

Program teaches children benefits of yoga

By Lauren Klein
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STAMFORD -- As Phoebe Fiore practiced breathing, she cooed as her breath swayed the delicate feather in her hand.

A 14-month-old toddler at the Childcare Learning Center on Palmer's Hill Road, Phoebe was learning how to control her breathing as part of the center's new yoga program to reduce obesity and anxiety in young children. "There are national studies that show the rise in obesity levels in toddlers," said Carol Sargent, child development director. "Physical development correlates with cognitive development and the yoga program (addressed) a lot of my concerns."

The yoga program will be an additional physical activity to the two, 45-minute outdoor play sessions the children have each day. Since most of the children are at the day care from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. while their parents work, the stretching and breathing incorporated in yoga also will help reduce the stress a child faces when he or she is around strangers and placed in group environments, Sargent said.

Nina Mukhametzyanov is a 14-month-old toddler who came to the center when she was a baby and still gets nervous around strangers.

When Nina teetered into the circular playroom for the yoga session, she cautiously eyed the unfamiliar instructor, Kim Beaumont. Gripping tightly to her teacher, Merzie Vallejo, she nearly broke out in tears.

"It's the first time they've ever seen me," Beaumont said. "It can be alarming and bewildering to see a new person; children have to process things at their own pace."

After a few poses that encouraged the toddlers to focus on breathing, such as standing on all fours -- known as downward facing dog -- stretching for their toes, and singing variations of traditional children's songs -- the "yogie-yogie" instead of the "hookie-pokie" -- Nina was smiling and enjoying the new activity.



"If you can bring anyone back to their breath you can relax them," said Beaumont, a native of Napier, New Zealand, and current Darien resident.

Beaumont started studying yoga seven years ago. After training with Yoga Kids in Long Beach, Ind., four years ago, she decided to start her own company, Kiwi Kreation, and teach children. She currently teaches children yoga at the Darien YWCA and the Darien United Methodist Church.

Beaumont will teach four, 10-student sessions once a week for six weeks. Infants from 14 months to 3 years of age will participate in the yoga program, which is the only one of its kind in Stamford.

"It's very different teaching kids than adults," Beaumont said. "The fundamental thing is not to force them into the pose because it's important to let them find their own way."

She uses songs, age-appropriate books and materials such as feathers and stickers to incorporate the "eight intelligences of yoga" -- linguistic, logical-mathematics, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist.

By using a variety of materials, the students also develop their language skills, an important skill to practice at a toddler's age, Sargent said.

The teachers will be present to both help the students and learn techniques to calm students during the day when they get frustrated or overwhelmed.

"We're not just concentrating on preparation for kindergarten," said Sargent, who hopes to get enough funding to continue the program next spring. "This kind of program works on self-esteem, social skills and cognition; it's all inter-related."

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