



International Journal of Contemporary Research In Multidisciplinary

Research Article

The Role of Yoga in Promoting Pro-Social Behaviour in School Children

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22079440>

Abstract

The contemporary educational landscape increasingly recognizes the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) for the holistic development of students. Pro-social behaviour—actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, and cooperating—is a cornerstone of a healthy society and individual well-being. However, school children today face numerous stressors, including academic pressure, social competition, and digital distractions, which can impede the natural development of these crucial skills. This paper explores the role of yoga, an ancient mind-body practice, as an effective intervention for fostering pro-social behaviour in school-aged children. It posits that yoga, through its integrated approach encompassing physical postures (Asanas), breathing techniques (Pranayama), meditation (Dhyana), and ethical principles (Yamas and Niyamas), cultivates the core competencies required for pro-social conduct. By enhancing self-regulation, developing empathy, reducing stress, and fostering a sense of interconnectedness, yoga provides a comprehensive framework for nurturing a more compassionate, cooperative, and socially adept generation. This paper examines the theoretical mechanisms through which yoga influences pro-social development and discusses its practical application within the school environment.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 10-07-2026
- Accepted: 15-08-2026
- Published: 24-08-2026
- IJCRM:5(4); 2026: 885-887
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Vedwan A, Verma A. The Role of Yoga in Promoting Pro-Social Behaviour in School Children. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(4):885-887.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Pro-Social Behaviour, Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Dhyana, Stress, Anxiety.

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of education extends beyond academic achievement to include the development of well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society. Pro-social behaviour, characterized by voluntary actions that benefit others, is fundamental to this objective. Such behaviours are linked to better peer relationships, greater academic success, and improved mental health. Despite its importance, the modern school environment often presents significant challenges to the cultivation of pro-social tendencies. High levels of stress, anxiety, and a competitive ethos can lead to increased self-focus and a decrease in altruistic behaviours.

In response to these challenges, educators are seeking holistic interventions that can support students' social and emotional growth. Yoga, a practice originating in ancient India, has emerged as a promising tool. Often misconceived in the West as merely a form of physical exercise, yoga is a comprehensive discipline for integrating the mind, body, and spirit. Its practices are designed to cultivate inner awareness, balance, and tranquility.

This paper argues that the multifaceted practice of yoga is uniquely positioned to promote pro-social behaviour in school children. It achieves this not by directly teaching children to be good, but by developing the underlying psychological capacities that naturally give rise to kindness, empathy, and cooperation. These capacities include emotional regulation, self-awareness, and a compassionate understanding of others.

2. Theoretical Framework: Connecting Yoga to Pro-Social Behaviour

The efficacy of yoga in promoting pro-social behaviour can be understood through several interconnected mechanisms, rooted in its core components.

2.1 The Components of Yogic Practice

To understand yoga's impact, it is essential to look beyond physical postures. A holistic yoga practice includes:

Asanas (Physical Postures): These build body awareness, strength, and discipline. They also help release physical tension where stress and emotions are often stored.

Pranayama (Breathing Techniques): Conscious control of breath has a direct impact on the autonomic nervous system. Practices like deep belly breathing can shift the body from a state of stress ("fight-or-flight") to one of relaxation ("rest-and-digest"), creating the calm mental state necessary for thoughtful social interaction.

Dhyana (Meditation and Mindfulness): These practices train attention and cultivate a non-judgmental awareness of one's thoughts and feelings. This builds the foundation for self-awareness and, by extension, awareness of others.

Yamas and Niyamas (Ethical Principles): These form the ethical bedrock of yoga. The Yamas (restraints) are particularly relevant to pro-social behaviour. They include-

Ahimsa (Non-harming): Fostering kindness and compassion towards oneself and all other beings.

Satya (Truthfulness): Encouraging honest communication.

Asteya (Non-stealing): Respecting the property and ideas of others.

Brahmacharya (Moderation of the senses): Promoting self-control.

Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness): Cultivating generosity and reducing envy.

2.2 Key Mechanisms for Fostering Pro-Social Behaviour

• Enhancing Self-Regulation and Emotional Intelligence

Pro-social behaviour requires the ability to manage one's own impulses and emotions. A child who is overwhelmed by anger or frustration is less likely to respond to a peer's needs with patience or help. Yoga directly trains this capacity for self-regulation. Pranayama and mindfulness meditation help children create a pause between an emotional trigger and their reaction. By learning to observe their feelings without immediately acting on them, they develop emotional intelligence. This regulated state allows them to respond to social situations more constructively, choosing cooperation over conflict.

• Cultivating Empathy and Compassion

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is the affective root of pro-social behaviour. Yoga nurtures empathy in several ways. Firstly, the practice of mindfulness turns a child's attention inward, helping them to recognize their own emotional states. This self-awareness is a prerequisite for understanding the emotions of others. Secondly, the ethical principle of Ahimsa (non-harming) is a central theme. Discussions and meditative practices centered on Ahimsa encourage children to consider the impact of their actions on others, actively fostering a compassionate mindset. Practices like "loving-kindness meditation," where children send well-wishes to themselves, friends, and even those they find challenging, directly exercise the "muscle" of compassion.

• Reducing Stress and Anxiety

A stressed or anxious child's cognitive and emotional resources are depleted, leaving little room for considering others' needs. The physiological effects of yoga are well-documented in their ability to reduce stress. Asanas release physical tension, while pranayama and meditation calm the nervous system and lower cortisol levels. By reducing the background noise of stress, yoga frees up a child's mental and emotional capacity, making them more available, open, and receptive to social cues and opportunities to help others.

• Fostering Interconnectedness and Community

Yoga philosophy often emphasizes the concept of oneness and the interconnectedness of all beings. This idea directly counters the ego-centric or competitive mindset that can inhibit pro-social actions. When practiced in a group setting in schools, yoga can create a non-competitive, supportive environment. Children practice alongside one another, learning to respect each other's space and abilities. Partner poses and group activities build skills in cooperation, communication, and trust, providing direct experience of positive social bonding.

3. Implementation in Schools and Conclusion

Integrating yoga into the school day does not require extensive time or resources. It can be implemented through:

Short "Brain Breaks": 5-10 minutes of simple breathing exercises and stretching in the classroom to reset focus and calm students.

Physical Education Curriculum: Incorporating a yoga unit to teach fundamental poses and principles.

After-School Programs: Offering dedicated yoga clubs for students interested in deeper practice.

Integration with SEL Programs: Using yoga philosophy and mindfulness as practical tools to teach concepts like empathy and emotional management.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, yoga is far more than a method for improving flexibility and fitness. It is a powerful, holistic system for cultivating the inner resources necessary for pro-social behaviour. By equipping children with the tools to manage their emotions, understand others, cope with stress, and feel a sense of connection, yoga addresses the very roots of social and emotional well-being. It provides a practical pathway to embodying the ethical principles that are vital for creating a kinder and more cooperative society. For educators and policymakers seeking to foster not just good students, but good citizens, yoga offers an invaluable and time-tested approach.

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