor).
- Hops on one foot.
- Pedals and steers a wheeled toy with confidence; turns corners, avoids obstacles and oncoming "traffic".
- Climbs ladders, trees, playground equipment.
- Jumps over objects 12 to 15 cm (5 to 6 in) high; lands with both feet together.
- Runs, starts, stops, and moves around obstacles with ease.
- Can run in a circle.
- Can jump
- Likes stories about how things grow and how things operate.
- Shows pride in accomplishments; seeks frequent adult approval.
- Often appears selfish; not always able to take turns or to understand taking turns under some conditions; tattles on other children.
- Enjoys role-playing and make-believe activities.

5 YEARS

- Walks backwards, toe to heel.
- Walks unassisted up and down stairs, alternating feet.
- Learns to skip using alternate feet.
- Jumps or hops forward ten times in a row without falling.
- Balances on either foot with good control for ten seconds.
- Asks innumerable questions: Why? What? Where? When? How? Who?
- Eager to learn new things. Curious and inquisitive.
- Plays cooperatively (can lapse), is generous, takes turns, shares toys.
- Has better self-control over swings of emotions.
- Likes entertaining people and making them laugh.

6 YEARS

- Weight gains reflect significant increases in muscle mass.
- Body may appear lanky as through period of rapid growth.
- Enjoys vigorous running, jumping, climbing, and throwing etc.
- Has trouble staying still.

- Can concentrate effort but not always consistently.
- Friendship with parent is less depended on but still needs closeness and nurturing.
- Anxious to please; needs and seeks adult approval, reassurance, and praise; may complain excessively about minor hurts to gain more attention.
- Often can't view the world from another's point of view.
- Self-perceived failure can make the child easily disappointed and frustrated.
- Can't handle things not going their own way.

7 YEARS

- Good sense of balance.
- Capable of basic gymnastics moves.
- Highly self-critical and eager to please.
- Can understand right and wrong.
- Complains a lot and has strong emotional swings.
- Ability at dealing with mistakes and failure improves.

8 YEARS

- Increased physical strength and endurance.
- Wants to understand how and why things work.
- Enjoys group activities.
- Prone to mood swings and melodramatics.
- Extremely impatient and may have a hard time waiting for special events such as Christmas.

9 YEARS

- May persist with a particular physical activity to the point of exhaustion.
- Eager to learn skills.
- Will use physical complaints as a means of getting out of undesired tasks.
- Generally dependable and can be trusted with basic responsibilities.

10 YEARS

- Capable of demanding motor/endurance tasks.
- Does not yet fully understand right from wrong.
- Disposition tends to be cheerful and fun-oriented.

- Can have a short temper, but has learned to adjust anger levels according to the appropriateness of the situation.
- Friendships are highly important, friends are almost exclusively same gender.

11 YEARS

- Extremely jumpy and has a hard time sitting still.
- Begins to understand that not everyone holds the same beliefs.
- Often critical of others, stubborn, and egoistic.
- Tends to display anger physically by hitting people/objects, throwing things, or slamming doors.

12 YEARS

- Overall disposition is pleasant and upbeat.
- Can become extremely excited over subjects of interest or accomplishments.

13 YEARS

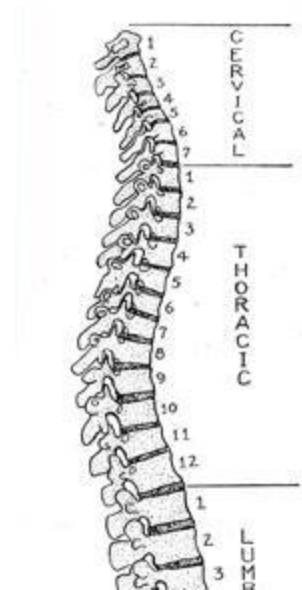
- Moody and uncomfortable with themselves and their surroundings.
- Likes to be alone and values privacy.
- Insecure about their bodies.
- Does not get along well with adults.

14 YEARS

- Generally pleasant, sunny disposition.
- Highly critical of parents and embarrassed by them.
- High level of interest in the opposite sex.
- Often a high interest in extracurricular activities.
- Wants to please and be popular.
- Has a large circle of both gender friends.

2.3 FRAGILE AREAS IN CHILDREN

The body of a child is in continuous change, growth and solidification for about 21 years. Some people believe all children are naturally flexible and therefore are easily able to do all yoga and acrobatic postures. Far from this, like adults, some children are very stiff and others will have a natural



flexibility. Our aim in this chapter is to raise awareness of the changes that they are still going through so we can adapt the practice to their particular bodies.

The main focus for the Family AcroYoga sessions is on the spine, the pelvis and the connection between these two. An adult spine has 27 vertebrae that create three natural curves that allow us to lean forward, lean backward, bend sideways, lengthen and twist.

PARTS OF THE SPINE

Cervical. We have 7 vertebrae that form the Cervicals and are connected to the cranium. The cervicals are curved in a lordosis shape creating an outwards curve. The movement of the cervical spine is in all directions: flexion, extension, side bend and rotation.

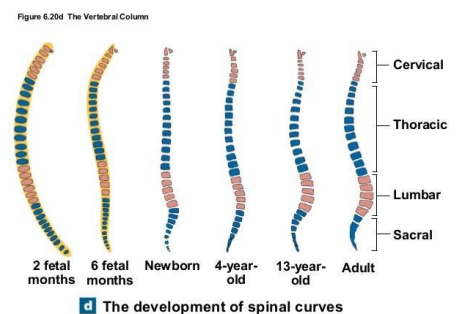
Thoracic. We have 12 Thoracic vertebrae that create the kyphosis curve we have in the middle of the spine. The 12 thoracic vertebrae have movement in all planes but the movement is less than in the cervical spine. Because there are 12, the accumulative movement is nevertheless considerable. As we go up the thoracic curve the rotation increases with the most rotation in the upper ribs and thoracic vertebrae.

Lumbar. We have 5 Lumbar vertebrae with another lordosis curve, connected to the sacrum. The movements of flexion and extension are fullest, but due to the interlocking joints of the lumbar vertebral facets, rotation is prevented. There is very little rotation between the lumbar vertebrae, especially while standing. Rotation would put too much torsion on the discs.

Sacrum. The sacrum is made up of five vertebral bodies united by four ossified vertebral discs.

SPINE DEVELOPMENT

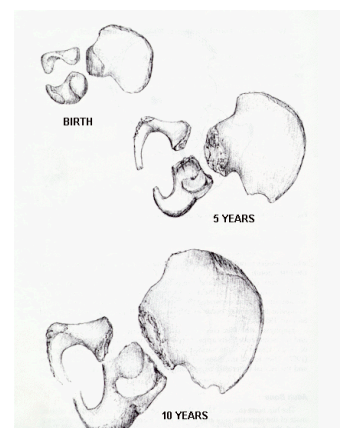
In the diagram you can see the evolution of the spine from the fetus to the adult. The natural curves of the spine are not complete until 14-16 years old. This means that we need to pay special attention to all spine movements.



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Children have 33 vertebrae and adults have 26. Between puberty and about the age of 25 the five sacral vertebrae fuse to form the sacrum and the four coccygeal vertebrae fuse to form the tailbone.

The 5th lumbar usually finds its final placement between ages 10 and 13. The hip articulation and the sacro-lumbar area acts as an ensemble. When



we are born the pelvis is not yet totally formed and consist of 6 separate bones. These bones slowly grow together and become 2 bones, the iliacs

Whom are attached to the sacrum. This means that the child has more mobility and less stability in this area.



BE CAREFUL WITH³

Backbends

These positions have a direct effect on the lumbar curve, that is the last of the spinal curves to form. If done too hard or without proper technique can provoke a dislocation of the lumbar spine. This means in class we can take positions with backbends but we must be extra careful and attentive to not strain the lumbar and not push them too much.

When flying it is important that whenever there is a slight backbend we support the back of the child as much as possible. At ages 3 to 6 they need full support on their back, which we can give by placing our shins or forearms along their full spine. At ages 7 to 12 we support more with our feet making sure they don't collapse into a deep backbend.

Yoga examples: Cobra (Bhujangasana), Bridge (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana), Wheel (Chakrasana) and AcroYoga examples: Backbird, Bow or 4-Step.

Forward Bend

The same danger as in the backbends. With forward bends we usually see the child's spine with a big kyphosis curve because they are pushing the flexion from the head or hands instead of lengthening the spine. The aim of the Forward bend is lengthen the front part of the body, opening the chest is an invitation to lengthen the spine and avoid compression on the lumbar. When the

³ Genny Kapuler, "The Spine: Form & Function" on Iyengar Yoga National Association of United States website. References: *The Thinking Body*, by Mabel Elsworth Todd. *Primary Anatomy* by John V. Basmajian.



spine is very curved the weight of the torso relies on the lumbar. One can remind them to press their hand on the ground or on their legs to open their chest.

Yoga examples: Forward Bend (Uttanasana), Seated Forward Bend (Paschimottanasana), Turtle pose (Kurmasana).

AcroYoga examples: Floating Pachi (Floating Paschimottanasana), Turntable.

Hip openings. Consider the angle of the torsion of the child when doing postures with external rotation of the femur. As the hip bones and the articulation of the femur are not yet solid it is more suitable to do these postures dynamically; doing a hip opening pose only swiftly or as part as a transition, so their muscles stay engaged which will protect the hips from externally rotating too far. An example is that we can not ask children to do the Lotus position.

Yoga: Tree (Vrikshasana), Lotus (Padmasana).

AcroYoga: Lotus Chair.

Progressions. In any yoga or acroyoga position we always want to encourage them to start soft. The aim is not to be the most flexible but to have fun and take care of our body. In every position start from a comfortable place. Just by breathing and softening we will get them to open and lengthen into the position. Forcing the body only make it more tense and rigid.

AVOID

Head Stand. The cervicals are fragile and the articulation that links the first cervical with the cranium is not completely solid. Avoid head balancing positions such as Headstand (Sirsasana). Many children love to try Headstands and if you observe them you will see that the cervicals are usually not aligned with the spine and they wobble and move quite a lot. Their balance is not yet trained and all this straining in the neck could be dangerous.

Instead we can offer shoulderstand where the child balances on the shoulders leaving the cervicals free from weight. This can be done with an adult or another child laying on their back in the Bridge pose or flying Star with an adult.

Long holds. It is important not to hold positions for too long; in general children should hold yoga or acrobatic positions about half the length of the time that an adult would.

Strict Technique. We do not want to request technical precision with positions around legs, knees or hips. For example yoga poses such as Tree, Diamond or Eagle.

Long Balancing Positions. With most children the sense of balance is something they play with a lot but that is not yet very accurate. Their spine and pelvis are as not yet together, they are wobbly just like their balancing poses will probably be. That's why we will avoid staying for a long time in balancing positions.

Pain. Any position or transition that hurts should be avoided altogether. Pain alters movement patterns and can affect the movement development of children (and adults).

2.4 GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR EACH AGE GROUP

According to children's stage of physical and spiritual development, the way we present Family AcroYoga to each age group will be different.

How and what to teach to the different age groups in Family Acroyoga:

	Ages 3 to 6	Ages 7-14
Main Goal of the practice	The practice is mostly about moving, having fun together, and bonding. Playfulness is the key.	The practice here too is mainly about having fun together. In this age group we can also focus on technique, acrobatic poses and building trust.
Teaching target group	The main target group here are the adults. We show the adults ways to move and play together with their children. The child is free to chose when and how to participate. There is no need to correct the child. Just by playing they will incorporate new movement skills that will develop their psychomotricity.	Both the adults and the children can be given instructions. However, the bulk of the technical explanations should still be provided to the adult. If there are specific moves that the flyer - the child - needs to know, we can do preparatory exercises (tightness drills, partner exercises). Layering is the key.

<p>How to give instructions to the children</p>	<p>Small children find it hard to concentrate for a long time. In order to keep their attention, do not make long verbal explanations and demonstrations. It is advised to change the rhythm and the exercises often. Stories, games and using themes work well to keep the attention focussed.</p> <p>We can give visual instructions using images and imagination, for example: “look up at the sun”, or “sit on the throne like a pirate”.</p>	<p>Children in this age group can concentrate a bit better and we can give simple technical instructions: <i>“look at your arms - they are bent, can you straighten them?”</i></p> <p>However, through storytelling, games and visual instructions the children will enjoy and understand the exercise better. Example: “be stiff like a stick” or “look up at the sun”.</p>
<p>Safety</p>	<p>As a teacher our first objective is to create safety, and teach the adults how to base in a safe way. Children of this age can make sudden moves, highlight this to the adults in class.</p> <p>Check the room for dangerous objects before class, children at these ages are climbing everywhere.</p>	<p>Give clear instructions to the adults and also tell them about pitfalls. Always let them practice dynamic moves or transitions first with a spotter.</p> <p>Children from this age group can be unrealistic about their own abilities and wanting to do poses that the adults are not ready to do.</p>
<p>Considerations about their physical development</p>	<p>Till the age of 7 children do not yet have a lot of body tension and their bodies are still quite soft. Therefore give them exercises in which we give them a big surface as support. For example, Front Bird without hands is hard for them, and therefore we can place our feet in such a way that toes touch the lower ribs of the child and the hip bone, in this way our feet will cover the soft part of the stomach. Or instead of the adult using just the feet for basing, he or she can</p>	<p>From the age of 7-8 children have increased physical strength and endurance, and they are able to have some body tension. One can start for example practicing Bird without hands (take time to build it up).</p> <p>Their shoulders can still be soft and not fully developed yet. We can propose inversions like Mini-star, but if they are not ready, they feel pain, or do not like it, have some other alternatives ready.</p>

	use the shins for a bigger surface for support. This way the child is closer to the ground.	
Not to do	Do not do inversions. Children of this age do not have the stability to do inversions. Any moves that hurt should be avoided.	The neck is still fragile, do not practice headstand. Any moves that hurt should be avoided.
Advised time per session	Max 45 min to 1 hour	1,5 hour Or 2 or 3 hours, but then with a break in the middle.

3. METHODOLOGY

We might be able to do the most impressive difficult AcroYoga moves but this doesn't make us necessary good AcroYoga teachers. The real magic happens when we can explain to others clearly and in fun and relaxed way what we are doing so they can learn it, too.



Methodology means a particular way to proceed. In Family AcroYoga we want to propose a methodology, a way of teaching and a way of structuring the sessions that can satisfy the needs of both adults and the children and that can create a playful and safe environment.

3.1. BALANCE BETWEEN NEEDS OF ADULTS & CHILDREN

What makes teaching Family AcroYoga special and complicated at the same time is that we teach simultaneously adults and children, who have very different needs, different bodies and different attention spans. Adults for instance often need time for warming up their body while the children can get bored after a single set of sun salutation. Adults often like to get detailed and comprehensive explanations but children just want to do it and get distracted from too much talking. Children need to move a lot and fast while the adults often get easily tired from active games and poses. There are many ways to deal with these different needs. The first step is to prepare every class well, thinking how to engage both adults and children in every part of the class. This way we will feel more efficient and confident in our teaching.

3.2. PREPARING A SESSION

Have an Aim

There are many ways of building up a class, the most important element is that we have a clear aim for the session. The aim can be a peak pose we want to reach with them, a quality we want to bring to the class (acceptance, joy, awareness, compassion...), reinforcing the parent-child bond, reinforcing the group bond, conscious communication, a story theme we want to share with them (being Indians, going to space, being animals, etc...). Once we have an aim we can build up a progressive class around it. This way, when we evaluate our class we can focus on the aim that we had and see if it was achieved.

To prepare the class we can start by choosing a theme, and then we can create a story and choose games and exercises, that can be linked to this theme. *“Themes can be how we bring our passions, wisdom and life experience to our teaching. Think of the material as the spaghetti, and the theme as the sauce, making something a richer experience with more*



diversity in the tastes and textures, and therefore also the meaning of why we are doing it”.
Jason Nemer - AcroYoga Teacher Training Manual, 2015.

Or we can choose an acrobatic peak pose or sequence that we would like to teach, and then build the class that builds up to these poses. Another way to plan our class is to choose a quality that we would like to work on, for example better collaboration or communication, and then build the structure of the class around this quality.

Timing

A Family AcroYoga class for ages 3-6 years can be 45- 60 minutes long. This time frame will give enough time to teach the different elements of AcroYoga and most children will be able to focus within this time frame. Children of this age have a short attention span, therefore a longer class or workshop could easily become less enjoyable. Because of this short attention span it is also recommended to be fast when we change from one activity to the next. Whenever we leave too much time in a position, an explanation or in between exercises, their attention starts shifting away from us and very often this translates into running around the classroom, playing with other children and disconnecting from the teacher. Their heartbeat is faster than that of the adults, their breathing, their bodies, their thoughts, they are all set in a faster rhythm than ours. So one of our aims is to tune in with this rhythm. Giving them time to play and explore each exercise and keeping them engaged at the same time. It is as well recommended to have a fast pace in the class: move from one exercise to the other, faster than in a class for older children or adults.

For 7-12 year-olds, we can plan a workshop between 1.5 hour and 2 hours long, because children from the age of 7 years can stay concentrated in 1.5-2 hours (with a little break in the middle). In this time period we have space to do all the parts of the AcroYoga class and most children will be able to stay focused for this period. When teaching a 2 hours class it is recommended to do a short drink and toilet break in the middle.

For longer workshops we could plan break moments and even moments where the children have some free time to play and we continue practicing with the adults. In the middle of the workshop we can split the group into adults and children. We can let the children play alone



themselves, while the adults continue the practice with each other on the other side of the room. Normally the children come back by themselves to continue the workshop. This will give us the opportunity to also work separately with the adults on their skills.

Balance between planning and improvisation

We need to know what we want to do and why, in order to afterwards letting it **flow**. Our authority strengthens when we know exactly what we want to do during each session. It is important to make a general *planning* of the trimester or of the whole year and then of each session. Each activity that we propose holds a proposition and aims at awakening something in the group. The clearer and more conscious our objectives are, the easier it is for the children to follow and enjoy the activities. What drives the class are not only our words but our energy and intentions. With clear and concise intentions, our energy shall hold their attention with lot more strength. Children figure it out very clearly when we are insecure about what we are about to do.

We always have to be present and be prepared to change our plans. Being present in the moment, and feeling how the participants are receiving the material, is a skill that we will develop teaching families. A good teacher is able to balance between following the plan and using her or his intuition and improvise according to the actual moment and situation.

We should always leave certain flexibility for when the energy of the group is not at all in relation to the prepared activities. Here we should be fast at understanding what shall best serve our objectives and their needs as a group and individuals. It is suggested to prepare several “paths” for a session, to keep it up our sleeves in order to be able to improvise and the change the plan.

Creating the space

It is important to create a safe and clean environment before the class starts. It is highly recommended having good puzzle mats or judo mats so that the children can fall without hurting themselves. Also making sure that there are no dangerous objects which might hurt the children or that could fall on them. As a teacher we are responsible for making the

space safe. When we start teaching in a new space, it is always good to visit the place before or arriving early so we have time to do so. Be aware of the place the participants decide to do the exercise, make sure no one is too close to walls or furniture, and if they are, ask them to move to a safer spot.

Arriving early

In order to have time for preparations, it is important to arrive early. Come minimum 30 minutes before the workshop starts. Sometimes we might even need to be there 1 hour before. This way we can prepare the space, put the mats where we need them, check the room for safety issues and review the program for the class. When the families arrive, we can welcome them all. If we know the students we can touch each of them, shaking hands, or giving a hug, to connect with them before the workshop begins.

After the class

After the class we can make an evaluation of the class. If we have a co-teacher, we should do this together. Always start with what went well. Spend some time on appreciating the things that went well. Then we can also think of what we can do better next time. If we have an assistant an option is also to invite the assistant to give ideas to improve our classes or teaching. Always stay curious and open for new input. This can develop our teaching. Maybe we have some new ideas for the next class. Write them down in a notebook.

3.3. PROGRESSIONS & LAYERING

To achieve our aims in class, whether they are technical or emotional, we need to offer a class progression and structure that will lead them to success. Presenting the content progressively, taking one step at the time and layering information will always make it easier for the families to assimilate new information.

Building a **progression** means that we start with the easiest exercise first and gradually add difficulty or move on to more advanced exercises. For example:

- Progression 1: Front Plank holding hands.

- Progression 2: Taking one hand out, base points toes. 3 points of contact.
- Progression 3: Taking both hands out, pointing toes and getting into Bird.
- Peak pose: Bird.

Layering the content means connecting exercises throughout the class. If we want our participants to do bird in L-base, we can start with doing the bird on the floor as a part of a yoga warm up or story. We can also make a game where the children have to be a stick. When we practice to fly the bird on the adults L-basing, we can refer to the exercise in the warm up: “Do you remember the bird in the yoga story? Now, we do the same movement, lift up the chest and look forward. And we can also be a stick, like when we did the game with the stick.” In order to layer, we make a connection between the different phases in our class. So in our preparation of the class, when we have chosen the peak pose, do warm up, games and tightness drills, that will prepare the children and adults to the peak poses. To layer also means to refer to the exercises earlier in the class that prepared the participants for the current exercise.

- Layer 1 - Yoga pose - Locust Pose (Salabhasana) - laying on belly, engaging body, lifting up chest and legs.
- Layer 2: Tightness drill - Stick in the mud - practice for the child to engage the body, stay straight and develops the trust.
- Layer 3: Front Plank Preparation - preparation for adult to use legs and prepare for lifting the child, preparation for the child to stay straight and to not bend towards the hands of the adult.
- Front plank - practice for the adult to come into the pose and keep balance, preparing the child to lift chest.
- Superman - Front Plank with one hand free - teaching the child to keep body straight as well with three points of contact.
- Peak Pose: Bird hands free, adult focuses on the balance, child focuses on engaging body and lifting chest.



To offer a class with a good balance between easy exercises and challenges for the fast learners, it is good to prepare material with variations to make it a little easier or a little more difficult.

3.4. STRUCTURING A CLASS

It is good to have the same structure of the class every time. Children love to recognize the same structure like a safe space and time, to play within. As we also get familiar with the same structure, it can create freedom for the teacher to improvise within the same structure and it gives a good rhythm to the class.

Recommended structure of the class or workshop:

1. Opening circle
2. Yoga
3. Acrobatic warm up
4. Family AcroYoga
5. Cool down
6. Closing circle

Opening circle. The aim of the opening circle is to create a clear ritual for the class to start. It creates safety for the children when the ritual for starting the class is always the same; it can be playing or singing a song, sitting in a circle, stretching on the floor, etc. Repeating an exercise every time again is grounding as well as marking a time-space frame for them. The opening circle can also create the possibility for connecting with each child and each adult. It can create a moment of togetherness, unity and contribute to community building. It can also be grounding and create a moment of calm.

Yoga. A little yoga practice serves as a warm up and as a preparation to connect participants with their own breath, body and inner state. We usually start with a 5 minutes meditation followed by another 5 minutes of pranayama. This gets the awareness of the



breath activated and gives both adults and children an introspective space where they can always come back to. Next, we can play with asanas and yoga games. We do want to get their bodies ready but we also want to awaken their body awareness. We also want to warm up the parents without losing the attention of the children. To keep the children's attention on the warming up, we can use visual explanations ('be a tall tree with deep roots and high branches') and/or tell a yoga story that is engaging. As L-basing requires both flexibility and strength, we can prepare the adults to become strong bases. To achieve this, we can propose yoga exercises that develop flexibility, as an example hip openers, as well as exercises that builds strength in the legs and arms. Often the children also like to do these exercises together with their parents.

Acrobatic warm up

The aim of the acrobatic warm up is first of all to warm up the body and the muscles, and to develop acrobatic skills and body awareness. During the warm up we can develop strength, alignment and tightness. With acrobatic games or poses we can teach participants to carry each other's weight and then build trust in one's own body and in others. This is an excellent way to prepare both adults and children for the flying positions. Another aim of the acrobatic warm up is to identify the level of the participants. How strong are they? Can they do inversions alone?

During the warm up we can introduce preparation exercises for the peak pose. With these exercises and games we start having a sense on their body awareness and acrobatic experience. This might tell us if our plan or aim can be achieved or if we need to adapt it and make it easier or more challenging for the group.

Family AcroYoga

Now we are ready to fly! In Family AcroYoga we usually state that the adults are the bases and the children are the flyers. Siblings can also work together and fly each other. It is recommended that there is 4 years between the base and the flyer, or 15 centimetres in height.



The aim is to have fun and build trust between children and adults. The aim is also to offer positions and flows that are suitable for each age group and within a level where the group can feel comfortably challenged. Our goal is for them to have a sense of success by the end of the class, to give them flows they can then practice safely at home and above all for them to have fun and bond while practicing.

Cool down

After flying and playing with acrobatics a moment to integrate the class and to restore the body and mind will be very well received. When children do acrobatics they can get very excited. The aim of the cool down is to help them to calm down and teach both adults and children methods to calm down. Also to show them the benefits of learning to calm down. Children and adults calmly working together encourages bonding, another result of the cooldown.

It is a moment where we can share joy and wellbeing in a more introspective way.

There are many ways to proceed and here are some examples that we use the most:

- **Massage.** Touch is not something all families share but it takes just one massage to get to love it. Either with Thai massage or any other massage technique that we know is a great way to bond through the body inducing a calm state of mind, nurturing the body after the physical efforts and taking care of one another. Giving and receiving a massage is a beautiful way to practice compassion and generosity, be it the children giving a massage to the adults, the other way around or in a group massage: creativity here has no limits.
- **Shavasana or guided meditation.** A guided Shavasana lying on the mat, or having the child on the back or next to the adult is another way to cool down. Guiding an adventure, a sensation through the body or a little story to invite them into their own inner senses and inner world. Opening the door to travel with imagination and feeling the power of relaxation, resetting the body and the mind, maybe even



contacting with their inner self. This can be a good opportunity to thread the theme of the class.

Closing Circle. A wonderful and grounding way to close a class or a workshop is with a closing circle. The aim of the closing circle is to reconnect all the participants. To close where we began and to get a little ritual, in which we recreate the feeling of togetherness.

Other Options:

This was like the basic structure of a normal class or workshop. But we can add other elements. Here are two options that, based on our experience, also work well.

Break for the children – and focus on the adults. Depending on the length of our class, the children might need a break. So we can give the children a break, and then continue to work with the adults. The adults have a longer attention span. It is good to have some time alone with the adults to develop their basing abilities. There are two options. Option A: we can review the exercises we just did with the children, with more focus on the technical details and the basic principles, like the alignment and the power lines in the positions. Or Option B: we can prepare the exercises that we will do with the children after the break. Then - when the children come back and want to fly - the adults are more prepared and it can be easier start basing the children in the new moves.

Circle of presentation

We can invite the children and adults to show their favourite exercises or moves in the middle of the circle at the end of the class. Explain the presentation form and give them 3-4 minutes to choose the exercise and rehearse it. They can show their favourite exercise from the class, or they can show a move that they do at home. The children are happy to show what they can do. We will learn a lot of new moves, and we can also see what exercise they love the most

If a child does not want to participate it is OK. If a child and adult have more experience with AcroYoga than the rest of the group, it is recommended to invite them at the end of the presentation, so the others do not get intimidated. We can also invite all the participants to



do all the favorite moves together: First 1 child and 1 adult show their favorite move, and then everybody repeats this move together. And then the next. To do this, we need to make sure to have enough time. It can be long and it is great fun.

3.5. DEMONSTRATIONS

Doing demonstrations is a visual and useful way to teach new poses or flows. We can demonstrate with a co-teacher, a student, an assistant or with our own child. Here are some key points to make these demonstrations more efficient.

Place the mats in a circle or half moon shape and show the exercise in the middle so everyone can see the demo.

The general structure of the demonstrations is:

- Silent demo - A silent demo is without any verbal explanations. The aim of a silent demo is to show a very clear embodiment and for the students to focus only on the body mechanics.
- Teaching demo, where we explain both the base role for the adults, and the flyer role for the children.
- Spotting demo, where we show and explain where the spotter stands and what the spotter does.

If we teach alone, we cannot do the silent demo. Then we do the teaching demonstration first.

When the demos take too long children often lose their focus but if the instructions are too short and fast the adults often find it hard to follow. Therefore give concise and clear technical instructions on the role of the adult (base). Limit the technical instructions for the children. Instead give more visual or playful instruction for the children.

Teaching alone

When we teach alone without assistants there are several options on how to make a demonstration. The easy and safe poses that do not demand advanced AcroYoga skills for the base can be shown by a child and an adult participant (for instance; Double Lion, Bunkbed, High Flying Butterfly etc.). First we give the essential technical instructions to the adult and then we speak to the children by using images or stories that can help them position their bodies effectively. For example; in Bird: instead of instructing “*Engage your core and lift your chest*” we could say “*look up at the sun and fly*”. In Foot to Hand: instead of saying “*straighten your legs and look forward*” we could make a story “*You are a tall pirate, look at the horizon to find a treasure*”.

With the more difficult AcroYoga poses or transitions it is important that they have a clear body demonstration that they can imitate, therefore as teacher we will be basing one of the children in the class. When children do not know yet the exercise, choose poses that are simple and that we can base with confidence. We always want to show the role of the spotter when getting into dynamic movements or more difficult poses, for this we can ask one of the adults to be the spotter, tell him/her where to stand and what’s going to happen. When we take one child for a demonstration the rest will probably want to do it as well. We will try to take a different child every time and to give an opportunity for each one to have the role if we can. This can boost their confidence so it is a tool to have in mind if we see that one might specially need a boost that day.

Certain transitions demand from the flyer/child a specific way of moving, for example the transition from Backbird to Bat. For most children it’s hard to understand the leg movements through verbal instructions. Even a skilled teacher can’t guide the child during a demo through the transition if the child doesn’t know what to do. Therefore we can do a preparation exercise on the ground where we practice the different steps and names for the leg movements. Once everyone has done it on the ground they’ll find it easier to do it in the air and we can demo it.



Teaching with a child

Another possibility is to have a child as our assistant. Whenever we co-teach it is important to try and prepare all the demonstrations before the class, so both of us know exactly what we are going to do.

When a child is the assistant, we have to be aware that even though they play a little bit of a teacher's role, they are still children. During the class they have their own needs and they might need our attention while we are assisting the class or maybe they lose focus in a demonstration. Patience and acceptance will be good tools. If on top of this we work with our own son or daughter there are more layers added because of our personal relationship with them. It might be a good idea to bring along an adult that they know and can be with them while we are helping the students or even bring some toys or colors with which they can play by themselves in between demonstrations.

Respecting their rhythm and needs is part of the equation and our role is to support them and adapt to each situation. In the beginning it can create jealousy, when our child sees us basing other children, especially if there is a good connection with another child. But it is possible and it is very enriching experience to practice and teach Family classes together with one's own child.

3.6. CONSCIOUS COMMUNICATION

Our way of communicating with the class can set an atmosphere of trust or one of frustration. Conscious communication is one of the key aspects of teaching Family AcroYoga. The objective is to create an environment of respect and trust. How can we apply this ourselves and transmit this type of communication when teaching? How can we give these tools to our students so they can apply it in their family relationships? When we become teachers, we are an example for our participants. The students will not imitate our words but our way of doing, thinking and feeling. They see the intention behind our actions. A good way to apply this conscious communication attitude is remembering the 4 C's: CONCISE, CAREFUL, CONSTRUCTIVE and CALM.



Concise

Communication needs to be clear and concise. Very often adults will remember only 1 clear instruction out of a demo. It is useful to keep every demo down to 3 main actions or instructions and keep layering the information instead of saying everything we know about each pose at once. Tell very precisely what we do, what we need from our partner, and how to do this. The more clear and precise we are the easier our message will be received. Give them time to practice and develop their own questions and if it doesn't sink in that day, it might just happen during the next session.

Careful

Our main role is to take care of the families so they can bond and enjoy some time together. Every person is different and while some enjoy some direct raw instructions others might need more loving suggestions. AcroYoga can make us feel empowered when we have fun or when we achieve something, but it can also create frustration and vulnerability when opening up to others and going beyond our limits. A careful approach is always going to be welcomed and it will build up trust between us and our students. With loving communication we can show that we are caring for the participants and building a space where they all feel accepted and safe and we are giving an example on how they can communicate to each other.

It is very important to respect a "no". We do not want to force a child to do something that they do not feel comfortable doing and we want to encourage the other adults to show the same respect. Every child has his or her own rhythm and progression and they will let us know when they are ready or willing to do something. If they do not want to participate they can play at the peace corner (the peace corner is a quiet area with small activities, like drawings and paper and colors, where the children can take a break from the class), and join when they are ready.

Constructive



Support our participants and start always with the positive. Very often in class we see straight away all the things they are doing “wrong” and we start pointing them out. This can be overwhelming and frustrating for some students. So instead of giving corrections, we can offer “Tricks”. For example instead of expressing “no, don’t bend the legs or the arms” we could say, “You went into the position very smoothly. Here is a trick to be more stable, try with straight arms and legs”. So stating first something that went well and adding a positive constructive tip from there. We also want to train our judgment to see what is the priority. Out of the ten things that are going wrong, which one is the first one to work on. It is our job to give them one trick or focus point at the time to progressively achieve the goal. If we can start seeing first the positive in others, we might do the same with ourselves. And remember that the final goal is to enhance the relationship within the families.

Calm

Awareness is the best tool we have to keep a calm disposition. If we are aware of our emotions we can adjust ourselves before losing patience. As a teacher we are essential in the process of creating a calm surrounding so the participants can feel safe and accepted. When stressed or losing the center we can easily react to our students and lose the careful and constructive communication. When we catch ourselves getting serious or stressed, it is useful to have a strategy such as taking a deep breath, taking a moment to close our eyes and smile, even laughing about oneself; whatever brings us back to a peaceful inner state remembering we are there to have fun. When we are in this calm state the magic happens. If we are already having a stressful day or we feel our energy is low, we can anticipate and be wiser by preparing a simple class that we know they will love and follow easily so we don’t confront ourselves with potential stressful moments in class.

Types of Communications

There are 3 types of communication channels, we usually use all three of them when interacting with others even if we are not aware of it. It is always good to be aware of which ones we use when teaching. Each person is more inclined to use and understand one of these three types. So by giving information through all three channels more students will receive our message.

Verbal

Offering verbal instructions with concise words and clear actions. When coaching we can also check in with them “How are you doing? How does this feel? Do you need to re-adjust?” We can also invite the adults to check in with the children to see if they feel good. Using terms that are easy to understand for both children and adults. Some people have difficulties to remember the name of the different positions. One option is to draw the positions and write the name of the pose underneath and hang it on the wall.

It is important that we all know what we are doing when flying with families. Make sure the child and the adult both know what the next step is. It is the base’s role to call out the next step. When there are moments where we are shaky or the child is afraid having some verbal reassurance like “I have got you” can give them the confidence they need to take the next step. And if we feel that we are not able to hold the child anymore we can just let them know: “Let’s come down now” in a calm way.

Visual

Body language is around 60% of our communication and it includes facial expressions, body posture, gestures, eye movement, touch and the use of space. When we are showing a demonstration, connecting the words with the action of the body while it is happening is always more clear and easy to remember. For example, when talking about alignment of the arms, it will be much more powerful if when we say it we show it, rather than just mentioning it without a visual support. When coaching the families a good trick is to have them imitate us. If we want the child to open the chest when flying Bird we can give him or her verbal instructions or just come in front of him or her, imitate the position he or she is in and from there show him or her in our body how the shoulders and chest can open. He or she will probably imitate this gesture straight away.

Tactile

Another great way to communicate is by touch. This touch should never be imposed and should never force the child or the adult into a position. The soft touch just brings the awareness in a specific part of the body and allows them to reposition themselves. When



we are upside down we might not be able to tell left from right or up from down. A little tap into the side we need to move will be the best way to guide them. Sometimes a verbal or visual instruction is not understood or they cannot translate it into their own bodies. For example if they keep forgetting to straighten the arms, the next time we can gently tap the elbows as a reminder and they will automatically bring the awareness there and straighten the arms. Gentle touch can also be an invitation for dropping weight, releasing tension, relaxing shoulders and most importantly, it may give support and bring confidence when there are situations of fear.

3.7. COACHING

After the students see the demo it is their moment to try and experiment for themselves. This is the moment for the teacher to observe the class dynamics and to assist each group as a coach. The role of a coach can make things happen for the group or can create frustration. It all depends on how we approach it.

In Family AcroYoga our intention is to let participants discover and let them achieve their own success. The coach's voice should not be loud and should never overpower the students. We will need to find a balance between guiding them and letting them learn on their own. Here are some of our tricks:

Find the positive first

As teachers we immediately see what a student could do different to achieve a position or a flow. As a coach, we always want to encourage them and make them feel and know that they are progressing. If the first thing we point out is all the mistakes they are doing they can feel that they are not doing anything right and that there are too many wrong things to correct. So before saying anything, take a moment to find the positives first. Let them know a few things that they are doing right, then offer them a “trick” or suggest them one thing



they could do differently, which would make it easier. If we focus on the positives first they will do the same to others and to themselves, creating a positive environment where we support each other. We want an environment where we leave behind the “I can’t do it” and embrace the “How can I make it happen?”.

Observe

Often we have the good will to help out the entire room and we find ourselves just walking by a group, pointing out a mistake or giving a tip, jumping to the next group, and to the next and to the next. This procedure can give some technical information to the groups, but this might not give sufficiently support to the learning process in the groups. Each group has a different dynamic and as coaches we need to observe and appreciate the dynamic they are into. It is better to take time with each group, observe, see how they are proceeding and if needed offer them a suggestion or positive reinforcement. This is the only way we will be able to offer them AcroYoga skills, communication skills and relationship skills. Achieving a position is one thing, learning these skills is a much more important goal.

Acrobatic voice

When we are flying acrobatics there are moments where we need to be direct and concise in our communication, whether verbal, tactile or visual. If a child is in an inversion and the pelvis starts to fall to one side, we don’t have time to say “Your arms are very straight. But are you aware that your center of gravity is falling towards the left. As a suggestion you could try to....”. In these precarious moments we need to be more direct “Straighten your body” or we could tap the side that is falling for them to feel that they need to move it.

Therapeutic voice

On the other hand, when doing yoga, massage or therapeutics our voice can have another tone and our voice and the language used can invite them to calm their mind, awaken their inner awareness and relax the body. Here we can be more poetic, using images, stories and have a softer voice.

Prioritize

In every position or flow there is a progression of steps. It is never the case that we can learn all the steps at once. As a coach we want to be able to see where the participants are and what are the steps that will take them to achieve the position. Each group of adults and children are different and are going to need different progressions. We can start by giving them one thing to work at a time. If we give them five corrections to apply in the next round they will probably do worse, overwhelmed by too much information. Give them one step at a time, and once the body has integrated this step they are ready for the next.

Let them figure it out

As a coach we can provide information or we can guide them to discover it themselves. A discovery that we make on our own is going to stay with us and has the potential to become a skill that we can apply in other contexts. A discovery that someone else shares with us may remain as information that we might apply to only one particular context. Find ways to invite them to make discoveries, to explore and to figure it out on their own. Maybe by making questions “How did that feel? How was that different? What do you think you need? What was your intention?”.

Reinforcing the bond between adult and child

Our aim is for the families to bond and learn together. As teachers we sometimes get excited to show them how it is done and we might have the temptation to basing all the children around us and make them fly. It is a natural and positive thing to do because we want them to experience it and have fun. But at the same time we don't want to take away the family experience. Our job is to teach the adults to be the bases. This might take some time, but the achievement will only be greater when they get there and their admiration for their parents will increase. When we base the children ourselves too they might sense that we are more stable than their adults and then there will be a queue in front of us with children wanting to be flown by us. This might create some frustration for the parents. So coaching becomes essential to empower them and offer them tools that will allow them work it out.

Emotional coaching



Playing and trusting with our bodies can trigger emotions during the classes. First thing to do is not to take it personal, it might not be because of our teaching. It can be something that they carry in them that emerges in that moment. Our role as teachers is to hold space for them and make them feel safe at all levels.

If a child has an emotional breakdown it might be for the parent to handle it or it might be up to us to be present for them, offer comfort, a hug, listening to their story, etc. If an adult has an emotional moment it might be better to take them aside and talk to them away from their children. Often when in presence of their own children they want to hold it all together so the children don't worry. If we feel the need to talk with them or listen to them we can take them aside and try to comfort or encourage them. This is a sensibility that will be developed with experience.

3.8. SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH LOVE

A recurring theme while working with children and families is authority. How can we show love and care and at the same time respect and authority in front of children? True and compassionate love always goes together with justice. To love is to be fair, and to be fair is a continuous, refined and subtle strategy that seeks in every situation a balance between the individual freedom and the group's freedom.

The theory is well known, but to apply it day after day, keeping a coherence in our acts requires continuous efforts. Above all, patience and positivity. When working with families the adults take part of this responsibility but as we are the ones holding the space the final responsibility of what happens in the room is ours. We can decide what kind of boundaries and atmosphere we would like. Here are some guidelines that can help create a harmonious, safe and respectful space:

Class Agreements

If we have regular classes we can start the course by setting some class agreements all together the first day. It is always better if the agreements come from the families and they all discuss and accept them. Very often adults and children will express the agreements in a “negative form “No hitting”. We can suggest to rephrase these in a positive sentence, for example “respecting others”, “listening when someone is talking”, “respect the material”, etc. Four agreements or so is sufficient so they can really remember them. If it is a one day workshop, we can just set the agreements ourselves at the beginning of the workshop so we can recall these agreements when they are not being respected.

Managing Expectations. Sometimes parents are nervous when their children are not sitting quietly or participating in the way the parent thinks they should behave. Once the parents start telling the child off or irritation arises it can influence the whole class and sometimes it can be uncomfortable for parents and their children to have tension in front of a whole group of people. As teachers we can manage expectations from the beginning of the class and create a relaxed atmosphere for everyone by explaining that our main intention for any workshop is that all participants, young and old, enjoy themselves. So when the children and adults are happy the session is successful, whether they manage to do the exercises or not.

We can also ask parents at the beginning of the class not to pressure a child to do any exercises, the best one can do is to merely invite the child to join in the activities. If a child is unwilling to join in an exercise or to be still and listen, it’s okay. It’s also fine when a child (or adult) adapts an exercise into something different, as long as it’s done safely. During a session we also want to encourage children to feel free, to fulfill personal needs like having a drink or taking a break or going to the toilet. It’s all okay. We are here to enjoy playing with each other!

Discover their qualities

Looking at each adult and each child with loving eyes, being curious about their personality and what they may be able to do rather than labeling and judging them. When we think we know someone we limit their potential and our capacity to see other parts of their being.



Keep your gaze pure and clean, observe and try to discover new parts of them every day. Once we know their qualities, we can incorporate exercises and games accordingly. For example, a child might be very loud, nervous and might move a lot and we discover he loves ninjas. We could prepare a ninja theme session and he would probably be more participative, attentive and “easy going” in that session. See what they are instead of what you would like them to be and magical things will happen.

Soft Boundaries

On many occasions we will need to use some soft limits to restore harmony and control in the group. A soft limit can be a hand on the shoulder to calm down an overly excited child, it can be a little touch of humor to bring their attention back, it can be a reminder of the agreements to respect when others or ourselves are talking in the group, etc... These soft limits should always be expressed in a positive way, pointing to what we want, and not what they are not doing. For example instead of saying “You are not listening to Paul” we could say “We listen to Paul now”. For this we need to have inner calmness and clarity to see a possible critical situation before it explodes. If we see it coming we can elude a potential crisis by setting a soft limit. It is important to set these limits from the very beginning of the class. If we let little crises or disturbances between children or in the group pass by, they will only escalate and lead to a fully-blown conflict that will be much more difficult to manage.

Hard Boundaries

Before starting our classes or workshops it is a very good idea to decide for ourselves how we set the boundaries. Being clear with what actions or situations are going to require a “soft limit” and what situations require a “hard limit” such as saying “No”.

If we respond with a “No” in all situations that disturb us we will say “no” so many times that it will affect the self-esteem of participants, the atmosphere will change and the “no” will also start losing its value. A firm “no” is powerful when it comes from an adult that has been supporting us with positive reinforcements, an adult who we trust and who

appreciates our qualities. A continuity of firm “no” with no other positive connection during the class can create an environment of negativity, self doubt and fear for the families.

For example, if a child hits another we could say “No, we don’t hit each other”. It is very important that we still keep our inner calmness and we do not just shout it out showing our temper. A good way to set a firm yet loving hard boundary is to being next to the child with some physical contact, such as a hand on the back, creating a space where they feel we welcome them, accept them and help them to relate to others. Our inner intention will be to ground them, to connect with their soul. We can look them in eyes with firm loving determination seeking for their soul to understand.

Sometimes we see a “rebel” attitude of a child. Internally we may sympathize and thank them for being true to themselves, externally, however, if it is needed for the group to bring them back to the activity, we will let them know with love, firmness and determination what we would like them to do.

It is important to maintain a coherence throughout the days and the year. What today is a “no”, has to be the same for everyone and every day. Children are seeking love and protection in us. When we doubt or hesitate about the limits that we are establishing, we are then actually saying that we don’t have the right criteria or firmness to protect them. This is by no means saying that some of the norms cannot be changed during the long term, but this should be done for a logical justification and not resulting from a hectic situation.

Provocations or asking for help?

There are moments when we feel that we are being tested and our buttons are being pushed. These can often be interpreted as a quest for safety and finding oneself. Children aim at figuring out up to where they can go, what is allowed or not, they want to know how big the playing field is and up to where the adult is ready to help and watch over their safety. Sometimes, the more they push the limits, the more insecure they are and the more in need of the adult to be committed to taking care of them. The adult holds the role of the protector and carer, establishing limits of the field so that they can play safely and develop.



When the children enter extreme processes of attention seeking, hurting others, going against the activities, they start reaching a point from which there sometimes seems to be no return. In these cases physical contact can bring them back into their bodies and grounding their feet again. Touching them firmly and looking at them face to face. With few but concise words, it shall be enough.

It is never personal

Nothing is personal. A lot of love, patience and happiness, are excellent investment for a good class. Situations that may appear are not personal or against us. Every attitude gives us information about the child in that moment. We are here to help and support their own processes. If we can see actions with a calm and objective gaze, we will be able to respond without losing our temper. This will give us a big advantage in leading the class and enjoying it!

Peace Corner

Finding the balance between respecting their own will whether they want to participate or not and encouraging them to join the activity is always a fine balance. Also if some children start losing interest for the activity it can become a wild party on the side. A peace corner is an area where children can go to if at any moment they do not want to join the activity. In the peace corner there is material to draw mandalas, make mandalas out of beans, strings to create ropes, bracelets, etc. All the material is an invitation to creativity and introspection. They should ask permission to go the corner or when we see a child that is just restless, running around, lost in his own nervousness we can also invite them to the peace corner. It is not to be used as a punishment or as a “time out”. It is an alternative activity.

Listening

Often children have a lot to say, ideas, games they want to share, stories, etc. When teaching we have an overview of the class content and we usually want to keep the train going and just offer the activities that we plan. Many times we are explaining or doing an



activity and they will interrupt us. Here we want to find a balance between listening to them and not losing the focus in our words or actions.

If we just continue with what we are doing or saying they will feel ignored, it is a strong feeling. So it is a great quality to be able to listen to them, receive their “gift” (an idea, a game, a comment ...) and respond to them before we continue. We often respond to these comments with a negative start “no, we will do this later”. One way to receive this can be “great idea, today we will play this other game”, “thank you for the idea”, “it is a fun game, we can do it in the next session”. Be careful on what you promise because we will need to keep our promise, children will remember. If they all have game ideas we can one day make a list and pick one for each session.

Thank you

One of the most effective words to gain trust and respect in class. When a child or an adult makes a comment, offers an idea, puts material away, helps us in a demo... the simple action of being grateful and expressing it will create an environment where we accept, value and trust each other. They will feel appreciated. Take one second to look at them eye to eye and say thank you whenever we feel grateful.

Sense of Humor

A good sense of humor is a great quality for those moments when we start taking things too seriously or personal. Using jokes and humor in class can help keep the focus and lighten the mood. At the same time, we need to be mindful not to create a situation where we make fun of a participant. Find a sense of humor where we all laugh together and find a good balance to not overload the class with jokes.

Ethical Boundaries

Whenever we are teaching we are in a power role. Families come to us to learn, to practice and to bond with each other. They will, in some cases, look up to us and not just notice the techniques we share but our vision and lifestyle too. With power comes great responsibility. When in a power role we should be extra careful not to cross personal boundaries. Flirting



or allowing sensual or sexual energy with the adults in the room is disrespectful towards both the adults and the children.

In a Family AcroYoga class children should not be exposed to this kind of interaction between the adults and the teacher. They will be aware of what is happening even if they don't always react to it. As for the adult students, on some occasions they admire us and project the joy and love they feel in class while practicing and attribute all this to us. It is rather easy and comforting to take advantage of this. It is important not to flirt with our students when we are in the role as teachers. This is true in any AcroYoga class we teach but especially important when we teach Family AcroYoga classes. Bottom line is as Family AcroYoga teachers we do not flirt with the participants in the class. It is not acceptable.

Positive Reinforcement

It is important to be positive and encourage students when they are participating in their activities. There is a difference between judging and describing. With small comments, facial expressions or gestures we can let them know that we enjoy the created harmony, beyond just saying "you are doing good or bad". AcroYoga cannot be done "good" or "bad", and above all it is not a competition. These small judgements, even with a positive intention, guide children to do activities for the sake of those outside, in order to receive a reaction from an adult.

When a child is doing an activity, he/she wants to show us how well they are doing, seeking our approval. Yoga seeks to teach internal connection, self-acceptance. Our job is to make sure that we don't instill a competition culture or the need for seeking for external approval. We can start taking note of our own vocabulary (good, bad, beautiful, nice, well done). For example, when we want to cheer them up we can use gestures, smiles, a caress or positive phrases that bring them to the present and self-consciousness. Describing what they do and celebrating it:

- Do you like this position?
- We had a good time / You had a good time doing it!
- What a "frog/tree/cobra"...!



- Can you feel now how your body is stretching?
- That was fun!

HOW TO KEEP THE FOCUS

In Family AcroYoga we are always playing with moments where participants gather and look at the demo and moments where they go and do it on their own. We gather their focus many times back and forth during the sessions. If we just shout “come back to the center” they will not hear us and we will struggle. Having different tools to gather their focus with harmony and fun will be a good idea. Introduce your tool at the beginning of the class and practice it a few times with the whole group.

- 1) **Tibetan bowl breathing exercise:** At the opening circle we introduce the music instruments as an exercise of breathing, for example a Tibetan bowl: Every time we hear the sound of the bowl breath in and out 3 times deep and slow. Allow the children to play the instrument too. Do set the rules: only play the instrument once, ask the teacher for permission, we can always breath deep also during flying, also the adults can play the bowl.
- 2) **Call and response rhythm:** We can do a clapping rhythm which the participants repeat till everyone is clapping and the focus is central again.
- 3) **Buddha:** When the teacher says “Buddha” everyone sits down in lotus with Jnana mudra (meditation). Then pick with one hand an imaginary flower, with the other hand we hold an imaginary candle. Breath in through the nose to smell the flower, breath out and blowout the candle. Repeat three times.
- 4) **Freeze:** It is like a statue game, whenever we shout “Freeze” everybody has to stay in the position they are in, and freeze like a statue. Then we can announce the next game or combine the Freeze with Buddha.

When the group's energy is still restless and all the tricks for gathering the attention don't seem to work we can always be spontaneous and introduce an active game (see chapter on Games). After physically moving and playing children are often better able to focus again.

4. CIRCLE CEREMONY

Circle ceremonies are a wonderful way to start and end a session. There are many different circle ceremonies each with a different main quality. Some are physical and are about doing a movement with the whole group, others aim at grounding and focusing the group, and others again are about winding down and closing the practice. All circle ceremonies create bonding in the group; everyone can see each other, they do the same movement or exercise or sing the same song. Doing things together in a circle creates a feeling of equality and energetically connects all the people in the group. We recommend starting and finishing with a circle ceremony to set a clear frame to the start and end of a class.

5. YOGA PRACTICE

Yoga means union. It is not doing positions, yoga is a state of being. The aim of yoga is to have all our faculties at the service of the soul, to be in a state of union at every moment, being in contact with our inner self, freeing ourselves, living with a perfect union among our parts, with our own truth and with the world around us. So whenever we create an atmosphere of respect, love, joy or self awareness we will be doing yoga. There are many ways in which this state can be achieved from sitting in meditation to playing or flying.

5.1. RAJA YOGA

Raja Yoga or Hatha Raja Yoga means “Royal Union” and refers to the goal of Yoga (Samadhi) and not to the method of attaining it. Within the practice of Raja Yoga there are: Meditation, Pranayama, Asanas and Shavasana.

In the 19th century Swami Vivekananda equated Raja Yoga to the Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali and nowadays Raja Yoga is understood as these 8 limbs to attain Samadhi.



MEDITATION

Meditation is to cultivate the mind, being aware of how it works and what kind of thought processes we have. The next step is to modify these processes into thoughts that are in union with our soul and heart. Awaken and maintain a state of consciousness to bring the awareness into our daily life experiences. Meditation can bring us consciousness and freedom.

In Family Workshops the meditation can be part of the opening circle. It can be done in a circle or with the child sitting in front of the adult or back to back. We can also place them lying down at the beginning of the class or at the end as a cool down. Here are some examples of these techniques. With families we can work on classic meditations, fantasy visualizations or meditations in movement.

PRANAYAMA

By controlling and being conscious of the breathing rhythm, we can reach mental control and calmness. When we start cultivating breath awareness silence can appear. With enough silence we can start hearing our inner voice. Breath is a nexus between our body and our soul. For our sessions we can incorporate Pranayama at the beginning of the class after the meditation while we are sitting in a circle and during the class remembering to keep breathing fully. The more active and releasing Pranayamas can be practiced as a game in the warm up.

ASANAS

In Family AcroYoga we can have adults and children who have never practiced yoga before. Body consciousness is gained with a lot of practice, concentration and patience. It is important at the beginning not to give them too many focal points. If for example we start from the breath consciousness, we could dedicate one or several sessions where the focus is on the breath and our verbal cues are mainly breath related. Progressively this attention is create a quality not only in the asanas but also in the connections, in the pauses, in the movement, etc.

Every session can have one main focus point, one theme. Here are a few examples of different aims during asanas: :

- 1. Consciousness of the gravity.** Ask them questions and propose them guidelines to feel the spine as the axis of the body. In every asana, see how gravity can help us allow the weight of the body part that is in contact with the floor to drop to support ourselves on the earth, aligning the spine.
- 2. Progression.** To see progressions on different levels. In the same asana, check that as we maintain the posture and breath into it, we progress physically. We can also pay attention to the progression of the asana over the duration of the whole course. On top of the physical progression, we can also perceive the mental concentration and the breath awareness. Observe how the breath goes deeper and longer.
- 3. Compensation** of each posture or action with their counter effects. During the sessions, we can mention the counter postures and dedicate a day to compensating. We can choose a few asanas and ask participants to do the asana and its counter pose with a bit of explanation of why they compensate each other. It can be an individual activity or in pairs, or even act as a small stage for small groups. From a few asanas we can create a story, adding its compensating postures.
- 4. Breath Consciousness.** In yoga, breath is always mentioned but in some sessions we can put it at the front of the stage. It can be set as an aim to link every movement with an inhale or exhale. This should remain a short sequence as it requires a lot of concentration and attention. Another possibility is to do a different breath in every asana, some more calming, some stimulating. The aim is to verify how our breathing is affecting our body and our mind. To experience that a long exhale will calm and free us, while a deep inhale will fill us with strength and courage. And above all during the class we can breathe thoroughly and we can even apply this in our daily lives.
- 5. Active vs Relax.** To play with feeling the difference between the two. In a posture tense up a particular part of the body then release it. In every pose repeat the contrast and remind them to release the parts that don't need to be active (eyes, jaw...). Also introduce asanas where the whole body has to be on tension, but also relaxing asanas. With time, we can influence and tonify the internal muscles without creating tension.
- 6. Harmonious flow of asanas.** Be creative in entering into and exiting out of an asana. Search for movements and links that keep the attention and the body awareness not only in the asanas, but also in between postures. You can dedicate sessions on different links. One day you can propose links in a military style, another one in classic ballerina style, acrobats, of some animals, liquids, sounds, with a little song, with a breathing technique. After having experimented with different ways to link asanas, you can dedicate a session where the participants create their own links. Again, depending on the atmosphere that we want to offer, in each moment our proposals may encourage calm and soothing or aim at a more spontaneous and active game. The harmonic flow with yogic

postures and dance is called Karanas. Further we will dedicate more time on how to play and create Karanas.

7. Spine. The spine is a transversal axis in yoga. We can say that it gives us seven possibilities of movement that will allow us games with children: flexion, extension, left and right side bends, left and right torsion and elongation (towards the sky). These are movements that we usually do spontaneously during the day to stretch out. We can present these movements to the students in a story that integrates them discretely, and that they discover by themselves. From there, they can create their own stories, asana sequences, links, dances with postures, partner flow, etc.

STORYTELLING WITH ASANAS

Two big allies in introducing Asanas to families are stories and animals, and their multiple combinations. Stories capture the attention of the audience and consequently if you manage it gracefully, you will be able to keep it for a long time. To listen and to tell stories stimulates imagination, visualisation and centres the mind. But at the same time, the story carries along a teaching, a life example that resonates in the mind and souls of the audience. From this, we have to take care of which story to choose to wisely match our objectives in relation to yoga.

An important element at the time of telling a story, sharing visualisations or do asanas with animals, is to mentally create these images when we are telling them. When the teacher has a clear and living image of what he/she says, the words are transmitted in the form of images, and the group receives the story as a real experience, alive, in three dimensions and with their own imagination. Otherwise we will just leave words on the abstract or intellectual level. For the asanas sessions, stories and animals can be used in many different ways, some of these are here mentioned:

Stories with asanas

During our storytelling, we do the asanas that arise from it. The teacher is showing them. We can adapt the stories so that elements of yoga appear. We can either first choose a story we like and then merge it with asanas, or have an asana sequence we want to do and find a story that takes us through the sequence.

Theatrical stories

We tell the story and we freely stage everything that happens. Within the story are postures but also theatre movements in the whole space.

Tales without an end

We tell a story and unexpectedly we leave the end for later. The story can be told with postures, staging it or simply seated. So pairs or groups can create their own ending in front of the rest of the group.

Invent stories with asanas

We give each group or pair 3 to 5 asanas. And from these they create a story that includes them and they present it in front of the group.

Cards with animals

We make some cards with animals relating to asanas. We pass them around and each child chooses 1 or 2, depending on the time we wish to dedicate to this exercise. We place the cards in front of the mats so that we can see all the animals. So we go around doing all the postures. The teacher shows it first and depending on the energy of the group, we can choose to make it dynamic and active or slow and gentle. We can also introduce themes like constant breathing, progression, tension and release, closed eyes, etc.

Connect animals

In a circle one of the participants picks an animal card at random. We execute its posture and we start a story. A second participant takes a card, we execute the asana and we continue with the story from where it was left...until the end of the circle or of the story.

The possibilities are infinite, our job is to soak ourselves with the principles of yoga so that they can be developed through each one of these possibilities.

SHAVASANA

You can chose to finish the session with deep relaxation, no longer than 10 minutes. This may help calming the vibrations, concentrate the energy again and it gives participants time to integrate, feel and observe the events and benefits that happened during the session.

It will most likely be difficult to maintain children physically inactive, so a good way to let them enter a relaxation state is to use visualisation. It means to induce the child in a state of relaxation and to guide a visualisation that lets their imagination flourish. Allowing glimpses of scenarios and characters, allowing them to put faces, names, details and colours on them.

5.2. JNANA YOGA: APPLYING YOGA PHILOSOPHY

The aim is to take the qualities that yoga exercises can develop and to awaken the self-inquiry attitude, being aware of our thoughts, words and actions. It is important not to fall into a black-and-white morality where there are “good” and “bad” actions or where there are specific religious beliefs. On the contrary, we want to open windows and doors, to provide new ways of relating to oneself and to others, to suggest and let the families come to their own conclusions.

The eight limbs of yoga are a very good way to share the depth and the different elements of the yoga practice. For families we can simplify them and present them in a more understandable way, connecting them to exercises we have done in the class. For example every week we could take one of the eight paths and apply it throughout the session. Another way would be to choose a topic and create a group discussion at the beginning or at the end of the class. Here are some examples on how to thread the philosophy within the class:

Satsang

Satsang in Sanskrit means “gathering together for the truth”. A simple and direct way is to have discussions at the beginning of the class about a specific topic. Then, throughout the class we might recall these discussions or even make them a theme for the whole session. Here are some examples:

- What is Yoga? [they could answer relaxation, calming, Aums, etc....] In Sanskrit Yoga means Union. But Union of what? [they answer. We gather the answers and unify them in one sentence] So we can say that yoga is the union of the body, the mind and the heart. So today we are going to practice exercises for these 3 parts to unify them.
- What is Meditation? [...] And why do we practice meditation? [...] How does it help us to do AcroYoga? [...] And how can it help us in our lives at school, at work or at home? [...]

- Do you sometimes lose your patience with some people? [...] And does it happen with some friends but not with others? [...] And in that moment, when they push your buttons and you react with a bad look or word or gesture, whose fault is it? [...] And who is responsible? [...] Do you have the control still? Or did you give away your emotional “remote control”? [...] So in fact, you can decide every time if you give them the power or if you keep the power [...] This week we can observe moments where others push our buttons and we can decide not to give them the power. You want to try this?
- Satya. Do you always tell the truth? [...] What does it mean to tell the truth? [...] What about when for example we don't like something that a friend gives us, but we don't want to hurt their feelings, would you tell them the truth? How would you say it to not hurt their feelings? [...]
- When we have a misunderstanding with someone there is usually two ways of reacting: pointing it out and reacting bad towards the other, creating pain to the other person; or not saying anything and keeping it to ourselves but this often is painful and disturbing for ourselves. How do you react? [...] How can we find a way to express what we need without hurting others or oneself? [...] When someone points at us we usually defend ourselves “You did something wrong”. But what happens when they just tell us their feelings “Your words hurt me”? [...] We can also try to say our feelings before pointing at or judging others. And just ask for what we need.

Experiential. Talking about an experience they just had is always going to be much more effective than bringing in abstract dialogs. After experiencing meditation or Pranayama they still feel the effects and in that moment we just need to bring the awareness in the effects of it. After Pranayama or meditation we can simply point out to the effect of it or ask them: How do you feel now? What sensations did appear? Taking in their answers we can suggest that whenever they want to calm down, or focus, or get energy they can use this or that exercise that we just did.



Games. Games are one of the best tools to experience different roles. They are not only fun but they represent different ways of relating to one another. In some games we need teamwork, cooperation, others require speed or mental agility. So a good way to introduce philosophy is to link with a game. For example, if we see the group needs some cohesion, we can propose some cooperative games and after the game have a little comment of how working together they achieved the goal. Another time we might want to loosen them up and propose an ice-breaker game. If we want to talk about non-violence (Ahimsa), we can find games where we need to help others.

During the games it is a good opportunity for us as teachers to step back and observe the group dynamics. In these moments we can see who is feeling more up or more down so that in the next activity we can uplift the ones who might need this.

5.3. BHAKTI YOGA

Bhakti Yoga is the practice of loving devotion towards a personal God to achieve total awareness (Samadhi). Each devotee chooses their own god to worship and the most popular ones are: Ganesha, Krishna, Radha, Rama, Sita, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Shiva, Parvati, Durga among others.

There was a Yoga Sutras text for the Raja Yoga practice and there is also a text for the Bhakti Yoga practitioners. The Narada Bhakti Sutra is a well known sutra venerated within the traditions of Hinduism, purportedly spoken by the famous sage, Narada. Within the text Narada explains the perfectional stage of pure devotion; the process to achieve this state; gives quotations from other Vedic personalities on the subject matter; things to avoid when developing Bhakti; and finally explains the nature of selfless love and the different forms of attachment to the Supreme person.

The practices of Bhakti Yoga can be praying, mantra singing or Japa (repetition of a mantra or divine name).

MANTRAS

In Family AcroYoga mantras are a great tool to bring the group together, uplift our hearts and focus our minds. Mantra means “tool for the mind”. It is a powerful way to meditate, to focus our attention only in one object and it takes us to a higher vibration, it invites us to look inside, to open our hearts, to feel and connect with others.

There are many ways to create and sing mantras in our classes. Here are a few examples:

- Instruments. Whenever there is an instrument to sing along with, the success is guaranteed. Bringing a guitar, flute, djembe or harmonium will always be well received.
- Clapping. Sitting in a circle we can sing along with a recorded mantra and find the rhythm clapping our hands, clapping on our thighs or on our chest. If the child sits in front of the parent they can clap on their thighs and the parents can softly clap on the child's back.
- Percussion. Get a few small percussion instruments (rattle, stick, maraca, bells, triangle, etc...) and give them to a few of the students in the circle. Each one can play along while we sing and whenever they want they pass it to the person next to them. We keep singing and playing until everyone had at least one instrument.
- Dancing. Standing in a circle we all hold hands and close our eyes. We play a mantra that will start slow and will progressively get more upbeat. We warm up the body and move as we sing. Keeping the eyes closed. As the mantra grows and becomes faster we start dancing along with the music.
- Spiral. Standing and holding hands in a circle. With a soft mantra we start just singing on the spot. Half way through the mantra the teacher starts walking towards one side making the whole circle walk together. A bit later the teacher will release one of the hands and start spiraling in. The rest of the students follow until they reach a closed spiral.
- Walking. Standing in a circle we take 4 steps towards the center and 4 steps back. Once we are in sync we ask the students to listen to what we say or sing as we go forward and to repeat as we all go back. It is a call and response game walking in a circle. From little phrases and melodies we can start developing a mantra. We can also ask them to take a round each to call and the group responds.

- Canon. Choose a mantra that can have at least 2 different voices. Once they all know by heart the mantra and the 2 voices we can split the group in two and sing in canon. We can be sitting in a circle or walking around the space.

5.4. KARMA YOGA

Karma yoga is the integration of the selfless actions that we can do during our daily life to help others. During the Yoga sessions, we can share some tricks, set challenges or propose little games to transform life into a conscious and entertaining game through which selfless love towards others will grow.

For example ask them if they have seen people caring for others in a selfless way that week? Ask them to do one selfless act during the upcoming week and talk about it in the next session.

An easy way to integrate karma yoga is to take care of the classroom. Taking turns, we can take care to place flowers on the altar, water the plants, make sure everything is in place, sweep the floor, light incense, massage the rest for the class, etc.

If the group and the context allows it, we can organise social actions to help or improve the life of the neighbourhood or the city. Likewise, we can get in touch with social organisations or entities that are in need and offer them a selfless service, for example, once every few months.

6. GAMES

Games are a great tool to warm up the body, activate the energy and break the ice. When choosing a game, we should keep in mind our initial objectives. We prefer games that are fun to play, but above all that help us awake qualities of the soul and stimulate the senses. Body expression games, externalising what we are, and experimenting new ways of acting



and feeling. Cooperative games, creating unity to develop the teamwork among the group and to awake the sense of safety and receptiveness inside the group. We pay special attention to possible abuse or isolation within the group. Creative games to awake their maximum potential. The main aim is that the families feel they have been playing throughout the entire session and to accomplish this, we are to feel that way too.

7. FAMILY ACROYOGA PRACTICE

7.1. FOUNDATIONS

Roles in Family AcroYoga. There are three primary roles in an AcroYoga practice: Base, Flyer, and Spotter.

- **Base** - this is the individual who has the most points of contact with the ground and is holding the weight of the Flyer. In AcroYoga this person is typically lying on the ground with the entire back torso in full contact. This enables both the arms and legs to be "bone-stacked" for maximum stability and support of the Flyer. This kind of basing is called L-basing. It is always the adult who is the base while doing Family AcroYoga. Bigger siblings can also base sometimes and an older child, if much bigger than her parent, and has sufficient maturity, might also base her parent.



- **Flyer** - this is the individual who is elevated off the ground by the Base. The Flyer can move into a series of dynamic positions, and generally lets gravity do the work for them. In Family AcroYoga it is the children who are the Flyers. Being a Flyer the child will develop balance, confidence, trust and core strength.
- **Spotter** - this is the individual who has an objective view of the partners, and whose entire focus is on making sure that the child lands safely in case of any slips. The spotter can also make recommendations to the Base and Flyer to improve their form. The Spotter must be an adult, or an older child. The Spotter cannot be smaller than the Flyer because the Spotter must be able to ensure safety and catch the Flyer, if the Flyer is falling.

Down. Down is a magic word. If someone in the trio feels unsure or unhappy about the pose or the flow, one can say DOWN, and the flyer has to come down to the ground IMMEDIATELY, and take a pause.

7.5 SPOTTING TECHNIQUES

In order to have fun safety is a primary condition. As teachers it is our responsibility to set a safe working space and offer the most efficient spotting techniques for each movement. The adults will be the spotters at all time.

Safe training space. To avoid falling and getting hurt, please make sure of the following before starting the workshop:

- There is lots of clear practice space around the practice area. Always make sure the head of the flyer is far away from walls or furniture.
- Furniture and other objects with sharp edges are moved from the direct play area
- For soft landings, place additional yoga mats around.
- When playing games make sure the floor is cleared so participants won't trip over things.



Spotter needed. When we are going to do something new, or doing something for the first time with a child, consider if a spotter is needed

Clarify what kind of spotting is needed. First of all everyone in the group needs to know what movement or transitions they will be doing. Second they all need to know what the spotter is going to be doing and where will he be standing. The primary responsibility of the spotter is the safety of the child.

Being very attentive. Falls and mishaps tend to happen suddenly. Stay close, with your hands ready, and keep your focus on the child. Even if it seems stable and easy for them we keep our guard up.

Give room for the adult basing and child flying to communicate. In many cases, it is more effective to let the base and flyer do the communication with no interference from a spotter. Be thoughtful about when and how we interfere in their communication. Often it is a good idea to wait till they come out of the pose and down, and then give our input.

Let the child know that we are present. When we - as a spotter- are out of the child's field of vision, it can sometimes be a good idea to gently touch the child and say: "I am right here".

Touch to show direction. As a spotter, we have the possibility to use touch for guiding the child. If it is okay for the base and the flyer, we can gently touch the child and say: "Move towards my hand".⁴

"Hot potato". As long as the spotter touches the child, neither the adult basing nor the child flying can feel how the balance is. Therefore we only touch the child, when needed. Good spotting is to physically interfere when needed. It is important that the spotter brings base and flyer into balance again and informs the base when he/she lets go of the child/flyer. When we

⁴ Rolf Andersen Meier 2015, CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION IN AcroYoga



can see that the child has found balance, we can practice the hot potato spotting. It is like we touch as if the child is a hot potato, we are touching softly and not too much. This is very good while spotting children, because we do not interfere in the balance, and at the same time we stay close to the child.

Inversions. It is very important to have good spotting when we do inversions. The child is upside down, and if it falls, it can hit the head hard. We always have to spot from the back and with the hands around the center or the hips of the child. We can use the “hot potato” spotting. The first time a child is doing an inversion it is recommended to do hands on spotting, holding the child in the position, so we are sure that the child will not fall.

8. MASSAGE

Everything that goes up must come down! The cool down is a very important part of the session so that the students can have some time to integrate all the activities, collect their thoughts and impressions and reorganize their body and soul with the experiences they just had. It is also an opportunity to share an activity that is gentle, soft and vulnerable. Acrobatics is very yang and here we cultivate, share and enjoy some yin energy. Some families don't have a moment where they can just rest together or massage each other, this is a precious opportunity. There are many techniques to achieve this state of releasing and digesting.

Massage for children offers a variety of health benefits. It is human nature to touch as a way of showing love and affection. This touch stimulates the body in positive ways to help it grow and develop. Massage is beneficial at any age but because children are still developing it can be especially helpful for them. Adult-child massage is a wonderful way to bond with children while offering them health benefits. Here are some examples of massage that we can use in Family AcroYoga.

8.1. PREPARATION FOR MASSAGE



Respect. Remember to first ask if there are parts of the body they don't want to be touched and to respect this.

Ask for what you want. And keep reminding the receiver to ask for what they want "more pressure, less pressure" and the giver to keep checking in.

Preparing the space. Prepare the space for the massage. Make sure that the child is lying comfortably and wears enough clothes so they do not get cold. Make sure to organize the room so that all the adults can see the demonstration. Place yoga mats and blankets to make it the massage space comfortable.

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Thich Nhat Hanh