

# 'Street Yoga' Helps Homeless Kids Find Balance

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NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO



Courtesy of Campbell Salgado Studio

Students at the Community Transitional School in Portland, Ore., strike a pose during Street Yoga. The program's instructors say the exercises benefit children facing housing and other struggles both physically and mentally.

*August 30, 2009*

Street Yoga sounds like a do-gooder's nirvana — it's an organization that teaches yoga to youths and families facing homelessness and other struggles. Based in Portland, Ore., [Street Yoga](#) runs two-day training programs across the United States, including a recent one in Washington, D.C.

The 40 or so trainees — all of them lithe, lovely yoga people — included social workers, a psychologist, medical students and some mental health care workers. They were asked to role-play rowdy homeless teenagers in a yoga class.

Everyone was assigned parts. Some were hyperactive, jumping up and down, while others pretended to sleep on their mats. They chatted loudly on their cell phones and chased each other around the room in a scene of sheer pandemonium.



Courtesy of Campbell Salgado Studio

Kelli Kessler May is one of the Street Yoga instructors.

"That was the most intense yoga I've ever, ever led," confessed Dani Berav, who volunteered to teach the class. She had spent the previous evening planning a class she hoped would communicate yoga's deep life lessons. None of it worked.

But Street Yoga founder Mark Lilly has taught classes like that in real life. He thinks yoga should not be reserved for yuppies. His students include children so severely abused that they have brain damage from being hit.

"There'd be kids shaking, literally shaking, with big bruises," he says. "They would run across the room and try to punch the staff person. They would spit on another kid or provoke a fight, or they would curl up in a ball and start crying."

Lilly admits that it will take more than a few downward dogs to change these lives. But he says yoga gives some measure of order, strength and balance to people living in indescribably dysfunctional worlds. And — it doesn't require any costly equipment.

Street Yoga bases the training on just seven yogic poses, including the challenging "crow pose." Lilly says most kids can master it in a couple of weeks, which gives them a rare feeling of success.

Social worker Katie Arrants is Lilly's co-teacher. She says it's vital to set firm, compassionate ground rules when leading yoga classes for disadvantaged youth.

"Whether it's a comment about someone's ass in the air — I can't let that fly," she told the trainees. "That's not safe in my class."

Arrants has to be flexible in many ways: She must follow the rules of the programs where she teaches yoga. Some have a no-touch policy. Others disallow kids' drowsing on the yoga mat.

Erin O'Reilly works at a program for sexually abused kids that has partnered with Street Yoga for about five years.

"Many of our kids disassociate to the point of reporting not having any feeling in their bodies," she says. But yoga gives them a chance to connect with and trust with their own bodies.

"They feel powerful," she says. "They feel strong."

Now, Street Yoga is developing programs with social workers that teach mindfulness in moments of crisis. Lilly offers one example: that moment when a parent is right on the edge of abusing his or her kids. Through Street Yoga, parents can learn tools to center, calm and control themselves.

"We're really trying to break in at those critical half-seconds," Lilly says, "to see if we can stay people's hands and keep lives from completely unraveling."

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