

Natural-born yogis

Gerri Halliwell does it with Bluebell, and Gwyneth Paltrow is a huge fan, but is baby yoga really good for your child?

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SITTING IN A converted loft space on New York's trendy Upper East Side, a group of glamorous women watch as their babies crawl around on the floor. The perfect little bodies are about to take part in a mother-and-baby yoga class. Located in one of America's new members-only clubs for parents and their children, this class is made up of an exclusive mix of celebrities and privileged city dwellers. Geri Halliwell attended classes while in New York with baby Bluebell, and yoga fans Angelina Jolie, Cate Blanchett and Gwyneth Paltrow are all said to have attended during recent stays in the US.

Long acknowledged for its health benefits for adults, is yoga really suitable for babies? Baby yoga is becoming widely recognised as one of the best ways for mothers to bond with their babies while meeting other like-minded parents. "I think parents sometimes feel excluded from hip places when they have children," says

actress Tricia Fisher, who founded the LA-based Nana's Garden spa with her sister Joley Fisher. "Now women stroll into a class and meet a whole crowd of cool, young health-conscious mothers."

And backing up these fashionable new institutions are a number of complementary initiatives, including baby-yoga clothing ranges such as Sugar Tush, favoured by the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow who bought their matching pink 'yoga mama' and 'yoga baby' tank tops for herself and Apple.

While it's one thing to imagine celebrity babies standing on their head, it's quite another to think of mothers in the suburbs bending their six-week-old into the lotus position. But now baby yoga has made it across the Atlantic thanks to Birthlight, an organisation that certifies teachers in baby yoga throughout the UK and there are currently 70 certified teachers practising across the country. National nursery group, Kids Unlimited, have even made baby yoga a regular part of their infant care programme. After giving up a

prestigious career with the BBC to become a stay-at-home mother, Alice Morgan found it difficult to fit into her new role. "I'd sit at home thinking, is this what I'm supposed to be doing?" Almost as soon as she started attending baby yoga classes, she felt a sense of calm, both with her baby and with the other mothers in the group. "I'd rush across London on the tube with the pushchair and by the time I got to the class I'd be exhausted. But all the mothers would be sitting in a circle totally focussed on their babies and suddenly it would go miraculously calm and quiet. I'd soak up the moment and think: 'Yes, this is what it's all about.' It changed everything for me."

So how do babies practise yoga? A typical Birthlight session teaches a range of gentle movements based on traditional hatha yoga. "There is

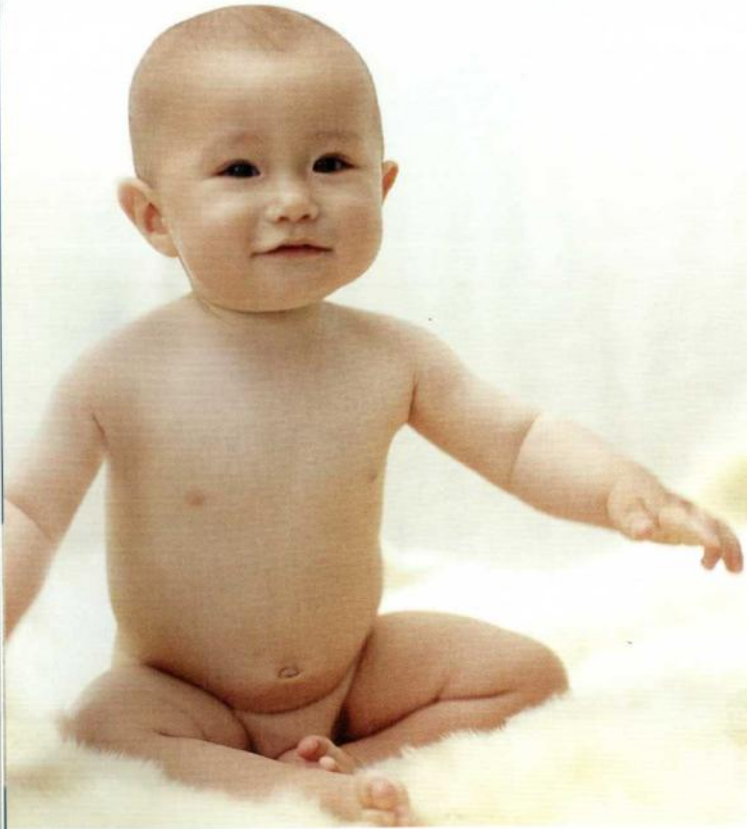
a structure to the class, but most of the time we follow the baby's cues," says Françoise Barbira-Freedman, a medical anthropologist at the University of Cambridge and founder of Birthlight. "It's not gym for babies – it's about building the mother's confidence and her baby's sense of trust." The classes focus

on building the bond between mother and child rather than how to achieve the perfect headstand.

"Babies are natural-born yogis – they teach us how to move," explains Uma Tinsmore-Duli, a Birthlight-trained yoga teacher with 13 years of baby-yoga teaching under her belt. "We live sedentary lifestyles which we extend to our babies. As a result, babies spend a lot of time in car seats and baby chairs and don't get to straighten their spines regularly. When they are older and crawling or even walking, you have to go with what they're doing," she says.

Which is where some of the simple exercises your baby might do naturally – if left to play on a mat at home – are relevant. "When your baby is lying on his tummy, he is doing a form of the cobra position," says Uma. The sitting pose – where you sit with your legs straight out in front, and your baby sits with his back against your belly – is, according to Uma, great for strengthening your pelvic floor, stretching your thigh muscles and encouraging your baby to sit up. "It has benefits for both mother and child," she says. "Yoga helps your baby's muscles

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to develop and can help to heal and strengthen your body after giving birth.” A benefit that is bound to be appreciated by those of us without the washboard stomach of Kate Moss and legs of Elle Macpherson.

These mutual advantages are focused on during classes, and is something that distinguishes baby yoga from infant massage or even postnatal yoga, where the emphasis is solely on the baby or the mother. But the positive points don't end there.

“With babies, you don't separate the physical and emotional,” says Françoise. “They communicate their wellbeing through movement. So if your child moves positively, he will grow and develop faster.” Despite stressing that milestones are an individual thing, Françoise does admit that many babies who attend the classes crawl and walk fairly quickly.

FRANÇOISE IS ALSO keen to point out that babies who do yoga tend to sleep better. “Babies do most of their growing during sleep, but lots of them aren't getting enough deep sleep because they are not tired enough to drop off easily each night,” she explains. “Also, many of the positions we do, such as gently bending your baby's knees onto his chest, help to relieve any tension he may have in his intestines. It can therefore prevent colic and constipation.” As a result, they are relieved of tummy problems and so many yoga babes are also more relaxed and contented.

Something that differentiates Birthlight from US baby yoga schools is the emphasis on relaxed holding and balancing. These are concepts that Françoise first came across while doing fieldwork in Peruvian Amazonia during her early twenties. “I was amazed by the way women handled their babies there,” she says. “They would swing them around and the babies seemed so content that it became a natural thing for me to do when I had children of my own. It's the

kind of thing you see fathers do with their babies. But mothers rarely have the confidence to do it.” This self-belief is a key element of baby yoga and according to Julie Llewellyn Thomas, author of *Yoga For Mother And Baby*, it is this quality that baby-yoga teachers are always building on. “Many of the new mothers we see have never held a baby before they gave birth, so holding is one of the first things we teach,” she explains.

Claire Cotton started baby yoga classes when her daughter Millie was 16 weeks old. “The relaxed holding techniques were a bit of a revelation for me,” she says. “I found that I'd been getting a lot of pain in my shoulder from holding Millie up high, and I was surprised how much she enjoyed being held lower down. I also felt calmer.”

Swinging your baby in the correct way provides numerous benefits. “Babies enjoy being swung because they have a biological need for intense physical stimulation within a nurturing environment,” explains Roslyn Jones, a paediatric osteopath at the Family Osteopathic Clinic in Oxford. “Adults don't enjoy the same vigorous actions because their neurological systems are different to a child's.”

“When I had my first baby, I wasn't quite sure what to do with her,” says Alice Morgan. “Baby yoga showed me that I could be relaxed with my daughter, that she was naturally robust and that her legs weren't going to break if I bent them.” Since then, Alice has set up the Baby Yoga Company – a group that produces educational DVDs for parents who want to practise the movements in the comfort of their home.

“Ultimately, baby yoga is kinetic,” says Françoise. “Combining movement with singing, touching and eye contact makes your baby feel good. He expresses this wellbeing to you and you, in turn, think, ‘My baby is great.’ These positive feelings are then communicated back to your baby and you have created a mutually beneficial cycle.”

According to London-based health visitor Lui Tan, baby yoga also gives parents much-needed time to focus on their child without distractions. “Studies have shown that the first three months of your baby's life are the most significant in terms of the way he will build relationships as an adult, so any activity which places an emphasis on emotional development at that stage is highly beneficial.”

So, celebrity fad or not, a baby yoga class offers far more than just the chance to meet hip new friends. But beware of the envy you may experience as you watch your baby achieve a pose that will forever remain within the realm of fantasy for his somewhat less flexible parents – after all, it's about the bonding, not just the bending ■

RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

- *Baby Om: Yoga For Mothers And Babies* by Laura Staton, Newleaf, £14.99.
- *Baby Yogaby* Françoise Barbira-Freedman, Gaia Books Ltd, £10.99.
- *Itsy Bitsy Yoga: Poses To Help Your Baby Sleep Longer, Digest Better, And Grow Stronger* by Helen Garabedian, Simon & Schuster, £8.50.
- *Yoga For Mother And Baby* by Julie Llewellyn-Thomas, Mitchell Beazley, £12.99.
- *Yoga For You And Your Child: The Step-By-Step Guide To Enjoying Yoga With Children Of All Ages* by Mark Singleton, Duncan Baird Publishers, £14.99.

USEFUL VIEWING

- *Baby Yoga And Baby Yoga For Toddlers* by yoga instructor Françoise Barbira-Freedman, available from the Baby Yoga Company at www.thebabyyogacompany.com, £14.99.
- *Baby And Toddler Yoga*, Bfs Entertainment, £12.99.

USEFUL WEBSITES

- www.birthlight.com For details of certified baby yoga teachers throughout the UK
- www.sitaram.org For articles, products and information on postnatal and family yoga sessions (London-based) as well as retreats and events.