

strike a pose with the family

by Patricia Ezechie



It's your worst nightmare... trapped in a cottage with your parents and/or in laws, your children, and a gale howling outside. A family holiday seemed like such a good idea, but even Monopoly, that old stalwart, has lost its appeal and you are beginning to wish you had given in to the kids pleading and allowed them to bring the Wii. If your mother in law tells the kids to be quiet and read a book one more time, you may just have to smother her! Suddenly inspiration - the thought of just a few minutes peace and quiet in Tree pose seems to drift in from nowhere, and the words of your Yoga teacher follow in quick succession: "The beauty of the practice of Yoga is that it is suitable for all ages and abilities....."

Can Yoga really be enjoyed and be of benefit to the whole family?

Yes it can. Yoga is accessible and of benefit to everyone irrespective of size, age and ability, works on all the levels in the body (physical, emotional and spiritual) and can be modified to suit everyone. So while the kids with their young supple bodies and no sense of fear can tackle a physically more demanding version of a pose, Gran can do her version of the pose in a chair and Mum and Dad can have a go at their particular modification somewhere between the two extremes. In terms of focus, the kids can use their energy and attention on maintaining their balance and holding the pose quietly and peacefully, while Mum, Dad and Gran focus on their posture and on keeping their abs engaged, backs strong and their breath deep and full.

So here are 6 easy poses to get the whole family going. The 6 poses are an example of the 6 different categories of poses that bend the spine though all its planes giving the spine (and whole body) a good work out, while calming and relaxing the mind. Give them a go - and enjoy!

tree pose (balance)

Tree is a fantastic pose for working on balance, maintaining focus and calming the mind. The key is to find a foot position where you can maintain your balance without compromising your posture or comfort. To maintain your balance while coming into and holding the pose, find a spot to focus on and keep your eyes on that spot the whole time. Arms can be placed in the front of the chest or above the head in prayer position, or simply extended above the head, arms wide emulating the branches of a tree. Once in position, embody the attributes of a tree - strong, rooted, balanced and grounded.

To come into the Pose

* Balance on one leg, keeping the body perfectly upright, eyes and focus straight ahead.

KIDS: Place your raised foot as high up the on opposite inner thigh as possible.

MUM & DAD: Place raised foot a little lower (between the knee and the ankle)

GRAN: Simply place the toes of the one foot on other, or remain seated in a chair, focusing purely on the arm variations and keeping the core of the body strong.

cobra pose (backbend)

Backbends are energising poses and, in addition to strengthening the muscles of back, stretch the front and help to balance the core of the body. Cobra and all backbends are a challenge as we are used to bending forwards in everyday life and very rarely, if ever, bend the spine in the opposite direction (backwards). The key thing to remember when coming into this pose is that it is not about how high you rise up when bending the back, it is about engaging the back

muscles and using them to bring the chest off the ground.

To come into the pose

* Lie on your front, hands under body and fingers pointing forwards, keeping the feet and knees together and anchored to the floor. Lift the chest and upper body using just the upper back muscles and the hands for support only.

KIDS: Visualise and mimic a cobra, raising your chest while keeping the shoulders drawn down, away from the ears.

MUM & DAD: Focus on using the upper back muscles and keeping the lower back open and relaxed

GRAN: Keep both hands and forearms on the floor easing any possible strain on the back.

seated twist pose (twist)

As well as being great pose for maintaining the mobility of the spine, seated twists are a good way to ease constipation! The beauty of the seated twist is that it can just as easily be done in chair with both feet firmly on the ground, as seated on the floor, while adding leg variations.

to come into the pose

* Sit in the floor with the legs extended in front. Bend the right knee, placing the right foot on the outside of the left knee. Take the left arm behind the body and place the left hand on the floor as close to the buttocks as possible, fingers pointing away from the body. Raise the right arm, twisting the body to the left, and place the outside of the upper right arm on the outside of the left thigh. Breathe in and lengthen through the spine. Breathe out and deepen the twist. Release and repeat on the other side.

KIDS: Have a go at the unmodified version as described.

MUM & DAD: Ensure the back remains perfectly straight, and keep the abs toned at all times (hold your stomach in!)

GRAN: Granny can do her version of the twist from the comfort of a chair.

staff pose (forward bend)

Forward bends lengthen the whole of the back, from the heels all the way up to the crown of the head. Staff Pose is wonderful, but it looks deceptively easy. To sit perfectly straight with the spine straight, the abs engaged, the backs of the legs extended out in front and pressing into the floor with the body at a complete right angle is a real challenge. To add an element of fun, participants can sit back to back to ensure their spines stay absolutely straight and in alignment. KIDS: Have a go at the unmodified version as described or sit back to back.

MUM & DAD: Ensure the back remains perfectly straight, and keep the abs toned at all times (hold your stomach in!). If the full pose is too intense, bend the knees or use the wall for support.

GRAN: Sit in chair and focus on keeping the spine straight, chest lifted and abs in.

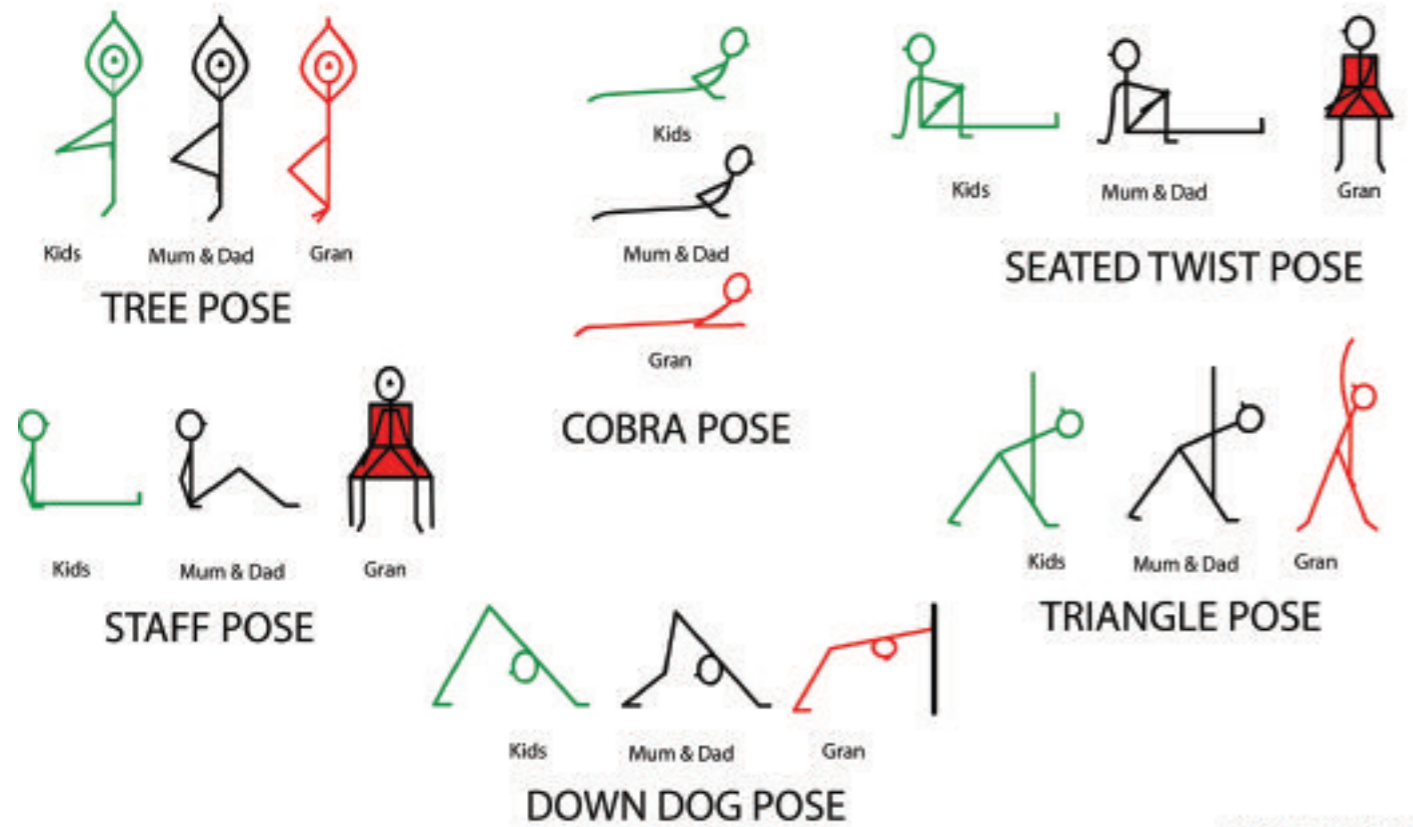
down dog pose (inversion)

Down Dog is probably one of the best known Yoga poses. This beautiful pyramid shaped pose has probably been tackled by the whole family at some point in their lives without them being aware that it is a Yoga asana! As well as lengthening and strengthening the whole body, once you are used to practising the pose, it can be quite restful and calming (really!). But it is quite strong, so take your time and don't hold it for too long to begin with. If you feel dizzy or uncomfortable, stop immediately.

to come into the pose

* Come on to 'all fours', with hands flat, parallel and shoulder width apart, knees under hips, and feet parallel and hip width apart. Take a deep breath in, roll over the toes, push down on the hands and push the bottom back and up (towards the back corner of the ceiling), lengthening the heels and chest down towards the floor. Hold for a

STRIKE A POSE WITH THE FAMILY Six yoga poses for the whole family



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few breaths (or for as long as is comfortable), then release the knees back down to the floor.

KIDS: Have a go at the unmodified version as described and try coming into the best pyramid shape you can. Once up, try to relax and enjoy the pose. Also try moving from *Down Dog* to *Child's Pose* as a little sequence and extra challenge (*Child's Pose*: Rest on knees with forehead on the floor and arms beside body palms facing upwards).

MUM & DAD: Ensure the back remains perfectly straight, keep the abs toned at all times (hold your stomach in!), and focus on pushing the bottom back and up. If the full pose is too intense, bend the knees slightly or use the wall for support.

GRAN: To save your knees, practise this pose with the hands against the wall. The back still gets a good stretch, but the knees are preserved!

triangle pose (side bend)

Like backbends, there generally is not a need for us to extend so fully through the side of the body in our day to day activities, which is why *Triangle Pose* is so good to help maintain spine flexibility and core strength and balance. This posture is wonderful for building strength and toning the whole body, especially the abs, obliques (waist and side muscles) and lower back. It is a strong pose, so practise with mindfulness, always keeping the abs engaged (stomach muscles pulled in!) to protect the lower back.

to come into the pose:

Stand with the feet a little more than hip width apart, feet flat on the floor and pointing forwards, ensuring the body is perfectly balanced with the weight of the body distributed evenly between both feet. Take a deep breath in (keep those abs pulled in) and lift the arms sideways to shoulder height. As you breathe out, extend the body down towards the left side, placing the left hand lightly on the left

thigh and raising the right arm up, right palm facing towards the body. Inhale, squeeze the abs and bottom muscles even tighter and return to upright position, then release the arms back to the sides.

repeat on the other side

KIDS: Have a go at the unmodified version as described.

MUM & DAD: Ensure the back remains perfectly straight, and keep the abs toned at all times (hold your stomach in!)

GRAN: Limit the extent of the side bend, keep both arms down beside the body and run the hands down the side of the body as you move into a gentler side bend.

Phew – after all that I think you will all be ready for a bit of a rest. So try *Corpse Pose* (lying flat on your back, legs and arms wide, with the back of the arms and hands, spine, backs of the legs and head in contact with the floor. Take a deep breath in and, as you exhale, relax completely into the ground. Remain in relaxation pose for as long as required but don't fall asleep!). I know that's technically 7 poses, but who's counting?!

So that's Yoga for the whole family. Have a go and remember it is all about being together and having as much fun as possible (with the added benefit of being fantastic for the whole family's health and well-being!).

If you want to add another dimension and make it more fun (Yoga purists turn away now!) add some music (banging beats) and an element of competition. See who can hold a pose the longest or who can remain the most still and quiet. It beats asking the kids to be quiet and read a book any day. And, if the rain should suddenly stop and the sun come out, take the activity outside. Yoga in the fresh air and in nature is even more wonderful!

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Guruji

a personal perspective by Mia Forbes Pirie

I was one of the many whose lives were deeply touched by Sri K Pattabhi Jois whom we all knew as Guruji. Six years ago, I went to Mysore for the first time and spent four months studying with him. Since then my life has been dramatically different. I have not been the most assiduous of students. I tried to spend a month in Mysore now and then when I could but never as much as I would have wanted or he would have counselled. My life has, however, been filled with a spiritual quality and a purer purpose since I met him. There is not much that I regret – but, like many, I imagine, I do wish I had spent more time with him. Somehow, I thought he would always be there.

Despite the thousands of students who crossed his path, his English was never perfected but communication was not a problem. He would give short instructions, point, sometimes grunt gently, "Huh" – telling you either to do something or that you had done it correctly or incorrectly, depending on the tone. With few words, he was very expressive.

When I first arrived in Mysore, despite having practised Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga for about 2 years, I was a beginner. I did my basic practice next to some of the most advanced practitioners in the world and feel very privileged to have studied with Guruji and among them. Having experienced the benefits of the practice and knowing him to be my teachers' teacher, I arrived in Mysore ready to put my full trust in him. He saw that. He understood people, and knew what each person needed. He treated everyone differently – giving them what they needed. If you arrived in Mysore with arrogance and a big ego, he would knock that out of you very quickly. If you needed support and nurturing, he would give that to you too – all within the confines of a Yoga room and the Ashtanga practice. Just being in his presence was a powerful and healing experience. He inspired great focus and dedication but often also infused a loving and light-hearted energy into the room.

In my case, I arrived (unbeknown to me) with a lot of fear in my heart. This was very obvious to him. Every day, almost unfailingly for 4 months, this 87 year old man would stand behind me in *Prassarita Padotanasana* (wide leg forward bend), put his hands on my hips and

tell me in his warm broken English, "Don't fear! – you touch your head" – indicating that I should move further forward and touch my head to the ground.

His touch was almost from another world – a deeply grounded place of peace and tranquillity reverberating with joy and a sense of ease. When he touched you to adjust you in a posture, something melted inside you and your heart opened. He was a true sage - but he was not perfect! And that was what was so perfect about him! He was real, human, tangible, and loving. His laughter had such a pure relaxed, almost holy ring to it – sometimes it touched me so deeply, it would bring tears to my eyes. He was diabetic but (like many of his students) he loved chocolate! He loved his students: however many would come, he was always happy to see them, welcome them and untiringly and uncompromisingly give them his teaching – he would sometimes teach tirelessly from 4.30 in the morning until well into the afternoon.

Not only did he inspire confidence, but his presence demanded it. I had never sat in the lotus posture and my first day in Mysore, he told me to take my right foot and place it on top of the left and then, gently, he showed me what to do with the left leg. I had no idea which posture he intended me to take, I just followed his instructions. Suddenly, I was in lotus! Then I began to panic - I couldn't believe what had happened - but it was too late! I was already in it! Towards the middle of my stay, after closing postures (which are done in another room), a long *Savasana* and a shower (before they took the shower away – you are not supposed to shower straight after practice), I came down to find the room cleared and him in his office. I went in and told him, with the glee of a 5 year old at Christmas, that I had managed to take 30 breaths in *Padmasana* (lotus)! This man, who had contorted his body into the most extreme postures over many years and to whom 1000 breaths in lotus would have been the easiest thing in the world, shared my joy and excitement. He beamed warmly at me like a grandfather, seeing a child take its first wobbly few steps on a bicycle without stabilisers and said "Good, good"!

Guruji had many catch phrases:

"Do your practice and all is coming" is known the world over. Along with one that is very often quoted but that I, personally, did not hear him say so often "Yoga is 99% practise, 1% theory".

When someone did a posture badly or just did something he didn't like or didn't agree with, he would sometimes say "Bad lady" or "Bad man" – this was very affectionate – although it did sometimes unnerve people who didn't know him.

Guruji believed and taught that Yoga is a lifelong practice. There was no hurry. People would get impatient to get new postures and he would only give them when he felt they were ready. Guruji did not believe in giving breathing techniques or meditation too soon either: "First asana perfecting, then pranayama". And my favourite: when you do your practice – "Think only God".

We pay tribute to the man by continuing to follow in his footsteps, by getting up every morning and doing our practise, and by respecting his work and lineage. His grandson, Sharat, now leads the Ashtanga Yoga community. As Sharat says in the film *Ashtanga NY* "After practising Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, their lives have been changed". This will continue to happen under his guidance. The passing of Guruji marks the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. He dedicated his life to Yoga, to God and to his students. He was a Sanskrit scholar and encouraged all his students to learn the sacred language. The world is a richer more beautiful place because he has walked on it.

Further information concerning Mia and Sri Pattabhi Jois and his Institute, see page 47. Mia will be publishing a series of articles in Yoga & Health from January onwards called 'Yoga Perspectives'.