



STEVE RUSSELL PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

A group of Grade 6 students at Nelson Mandela Park Public School go through their paces. Through yoga, youth are learning to be still, to focus, to relax and to have greater self-control.

# Yoga program helps kids face challenges

YOGA from L1

The organization also runs community-based, drop-in programs in Rexdale and Regent Park and runs yoga classes in facilities for incarcerated youth. New Leaf relies largely on private donations — it's hosting a fundraising gala Dec. 3 — and schools contribute when possible.

The goal isn't really to teach kids about poses, explains New Leaf's executive director Laura Sygrove, who co-founded the organization in 2007. Rather, it's to teach them how to understand the connection between their emotions and what they feel in their bodies. New Leaf's work is rooted in a growing body of research showing yoga and mindfulness can support young people who have experienced forms of trauma.

"Our programs offer youth an opportunity to build their capacity to identify feelings, breathe through difficult emotions like anger, anxiety, stress, and make more empowered choices about how to respond to those emotions," says Sygrove.

"When these skills are practised over time, youth recognize they have tools within themselves to work with challenges in more positive ways."

In schools, yoga classes aren't typically open to all students, but limited to those whom staff think will benefit the most. That means students may miss a regular period to attend yoga and then have to make up lost class work. But the benefits are such that teachers and parents support the initiative.

Child and youth counsellor Jennifer Haugh says that at C.W. Jefferys "word has gotten out" and there's already a wait list for the girls' yoga class.

"If we can get these kids to focus and be quiet for a few minutes, that's a success because that may be the only quiet they have in their day," says Haugh.

Tenth-grader Janeil Treleven, 15, has only been doing yoga there for



Students at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute stretch. There is a waiting list at the school for the girls' yoga class.

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**LAURA SYGROVE**  
NEW LEAF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

the last month, but already notices a change: "I'm not mad all the time. It helps relax me."

That's, in part, why Christopher Graham of Bendale is hooked. His school introduced yoga for boys last year and the 12th-grader says he's learned to remain "super calm" when angry.

Prior to yoga, Christopher used to

act out. He shows the stitches on his right hand, which he got after smashing his fist through a window.

"I would hurt myself. I punched lockers and bruised myself. Like, I don't want to hit anyone, so I hurt myself so I feel the pain."

The 17-year-old football player also feels the benefits of yoga on the field: "I'm a lot looser and flexible," he says, adding he's taught poses to some teammates.

The yoga program was such a hit last year at Bendale that in late August, as principal Wendy Blain was gearing up for a new academic year, kids were stopping by the school to ask if there was again going to be yoga and if they could join.

As a result, the boys' class grew in numbers and they introduced a girls' class. There's also a waiting list at that school.

For Haifa Ali, 16, of Bendale, yoga is an escape: "I go with a lot of stress from school and family problems. . . . When I go into that room and sit, I

feel like I can run away from everything."

When first founded, New Leaf's focus was on youth in detention centres. It only expanded into schools three years ago, after principal Jason Kandankery of Nelson Mandela Park Public School in Regent Park reached out to New Leaf after learning of its success in youth facilities.

At the time, he was running out of ideas on how to address the needs of a particular group of children. There was a special-education class — made up of students with learning disabilities — where the kids were struggling with behavioural issues, which was affecting their ability to learn and resulting in a high suspension rate. Kandankery brought in mentors and resource staff — but little seemed to work.

"I wanted us to think outside the box," recalls Kandankery, who learned about New Leaf from a community member. "I had done some reading around yoga being used in

the (United) States, in schools with similar demographics experiencing some of the same issues around suspension and self-regulation and it was used to good effect. So I thought, 'Let's try it.'"

Results were quick: Kids were better able to deal with conflict, more focused in class and suspensions dropped to zero for that group.

"We were ecstatic," recalls Kandankery. "We need to be creative in how we address supporting our children and I think this is an example of an intervention that can be really effective."

Results were evident at home too. Mother Nicole Scott, whose son Landon Rands, 11, started yoga three years ago, has also seen "a big change."

"If something were to happen he would explode and not know how to react," says the mom. "Since he (started) yoga he's learned how to take his time, sit down, relax."

Landon says he's learned to "breathe and walk away" from conflict — both in the schoolyard and with his 4-year-old brother. The sixth-grader also learned yoga isn't just for girls: His yoga teacher is Andre Talbot, a former Toronto Argonaut receiver who played in the Canadian Football League for 10 years.

Across town at Bendale, 12th-grader Dylan Ramkay says taking a break during his studies to do a couple of poses helps keep him on track.

"I get frustrated if I don't understand the work I'm doing," explains the 17-year-old. "I'll step back and think I need to breathe and try to calm myself down. (I tell myself) 'I can do this.' I do a couple of stretches and go back to work."

Classmate Blain Romain also does yoga on his own time. It not only helps in the morning when he's in a terrible mood, but is a great way to cap the day.

"I find it relaxes me before I go to sleep," says Blain. "I fall asleep faster."

# A better alternative to living upstairs, or closer to their parents

TIMSON from L1

In professional sports, if they say you're "in the basement" that means you're in last place (although no doubt still raking in millions).

Of course millennials do live in the family basement, especially if there is a separate apartment and they can have privacy. Then again, so do grandparents, warring spouses, and Labrador retrievers.

South of the border, an intellectual argument recently raged about the basement tribe. In "The Misguided Freakout About Basement-Dwelling Millennials" an article in the Atlantic called current statistics "criminally misleading" because, according to the U.S. census, young people who are actually away at college are counted as "living with their parents."

No, no, shot back the New Republic: more young people are living at home with parents than at any other

time in history, and not acknowledging "the great delay" is harmful because it "risks the life prospects of an entire generation."

A 2011 Statistics Canada survey concluded that while numbers here have now "levelled off," a whopping 42 per cent of people in the 20 to 29 age bracket were living at home. In comparison, in 1981, just 26.9 per cent of people that age lived in the parental home.

Going back a few generations, many young people lived at home until they married. And some even after — my in-laws lived with parents until they could afford to buy a house.

Yet in today's Darwinian economic world, where rents are high, jobs scarce, and young people are undeniably waiting longer to achieve milestones like marriage or buying a home, the attitude of boomer parents toward their youth is woefully conflicted.

Many encourage their kids to "save money" by remaining in large, comfortable family homes, even as they lionize their own grotty first apartment experience as being seminal to their independence. Not to mention sex lives. These same parents then lie awake nights, with grown children in the next bedroom (or three floors down), wondering if liftoff will ever take place.

Here's a paradox: I don't, in general, get an anguished vibe about the "basement-dwelling" trope from many millennials themselves.

Sure they would prefer to be living independently. But living at home with one's parents, in the basement or upstairs, paying rent or not, seems to be a purely practical decision with specific reasons for doing so, one that many have chosen not to invest with any blame, shame or symbolism.

Here's how one 25-year-old woman with two degrees and a job, who

like many of her peers, has fluidly moved in and out of the family home, answered my question on whether "basement-dwellers" is an offensive label:

"I would say probably not. I think the people who just live in their parents' basement for free find it a better alternative than living upstairs, or closer to where their parents sleep."

Some friends, she said, are just unhappy about still living at home at all but "the basement thing" is not the issue (although it is the metaphor).

Another millennial, 27, who recently stayed with us as he roamed Bay Street looking for investors for his startup, proudly listed his "basement dwelling" friends: one had finished a masters in education and was now teaching at an inner-city school in D.C., another had finished a master's degree and was looking for a new job (while her sister, also

at home, goes to med school in Toronto).

In our affluence, we have admittedly made it possible for this generation to continue their education longer, knowing there will always be a (perhaps heavily mortgaged) roof over their heads.

Maybe they view it as an entitlement, maybe a necessity. We are all only capable of seeing the world through our own generational lens.

I recently attended a 30th birthday party for a relative, and left dazzled by his friends. They all had jobs! They were living independently! Making their way in the world!

My surprise at their progress made me ashamed. If they don't mind, on their path to success, about being "basement-dwellers" why should I? Judith Timson writes weekly about cultural, social and political issues. You can reach her at judith.timson@sympatico.ca and follow her on Twitter @judith-timson.