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Kids Yoga

## Now Lotus. Now Down Dog. Now WOMPING WILLOW!?

By [Gary White](#)

The Ledger

Yoga instructor Michelle Pugh directs her three students into Vrikshasana -- the tree pose -- and the students do their best to emulate her position as she stands on one leg with the opposite foot propped against her thigh, her hands clasped above her head.

"I want you to decide what kind of tree you want to be today," Pugh tells the students.

"Strawberry," one answers.

"Blue," another says.

"Apple," the third suggests.

Pugh describes herself as a weeping willow, and a student named Taylor quickly responds, "Whomping willow!"

Buddha, meet Harry Potter.

Yoga, an ancient Eastern practice embraced in this country by stress-addled adults hungry for serenity, might seem an incongruous pursuit for children. But the recent scene at Lakeland's My Time Studio, where Pugh leads a weekly class for kids ages 4 to 7, suggests yoga's appeal stretches beyond those occupied with business meetings and mortgage payments.

Jamie Naughtright, co-owner of My Time Studio, says the center has deliberately tried to erase age boundaries from yoga. Parents are welcome to attend classes for children, while adult classes are open to kids ages 7 and older. The studio also offers a class geared toward kids in the 8-to-17 range.

Taylor, the sole boy at the recent gathering, happens to be Pugh's 6-year-old son. Pugh, 36, says Taylor watched her practice yoga from the first days of his life, and by the time he could sit up he was joining her in a baby's version of yoga.

Pugh, who teaches yoga at Florida Southern College, says Taylor benefited mentally and



Instructor Michelle Pugh helps Haley Robles, 3, perform a triangle with Taylor Pugh and Sarah Norgard, both 6, at My Time Studio in Lakeland. Below, Haley does a butterfly pose during the yoga class for kids. PIERRE DuCHARME/Ledger photo

physically from his early introduction to yoga, a practice involving a sequence of poses and stretches that in its traditional form is coupled with meditation.

"It helped him develop a great deal because children learn spatially," Pugh says. "He walked sooner. He's been very calm; he's able to sit and be quiet when he's asked to."

Taylor, who has short, lightbrown hair and often wears a thoughtful gaze, adds: "It calms me down. Then I can get hyper again."

The three children in the recent session display alternating measures of attention and restlessness as Pugh guides them through an abbreviated set of poses.

Taylor is joined by Sarah Norgard, a 6-year-old girl wearing baggy blue gym shorts and a yellow T-shirt, and Haley Robles, a 3-year-old girl in a maroon leotard. Each uses a brightly colored, spongy yoga mat designed like two fitted pieces of an oversized jigsaw puzzle.

Pugh emphasizes the postures that mimic animals and encourages the kids to make animal sounds, which keep them interested and foster energetic breathing. The children thrust out their tongues and roar during the lion pose, meow as they arch their backs for the cat pose and moo as they settle into the cow pose. They modify the butterfly pose, pointing fingers above their heads to form antennae.

During the stork pose, which resembles the tree pose but with the knee pointing forward, Pugh asks what sound a stork makes. The children seem a bit perplexed.

"Bawk, bawk," Taylor finally offers.

The kids' poses are hardly precise. Legs and arms wiggle and waver, and the children often lose their balance doing the single-leg postures. At times, a pose prompts two of the children to face in opposite directions.

Pugh knows she can't conduct the class for kids as she would one for adults. Traditionally, yoga classes end with several minutes of chanting or silent meditation, but Pugh shortens the contemplative part of the session. She introduces the traditional meditative syllable -- "om" -- but she does so in a non-mystical way.

After leading a chorus of "ohhhhhhhhhh," Pugh tells the kids: "Now I want you to pretend you have something real good, like chocolate or `pasketti,' in your mouth, and go, `Mmmmmmm.' Put it together: "Ohhhhhhhmmmmmm.' "

The session ends with everyone in a seated position, hands pressed together in a prayerful gesture. Pugh asks the kids to repeat "Namaste," a Sanskrit word roughly meaning "I bow to you," but Haley seems more interested in playing with her mat.

The children discover a large orange exercise ball and begin tossing and slapping it to each other. Sherrie Robles, watching her daughter from the side of the room, says she began bringing Haley to the studio not long after discovering yoga herself a few months ago.

"It's a challenge for her because she's just 3, so she's all over the place," says Robles, whose

mother-in-law, Carolyn Robles, is the studio's co-owner.

But Sherrie Robles says her daughter already has absorbed yoga to the point she spontaneously displays poses outside of class.

Sarah Norgard, a first-grader missing her front teeth, says her arms and legs ached the first time she did yoga, but now she seems comfortable with the routine. She says the butterfly is her favorite pose. Why?

"Because it's like I get into a butterfly," Sarah says.

Taylor Pugh prefers the lion pose, explaining, "It's funny." The "warrior three" pose is his least favorite "because you have to balance on one foot. I'm not good at balances."

In some ways, though, children are better suited to yoga than adults.

Andrea Norgard, who discovered yoga 20 years ago, says she has never been able to adopt the bow pose, which requires a backbend. Her daughter mastered it on her first try.

"Children are actually our best teachers in that they do what feels natural," says Pugh, the teacher. "They're very, very, very flexible, and I think the reason they're so flexible is they don't know what their limitations are.

"They are so free, and actually it's what adults are striving to get back to, that freedom from fear, that ability to move from one pose to the next with no regard to how I look and if this pose is perfect."

For the kids, every pose -from a strawberry tree to a whomping willow -- is perfect.

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