

STORIES, SONGS, and STRETCHES!

Creating Playful Storytimes
with Yoga and Movement

KATIE SCHERRER



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Contents

Introduction ix

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|----|
| 1 | An Introduction to Yoga | 1 |
| 2 | Yoga, Movement, and Early Learning | 9 |
| 3 | Yoga Storytime Fundamentals | 19 |
| 4 | Basic Yoga Poses for Yoga Storytime | 37 |
| 5 | Ready-to-Use Yoga Storytime Plans | 61 |

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Animal Friends | 62 |
| Buggin' Out | 64 |
| A Day at the Beach | 66 |
| Down on the Farm | 69 |
| Hippity Hop | 71 |
| How Do I Feel? | 73 |
| Let's Play Yoga! | 75 |
| Rhyme Time | 77 |
| Shapes Everywhere | 79 |
| Spring Has Sprung | 81 |
| Strong and Mighty Trees | 83 |
| Yoguitos | 86 |

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| 6 | Recommended Resources for Yoga Storytime Programming | 89 |
|---|--|----|

Index 95

Introduction

How are you feeling, right now, as you pick up this book and begin to look through it? Perhaps you notice excitement about the idea of incorporating yoga into your storytime programs. Perhaps there is skepticism about the role of yoga in a library setting or for this particular age group. Perhaps you like the idea of making your storytime programs more physically active but feel a little uncertain about how to start. Maybe you're just curious. Whatever you are feeling, try right now just to notice it, with as little judgment as possible. Whether you love yoga, hate it, or are ambivalent toward it, just notice these as passing thoughts, the way you would notice fluffy clouds moving through a bright blue sky. Notice if there are any physical sensations that accompany your thoughts, paying particular attention to the sensations at the jaw, the shoulders, across the chest, and in the stomach. If you encounter any sensations of gripping or tightness, is it possible to soften in those areas? What effects do you experience in the mind when you allow the body to relax in this way? Just notice. No matter your experience with or opinion of yoga, you are invited now to suspend your judgment and explore this work with an open mind.

Yoga is a contemplative movement practice that people have been using for thousands of years, first in India and now in all corners of the globe, to deepen their self-awareness, improve their physical health, and reduce their experience of stress. As one of my yoga teacher friends often says, "Yoga changes us, and yoga keeps us exactly the same." What she means is that many people find that the practice of yoga helps them feel relaxed and confident, allowing their true selves to shine brightly as they find some of their unnecessary or unhelpful habits beginning

to drop away. As you explore this manual, you may find that it encourages you to change your storytime—and keep it the same. This work is not intended to present a radical new approach to designing and implementing preschool storytime, abandoning the early literacy practices and other traditions that characterize storytimes across the country and beyond. As you read with an open mind, you will find that this work presents yoga and movement as tools that librarians and others can use intentionally to engage children and families through embodied play. This work honors and builds upon traditional storytime, as it presents new ideas for using a millennia-old movement practice to enhance it.

This work is written specifically for public librarians working in youth services departments and presenting storytime programs to preschool-age audiences. However, its use is not limited to the library setting. Early childhood educators may discover ideas for incorporating yoga and movement into their circle times or daily transitions. Children’s yoga teachers may use it to deepen their understanding of child development and broaden their exposure to high-quality children’s literature. Finally, parents and caregivers may glean some ideas for how to share yoga at home with their young children in a fun and engaging way.

This book begins with a discussion of yoga and how it has changed over the centuries. It dispels common myths or misunderstandings about yoga and moves on to discuss the evidence-based benefits of yoga to adults and children. Guidance is given on how to locate a qualified children’s yoga teacher to lead library programming, if necessary. Chapter 2 dives more deeply into the benefits of the use of yoga and movement with preschool children, specifically exploring how yoga can support children’s physical, social-emotional, and early literacy development. In chapter 3, step-by-step direction is provided regarding how to design and launch a yoga storytime program. Guidance is offered on general program design, materials selection, and the logistical arrangements of physical space, props, and marketing. A case study of librarians regularly offering a successful yoga storytime program in their library is shared. Chapter 4 presents thirteen basic yoga poses and more than two dozen variations of those poses, along with specific suggestions for how to use the poses in a yoga storytime setting to stimulate children’s early learning. Chapter 5 offers a year’s worth of monthly yoga storytime program plans, fully designed and ready to use. This work concludes with a list of professional materials and online resources to assist you in your yoga storytime planning. A complete bibliography of all materials used in the sample yoga storytime plans and suggested picture books for such programming are also included.

This work represents a unique culmination of my experience in two seemingly distant worlds, both of which have been central to my life for well over a decade. My library work embraces my passion for empowering diverse and traditionally underserved families through strategic outreach, creative partnerships, and culturally relevant programming. Over the years that I have been working in and with libraries, I have also been studying yoga and mindfulness. These practices have both changed me and kept me the same, allowing me to slowly release unhelpful

patterns and come closer to my most authentic self. This process is a lifelong one; though I am a yoga teacher today, I am always a student first. Sharing yoga with children of all ages (from toddlers to teens) as a children's yoga instructor has kept me honest and dedicated to my own practice—those of us who work with children know that they sure can smell a fake! It has also made me an even more fervent supporter of public libraries and all they have to offer to families. All these experiences have come together to prepare me to write the book you are reading today.

It is my sincere hope that this work will inspire you to let your personality shine more fully in the storytimes you lead, regardless of whether you ever include a single yoga pose. I believe that our role as children's librarians is to facilitate *connection* for the families we serve—connection with books and reading, with the public library as an institution, and with one another. When we are authentic and present in our work, willing to connect *ourselves* with the families we serve, we create an environment in which it is possible for all these other connections to develop. Yoga storytime can be a special way in which to foster this connection, a program in which fun and creativity flow freely. Enjoy the journey.

An Introduction to Yoga

What is yoga? This seemingly straightforward question can elicit a variety of responses, depending on who is asked. Based on one's experience and perspective, yoga may be thought of as a form of exercise, a spiritual practice, a fitness fad, a relaxation strategy, or an esoteric form of self-torture! Often, yoga is defined as a union of the body, heart, and mind; yoga is what we experience when these seemingly disparate parts of the self are brought together. In order to move forward in discussing how yoga can be used in the storytime setting, it is helpful to first understand a bit more about what yoga is and is not. The following section is intended to provide this context.

A Brief History of Yoga

Yoga is a contemplative movement practice that originated in ancient India, where it has been practiced for at least two thousand years.¹ The word *yoga* can be translated as “to yoke, join, or concentrate.”² In the past, yoga was taught directly from one teacher to one student, mostly men. Great emphasis was placed on meditation. Physical practices were a means to purify and prepare the body to sit in meditation for long periods of time. Two of the most important historical yoga texts are the *Yoga Sutra*, credited to the Indian sage Patanjali, and the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*.

MODERN YOGA

In the late 1800s, yoga masters from India began traveling to the West to share the practice. From that period on, the practice of yoga went through tremendous change. European gymnastics and an overall enthusiasm for health and physical

strength prevalent in the early 1900s influenced yoga greatly. Teachers offered yoga as a system for full-body health, and their students began to demonstrate and teach their incredible feats of physical strength to large groups.³ Western interest in Eastern philosophy also increased interest in yoga and influenced how it was taught to Westerners.⁴ Perhaps the most influential teacher of this time was T. Krishnamacharya, whose students B. K. S. Iyengar (founder of the alignment-based Iyengar Yoga), K. Pattabhi Jois (founder of the intense vinyasa-style Ashtanga practice), Indra Devi (yoga teacher to Hollywood stars in the mid-1900s), and T. K. V. Desikachar (founder of Viniyoga) went on to have tremendous influence on the spread of yoga in the West.

YOGA TODAY

Today there is a yoga practice available for every body type and personality style, from fast-paced *vinyasa* classes to deeply relaxing restorative classes to yoga that has been adapted for special populations, such as senior citizens, pregnant women, and children. Yoga is typically taught in a group setting by a trained yoga teacher in a yoga studio, though with the rise of yoga's popularity, it is common to find classes being held today in gyms, community centers, public parks, and even libraries. Yoga classes commonly include yoga poses (*asana*), breathing practices (*pranayama*), meditation, and relaxation.

Yoga Myths

Perhaps the most important yoga myth to dispel is that yoga is a religion; it is not. Though the roots of yoga are those of a spiritual practice, today yoga is generally practiced in a completely secular manner. There is plenty of yoga philosophy available for interested students to explore and apply to their lives as desired, and some may find that yoga helps them develop or deepen their spiritual lives. However, many others simply enjoy the physical and mental benefits of the stretching and relaxation the practice offers. What a student takes away from a yoga practice is ultimately up to the individual.

Another pervasive yoga myth worth addressing is that one must be “flexible,” possess a certain level of physical fitness, or look a certain way to practice yoga. This is not true. Yoga is indeed for everybody, and a qualified yoga teacher will know how to help students modify the practice to work best for their bodies. It doesn't matter if you can't yet (or ever!) touch your toes, or if you can easily press yourself up into a full backbend when you first step out of bed in the morning—yoga is for everyone.⁵

Yoga Benefits

Though not long ago considered “fringe” or “counterculture,” yoga in the United States today is very much mainstream. Thirty-six million people are practicing yoga

in the United States, and this number continues to increase year after year.⁶ Over 28 percent of Americans have participated in a yoga class at some point in their lives, often citing physical health and stress reduction benefits as their motivators.⁷ The scientific community has taken note of these claims of positive mental and physical benefits. Scientific research has found that practicing yoga can do the following:⁸

- Reduce back pain
- Reduce stress
- Lower heart rate and blood pressure
- Help relieve anxiety, depression, and insomnia
- Improve overall physical fitness, strength, and flexibility

Yoga and Preschool Children

A child's yoga is quite different from yoga for adults. Though many poses and practices are used in both adult and children's yoga settings, there is no expectation of precise form, rigorous flow, or extended silence in a child's practice. Yoga can be shared with children in a variety of contexts and by a variety of people, such as yoga teachers in studios, classroom teachers in schools, librarians in storytime, and parents or other caregivers at home.

As with adult yoga, yoga for children is becoming increasingly popular. A 2012 study found that 1.7 million children had practiced yoga in the previous year.⁹ As with adult yoga practitioners, the number of children practicing yoga continues to rise annually.¹⁰ Today, children are practicing yoga in over 940 schools across the United States.¹¹ Some researchers have wondered whether the benefits of an adult yoga practice are applicable to children as well as whether there are other benefits to children specific to their developmental stage. Though less quality research is available on the specific benefits of yoga for children, some studies have found that yoga can help children do the following:

- Improve self-regulation¹² (which is considered an important component of school readiness)
- Reduce the negative effects of stress and stress response¹³
- Promote attention and social skills¹⁴
- Improve endurance, strength, motor planning, motor performance, static balance, bilateral coordination, and flexibility¹⁵
- Improve cardiovascular health¹⁶

Research specific to yoga programs in school settings has found numerous positive benefits to children as well, including increased emotional balance, attentional control, and cognitive efficiency as well as reduced anxiety, negative thought patterns, reactivity, and negative behavior.¹⁷ No studies have found adverse effects on children from practicing yoga, suggesting that yoga has a high safety profile.¹⁸

Children's Yoga Classes Compared with Yoga Storytime

Although a children's yoga class and a yoga storytime will be similar in many ways, they are not the same thing. The intentions of the two will be slightly different. The skills, knowledge, and training of the person leading the programs will be different as well. Let's take a look at the two in a bit more detail.

CHILDREN'S YOGA CLASSES

Teaching yoga to children in an age-appropriate manner is the key goal of a children's yoga class. Yoga classes for children can be offered in many settings, including yoga studios, fitness clubs, community centers, and even libraries. In a children's yoga class, yoga poses will be taught along with breathing practices, meditation, yoga philosophy, and the like. Teaching yoga to children requires specialized knowledge of anatomy, child development, yoga poses, and appropriate modifications for children. Therefore, children's yoga classes should be led by a credentialed yoga teacher who has specific training in the instruction of yoga to children.

YOGA STORYTIME

The goals of a yoga storytime, as with any storytime, are to engage children with books and language and to model practices that support early learning to adult caregivers. In a yoga storytime, yoga and movement are used as tools to help reach these goals; they are means rather than ends. Nearly anyone with the necessary skills and training required to lead professional storytimes for families and young children can add basic yoga poses and movement into their storytime programs. If you are presenting a yoga storytime, it is advisable that you have a regular yoga practice of your own in order to be comfortable moving your own body into the various yoga poses you are sharing with children. Be sure to clarify that you are not a yoga teacher, particularly if you receive questions from adults about yoga. Have a list of recommended children's yoga resources and local classes that you can give to families if they are interested in a more yoga-focused program than what you are offering.

HIRING A CHILDREN'S YOGA TEACHER

If you are interested in providing yoga classes for children at your library, or if you would like to offer a yoga storytime, but do not have any staff who are comfortable leading this style of programming, then you will need to hire a children's yoga teacher to present the program, either on her own or in cooperation with library staff. The following are some key points to look for when hiring a yoga teacher.

- *Appropriate yoga credentials.* Teaching yoga is not a highly regulated profession in the way other fields, such as medicine, are. In most states, anyone can call himself a yoga teacher, regardless of whether he has completed any training. That being said, Yoga Alliance (www.yogaalliance.org) is a nonprofit organization that works to regulate the industry. Most yoga studios require their

teachers to have completed a minimum of two hundred hours of training at a Registered Yoga School (RYS) and to have undergone the process of registering with Yoga Alliance to become a Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT). Anyone using the RYT credential can be verified through the Yoga Alliance website. Someone who has obtained this credential has completed at least two hundred hours of training in the instruction of yoga; however, the amount of time spent learning about the instruction of yoga to children (if any) varies from program to program.

- *Specific training in teaching yoga to children.* Dozens of programs provide training in the instruction of yoga to children, including Childlight Yoga, Yoga Kids, Karma Kids Yoga, Rainbow Yoga, Little Flower Yoga, and many more. Yoga teachers who are already RYTs can complete an additional ninety-five hours of training specific to the instruction of yoga for children to obtain the Yoga Alliance designation of Registered Children's Yoga Teacher (RCYT). Someone who has obtained this credential has completed a minimum of two hundred hours of training in the instruction of yoga in general and an additional ninety-five hours of training just in the instruction of yoga to children. This certification is the gold standard for children's yoga teachers.
- *Experience working with children.* Experience can matter almost as much as training when it comes to teaching yoga to children. A Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT) may or may not be qualified to teach yoga to children, depending on her experience. When hiring a yoga teacher for kids, look for specific training in children's yoga instruction or experience working with children. Ideal children's yoga teachers will have a combination of both.
- *Liability insurance.* Professional yoga teachers are required by most yoga studios to carry their own liability insurance. Ask any yoga teacher you are considering hiring to supply proof of this insurance. In addition to providing extra protection to the library in the extremely low chance of an injury, being able to supply proof of this insurance is a mark of the teacher's professionalism.

If you are interested in hiring a teacher to teach yoga classes for kids at your library, look for someone who is either a certified children's yoga teacher through one of the many available children's yoga programs or a Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT) with experience teaching yoga to children. A Registered Children's Yoga Teacher (RCYT) is ideal but may be difficult to find. Depending on your area, expect to pay a rate of \$30 to \$75 for a forty-five-minute program.

Concluding Thoughts

Yoga is understood differently by different people. It is a contemplative movement practice that has changed greatly over time, spreading from its roots in ancient India to every corner of the globe. Today there are specific yoga practices available for all people, including children. As concerns regarding childhood obesity¹⁹ and the effects of screen time²⁰ rise, yoga offers a healthy opportunity for children to

engage in physical activity, learn strategies for self-regulation, and interact socially with other children and adults. As the next chapter will explore, yoga and storytime combined can be powerful for supporting young children in their early learning. Whether a storytime leader chooses to incorporate yoga on his own or decides to hire a qualified children's yoga teacher, the possibilities are unlimited for what a yoga storytime can look like in action and how it can help engage young children in body, heart, and mind.

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Index

Titles of books and CDs are shown in italic.

Titles of songs and rhymes are shown in quotes.

A

The ABCs of Yoga for Kids (Power), 22, 38, 55
activities. *See* Early Learning Tie-Ins;
Movement Extensions
adults, setting expectations for, 32–33
age considerations, 29
Akron-Summit County Public Library,
30–31
All in a Day (Rylant), 23, 70
Animal Friends program, 62–63
Animal Opposites (Horáček), 62
animal sounds activities, 41, 70, 84
animals
 books about, 22–23
 poses of, 40–42, 43–49, 54–55, 63, 68,
 71, 87
 programs about, 62–63, 69–70, 71–72
Anna and the Cupcakes (Koral), 26, 65
“Apple Tree” (Koral), 26, 59n5, 85
apps, 27
automation, process of, 9–10

B

“Back to the Farm” (Koral), 26, 70
Bari Koral Family Rock Band, 25–26, 28,
45, 59n4–5, 65, 70, 85

Bassin, Lianne, 26, 73
beach-themed programs, 66–68
behavior standards, 32–33
Beliveau, Kathy, 23–24, 67
Belly Rest Pose, 50
Berkner, Laurie, 26, 64, 68
Big Animals activity, 48
bilingual programs, 86–87
Bird Pose, 58–59, 84, 87
Blooming Flower activity, 81–82
Boat Pose, 39–40, 46, 78
book selection, 21–24
books, recommended, 22–24, 92–94
brain development, 10
Breathe (Magoon), 23, 68
Brinkman, Devon, 31
Brooklyn Public Library, 28
Bug Pose, 50, 63, 65, 80
Buggin’ Out program, 64–65
“Bumblebee Buzz Buzz” (Berkner), 64
Bunting, Eve, 69
Butterfly, Butterfly (Horáček), 22, 64
“Butterfly” (Bari Koral Family Rock Band),
25–26, 59n4, 65
Butterfly Life Cycle activity, 52, 86
Butterfly Pose, 51–52, 63, 65, 86
“Bye, Good-bye,” 74

C

Cabrera, Jane, 22–23, 78, 81
Call Me Tree (Gonzalez), 23, 85
 Carle, Eric, 22, 64, 75
 Cat Pose, 40–42, 63
 Caterpillar Pose, 54–55, 65, 86
 CDs, recommended, 91–92
 Chair Pose, 42–43, 63, 71, 73, 87
 children
 behavior standards and, 32–33
 classes vs. storytimes for, 4–5
 physical activity recommendations
 for, 11
 yoga and preschoolers, 3–6
 children’s librarians, role of, xi
 children’s yoga teachers, 4–5
 Child’s Pose, 53–54, 68
 chimes, 33
 Circle Pose, 50, 63, 86
 CJ (artist), 80
 Clam Pose, 52, 67
 “Clap and Sing Hello,” 75
 “Clap Your Hands” (They Might Be
 Giants), 26, 71
 Cleland, Andrea, 91
 closing songs, 63, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80,
 82, 85, 87
 Cocoon Pose, 50, 52, 86
 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and
 Emotional Learning (CASEL), 11–12
 Colorado State Library, 28
 competencies, social-emotional, 11–12
 Connell, Gill, 10
 Corpse Pose. See Rest Pose
 Cosmic Kids Yoga, 28, 38, 59n1, 90
 Cousins, Lucy, 16
 Cow Pose, 40–42, 63, 80, 84
 credentials for teachers, 4–5
 Crescent Moon Pose, 56–57, 68, 79, 87
 Cronin, Doreen, 21
 cross-lateral movements, 10

D

“Dance for the Sun” (Willey), 25–26, 45,
 76
 Davis, Katie, 22, 71
 A Day at the Beach program, 66–68
 Desikachar, T. K. V., 2
 Devi, Indra, 2
 dialogic reading, 13
 digital tools, 27–29
 Dinosaur Pose, 48–49

Dog Pose, 43–45, 63, 75–76, 84, 87
 Doherty, Laura, 15, 26, 62, 67, 68
 Dolphin Pose, 43–44, 67
 Donkey Pose, 43–44
 Down on the Farm program, 69–70
 Downward-Facing Dog Pose, 43–45, 63,
 75–76, 84, 87
 Dr. Jean, 69
 Dragon Pose, 48–49
 Dragonfly Pose, 53, 59, 63, 65, 81–82
 Duck Pose, 42, 63, 84, 87

E

Early Learning Tie-Ins
 Big Animals, 48
 Exploring Opposites, 57, 63
 Fishy Rhyme Time, 46–47
 Five Green and Speckled Frogs, 43, 72
 Friendship Grove, 59
 One-on-One Reading Time, 51
 Shapes and Letters Guessing Game,
 52, 80
 Telling a Story with Sound, 41–42
 early literacy, 13–14, 55, 90
 Egg, Egg, Bird activity, 54
 Egg Pose, 53, 71, 86
 Elephant Pose, 47–48, 62–63, 80
 embodied play, 15–16, 19, 34
 emotional development, 11–13
 emotion-themed programs, 73–74
 empathy, 12
 Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR),
 13–14, 55, 90
 Exploring Opposites activity, 57, 63
 Extended Mountain Pose, 44–45, 56–57,
 87

F

farm-themed programs, 69–70
The Feel Good Book (Parr), 74
 Feeling Faces activity, 73
The Feelings Book (Parr), 13
 feelings-themed programs, 73–74
 Fierce Pose. See Chair Pose
 Fish Pose, 15–16, 46–47, 66–68, 71, 80, 87
 Fishy Rhyme Time activity, 46–47
 “Five Green and Speckled Frogs,” 43, 72
 “Five Little Monkeys,” 78
 Flamingo Pose, 56
 Flannel Friday, 24
 flannelboards, 24, 73, 80, 84
 flexibility, 2, 3, 9

Flower Pose, 52, 82
 “Follow the Leader,” 87
 Forest of Trees Pose, 59n6
 Forward Fold, 45, 47–48, 57, 62–63, 68, 77, 80
 Fox, Mem, 23, 80
 Friendship Grove activity, 59
 Frog Pose, 42–43, 63, 71, 87
From Head to Toe (Carle), 22, 75

G

Gill, Jim, 26, 71, 73
 Giraffe Pose, 56–57, 63
 “The Goldfish” (Laurie Berkner Band), 26, 68
 Gomi, Taro, 21–22, 62
 Gonzalez, Maya Christina, 23, 82, 85
A Good Day (Henkes), 65
 “Goodbye Children” (Reid-Naiman), 78
 “Good-bye Friends,” 76
 “Goodbye Song” (Doherty), 68
Gracias/Thanks (Mora), 23, 87
 Grasshopper Pose, 48–49
 gratitude (*aparigraha*), 12, 87
 Grow from a Seed to a Tree activity, 59

H

“Hands Go Up,” 71
 Happy Baby Pose, 50, 63
Happy Lemons (Ralph’s World), 26, 63
 Happy Spines activity, 57
 hard work (*tapas*), 12
 “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” 25, 81
 “Hello Everybody,” 66
 “Hello Neighbor” (Dr. Jean), 69
 Henkes, Kevin, 22–23, 65
 “Here, Here,” 62
 Hesselberth, Joyce, 79
 “Hickory Dickory Dock,” 77
 High Lunge, 48–49
 Hippity Hop program, 71–72
Hooray for Fish! (Cousins), 16
 Horáček, Petr, 22, 62, 64, 86
 Horse Pose. See Dog Pose
 How Do I Feel? program, 73–74
Hurry! Hurry! (Bunting), 69
 Hutchins, Pat, 84

I

I Am Yoga (Verde), 23, 73
I Don’t Want to Be a Frog (Petty), 72
I Know the River Loves Me (Gonzalez), 23, 82

I Love Our Earth (Martin), 23, 85
 I Swam in the Ocean activity, 46
I Went Walking (Williams), 24
 “I’m a Little Fish” (Doherty), 15, 26, 67
I’m a Rock Star (Joanie Leeds and the Nightlights), 26, 73
 “I’m a Tree, I Have Four Needs,” 83–84
 “I’m in the Mood” (Raffi), 73
 Insight Timer, 27
 Internet resources, 90–91
 Isadora, Rachel, 45
 “It’s Time to Say Goodbye to All Our Friends,” 87
 “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” 64
 Iyengar, B. K. S., 2, 38

J

Jaeger, Sally, 66
 Jbrary, 28
 Joanie Leeds and the Nightlights, 26, 73
 Johnson County Library, 28
 Jois, K. Pattabhi, 2
Jump, Frog, Jump! (Kalan), 22, 71
 “Jump, Jump” (Joanie Leeds and the Nightlights), 26, 73
 “Jump Up, Turn Around” (Gill), 26, 71

K

Kalan, Robert, 22, 71
 Karma Kids Yoga, 26, 75, 77
 Kids Yoga Stories, 38, 90
 King County Library System, 28
 Koral, Bari, 25–26, 28, 45, 59n4–5, 65, 70, 85
 Krishnamacharya, T., 2

L

Laínez, René Colato, 70
 Lara, Linda, 82
 LaRochelle, David, 41
 The Laurie Berkner Band, 26, 64, 68
 LeBox, Annette, 23, 63
 “Let’s All Clap,” 64
 Let’s Play Yoga! program, 75–76
 letters, activities with, 40, 52, 55
 liability insurance, 5
 librarians, role of, xi
 libraries, case study of, 30–31
 Lion Pose, 51, 63, 73
 Lionni, Leo, 22, 68
 listening stories, 23, 24

- Little eLit, 27
 Lizard Play activity, 49
 Lizard Pose, 48–49
 Lobster Pose, 40–41, 67, 68
 Locust Pose. See Fish Pose
 Luján, Jorge, 86
- M**
- Magoon, Scott, 23, 68
Mariposa, Mariposa (Horáček), 86
 marketing and promotion, 34–35
 Martin, Bill, Jr., 23, 85
 materials selection, 21–29
 mats, 34
 McCarthy, Cheryl, 10
 meditation, 27, 35–36
Mindfulness (Williams and Penman), 36
 modern yoga, 1–2
 Monkey Jumps activity, 42, 63, 77, 84
Moo! (LaRochelle), 41
 Mora, Pat, 23, 87
 “The More We Get Together,” 80
 Mouse Pose, 53, 63, 77
 movement
 - automation and, 9–10
 - early literacy and, 13–14
 - social-emotional learning and, 11–13
 - songs for, 15, 26, 65, 66–67, 69, 71, 75
 - yoga and, 9–16
 Movement Extensions
 - Blooming Flower, 81–82
 - Butterfly Life Cycle, 52, 86
 - Egg, Egg, Bird, 54
 - Feeling Faces Flannelboard, 73
 - Grow from a Seed to a Tree, 59
 - Happy Spines, 57
 - I Swam in the Ocean, 46
 - Lizard Play, 49
 - Making Animal Sounds, 41
 - Monkey Jumps, 42, 63, 77, 84
 - overview, 38
 - Playful Elephants, 47–48
 - River Adventure, 40
 - “S” Is for “Snake,” 55
 - Sun Salutation, 44–45, 59–2, 75–76, 82
 - Wiggle and Rest, 50*Moví la mano/I Moved My Hand* (Luján), 86
A Moving Child Is a Learning Child (Gill and McCarthy), 10
- Moving Rhymes for Modern Times* (Gill), 26, 71
 “Muévete” (Nathalia), 86
 music. See songs
 music streaming services, 29
 musical instruments, 33
My Friends (Gomi), 21–22, 62
 myths about yoga, 2
- N**
- Namaste Kid, 31, 90
 naming considerations, 34
 Nathalia, 86
 National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), 11
 natural world, celebration of, 23–24
Nighty-Night, Cooper (Numeroff), 78
 “Now It’s Time to Say Good-bye,” 85
 Numeroff, Laura, 78
 nursery rhymes, 77–78
- O**
- ocean-themed programs, 66–68
 “Old McDonald Had a Farm,” 70
Once Upon a Mat (Namaste Kid), 31, 90
 “One Elephant Went Out to Play,” 47–48
 One-on-One Reading Time activity, 51
 online resources, 90–91
 opening songs, 62, 64, 66, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77, 81, 83, 86
 opposites, as theme, 57, 62–63
Over in the Meadow (Cabrera), 22, 81
- P**
- parents, setting expectations for, 32–33
 Parr, Todd, 13, 23–24, 74, 76
The Peace Book (Parr), 23–24, 76
Peace Is an Offering (LeBox), 23, 63
 Penman, Danny, 36
 Petty, Dev, 72
 phonological awareness, 14, 25
 physical activity recommendations, 11
 picture books, 22–24, 92–94
 planning template, 21
 play, embodied, 15–16, 19, 34
 Playful Elephants activity, 47–48
 poses. See yoga poses
 Power, Teresa Anne, 22, 38, 55
 preparation exercises, 35–36
 preschoolers. See children
 professional resources, 89–90

program design, 19–21
 promotion and marketing, 34–35

R

Rachel's Day in the Garden (Shardlow),
 23–24, 82
 Raffi, 73
 Ralph's World, 26, 63
 reading, dialogic, 13
 recommended resources, 22–23, 26, 28,
 38, 89–94
 Registered Yoga Teachers (RYTs), 4–5, 39
 registration requirements, 29
 Reid-Naiman, Kathy, 78
 relationship skills, 11–12, 15
 relaxation (*savasana*), 20, 50–51
 religion, myth of yoga as, 2
 research studies, 3, 12, 14
 Rest Pose, 20, 50–51, 63, 71, 86–87
 Reverse Table Pose. *See* Spider Pose
 Rhyme Time program, 77–78
 rhymes
 incorporating, 25
 nursery, 77–78
 River Adventure activity, 40
 “Rockin’ at the Zoo” (Doherty), 26, 62
 room layout, 32
Row, Row, Row Your Boat (Cabrera), 23,
 78
 Rylant, Cynthia, 23, 70

S

“S” Is for “Snake” activity, 55
 Sanskrit names, 12, 37
 Sara Jordan Publishing, 87
 Savoie, Anne-Marie, 30–31
Say Hello! (Isadora), 45
 “Say Hi to the Animals” (Ralph's World),
 26, 63
 Seal Pose, 54–55
 Seated Forward Fold, 53–54
 Seated Pose I, 51–52, 63, 64–65, 67, 71, 73,
 81–82, 86
 Seated Pose II, 53–54, 59, 63, 65, 71, 77,
 81–82, 86
 sea-themed programs, 66–68
 seating arrangements, 32
 Seed Pose, 53, 59, 81
 self-awareness, 11–13
 self-management and regulation, 3, 11–12,
 20, 30

Señor Pancho Had a Rancho (Lainez), 70
 “The Shape Shake” (CJ), 80
Shape Shift (Hesselberth), 79
 Shapes and Letters Guessing Game, 52, 80
 Shapes Everywhere program, 79–80
 Shardlow, Giselle, 23–24, 82, 90
 Shark Pose, 46, 66
 “Sharks in the Sea,” 66–67
 “Silly Dance Contest” (Gill), 26, 73
 Snail Pose, 53, 65
 Snake Pose, 45, 54–55, 65, 68, 71, 86
 social awareness, 11–12
 social-emotional learning, 11–13
 Solis, Sydney, 24–25
 songs
 CDs, recommended, 91–92
 for closing, 63, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78,
 80, 82, 85, 87
 with movement, 15, 26, 65, 66–67, 69,
 71, 75
 for opening, 62, 64, 66, 69, 71, 73, 75,
 77, 81, 83, 86
 overview, 25
 for resting, 26
 yoga-specific, 26
 See also specific songs
 Spanish programs, 86–87
 Spider Pose, 40–41, 64–65
 Spring Has Sprung program, 81–82
 Standing Pose, 44–45, 56–57, 63, 68,
 79–80, 87
 Stanley, Jessamyn, 6n5
 Star Pose, 56–57, 78
 storytelling, 24–25
Storytime Yoga (Solis), 24–25
 storytimes. *See* yoga storytimes
 stress reduction, 3
Stretch (Cronin), 21
 Strong and Mighty Trees program, 83–85
 “Sun Dance” (Koral), 45
 “Sun Dance” (Lara), 82
 Sun Salutation, 44–45, 59n2, 75–76, 82
 supplies, 33–34
Swimmy (Lionni), 22, 68

T

Table Pose, 40–41, 44–45, 63, 80
 teachers (RYTs), 4–5, 39
 Telling a Story with Sound activity, 41–42
 Ten Red Apples (Hutchins), 84
 “Thanks for Coming,” 70

- “That’s What They Do” (Karma Kids Yoga), 26, 75
 They Might Be Giants, 26, 71
 “This Is Big Big Big,” 65
 Three Minute Breathing Space meditation, 35–36
 “Tickle the Clouds,” 63
 “Touch Your Nose,” 72
 “A Tree Is a Home,” 85
 Tree Pose, 58–59, 68, 80, 84, 87
 tree-themed programs, 83–85
 Triangle Pose, 58–59, 80
 Turtle Pose, 52, 63, 71
 “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” 78
- V**
- Van Der Schyf, Sophia Louise, 30–31
 Verde, Susan, 23, 73
The Very Busy Spider (Carle), 22, 64
- W**
- “Walking, Walking,” 62
 Washington County Cooperative Library System, 28
 “We Had a Good Day!,” 82
 “We Say Hello Like This,” 77
 “We Stretch Up High Like This,” 79
 Webster, Erika, 66
 “Welcome, Everyone,” 81
 “We’re Here for Stories and Yoga,” 83, 86
 Whale Pose, 46, 66–68
 “What Do I Feel” (Bassin), 73
 White Noise app, 27
 “Who Are the Animals That Live on the Farm?,” 69
Who Hops? (Davis), 22, 71
Whoever You Are (Fox), 23, 80
 Wiggle and Rest activity, 50
 Willey, Kira, 25–26, 45, 76
 Williams, Mark, 36
 Williams, Sue, 24
- Y**
- yoga
 benefits of, 2–3
 books about, 22–24
 defined, ix, 1–2
 early literacy and, 13–14
 movement and, 9–16
 myths about, 2
 principles of, 12, 24
 social-emotional learning and, 11–13
 as a tool, x, 4, 14–16
 Yoga Alliance, 4–5, 39, 91
 “Yoga Clock” (Karma Kids Yoga), 26, 77
The Yoga Game by the Sea (Beliveau), 24, 67
 Yoga International, 38, 91
Yoga Journal, 37–38, 91
 yoga mats, 34
 Yoga Play! program, 30–31
 yoga poses
 of animals, 40–42, 43–49, 54–55, 63, 68, 71, 87
 for bilingual programs, 87
 of bugs, 65, 86
 descriptions of, 39–59
 of feelings, 73
 overview, 37–39
 of sea creatures, 68
 songs that inspire, 26
 yoga storytimes
 behavior standards in, 32–33
 case study of, 30–31
 hiring yoga teachers for, 4–5
 planning logistics of, 29–35
 program design of, 19–21
 promotion and marketing of, 34–35
 ready-to-use plans for, 62–87
 selecting materials for, 21–29
 self-preparation for, 35–36
 template for, 21
 vs. yoga classes, 4
 yoga teachers, 4–5, 39
 Yogibrarian blog, 91
 Yoguitos program, 86–87
 Yoo, Taeun, 23, 75
You Are a Lion! (Yoo), 23, 75
 YouTube, 25, 27, 28, 59n2, 90