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pg. 26



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A Breath of Fresh Air

Courtney Loughney and her team at **Petite Yogi** help children reconnect with their minds and bodies through engaging and informative school yoga programs.

While most people are hitting the snooze button on their smartphone alarm and trying to sneak in a few extra minutes of sleep, Courtney Loughney is already well into her day. She wakes every day at 4:30 a.m., arrives at the gym 30 minutes later, and follows her workout with an hour or so of administrative work for her business. Then it's time to rouse her three children, get them ready for school, and dive into whatever the day holds.

Life slows down a bit on the weekends, when Loughney does her best to avoid reading emails. The time and effort she puts into the other five days is one reason why Petite Yogi has become such a success since she founded the children-focused yoga program in 2013. The resident of Wilmington, Delaware, learned the value of a strong work ethic early in life while growing up in Scranton, whether through her own grueling routine as a serious ballerina or just from following her parents' example.

"My parents were entrepreneurs, and I think that's where I get it from," she says. "I'm always thinking about the next thing I can do and what I can get involved in."

Loughney previously worked as a behavioral specialist, working mostly with children on the autism spectrum in their homes or at school. She came up with the idea to combine her passion for helping children with her love for yoga, which she began practicing and then teaching while in college.

"I noticed that a lot of the kids I was working with were experiencing anxiety, and as a behavioral specialist you can't measure anxiety because it's a very data-driven field," she says. "I wanted to work with kids on their anxiety, and teaching yoga was my college job, so I took all of my tools and created this program."

"I also started having kids of my own," she continues. "I realized how much yoga helped with my anxiety and my overall well-being. I wanted to put my kids in yoga and there was no kids' yoga, so I decided, 'I'm going to start this and see what happens.'"

It did not take long for Petite Yogi to become a hit. Loughney partnered with preschools, elementary schools, and middle schools throughout

New Castle County, offering yoga programming in the form of elective classes or afterschool clubs. She now teaches more than 40 classes per week herself and has a full team of instructors.

"The schools really love it," Loughney says. "For example, we have a program with Cooke Elementary and they have us come in to give every single kid a mindful break during the school day. The teachers, the staff, and the principal are all super receptive to it, and the kids love it. Our afterschool programs are also great because the kids get to move their bodies, breathe, and do something fun after school."

Yoga for kids is different than for adults in that it includes breathing techniques, games, and certain themes, such as Halloween-themed poses throughout October. They can also take the lessons they learn and apply them to other aspects of their lives, from using breathing exercises to fall asleep at night to refocusing on schoolwork, or using certain skills to improve athletic performance.

"Even last night, my son got upset because he couldn't figure out his math homework," Loughney says. "We just did a little breathing exercise [to help him relax]. People don't realize that you don't have to do a full hour of yoga—just five rounds of breath can reset you to do whatever you're doing. That's what I did with my son; it helped him refocus, and he ended up figuring out his homework."

Petite Yogi has expanded into Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and Loughney recently began offering licensing opportunities for those who would like to open their own branches. Interested entrepreneurs, as well as local schools seeking to bring the programming to their students, can contact Loughney for more information.

In the meantime, as Loughney balances her thriving business, being a mom, and giving back to the community through philanthropic work with the Delaware Art Museum and Goodstay Gardens, she continues to lean on yoga in her own life.

"When I got to college, I decided I wasn't going to dance anymore, and I immediately found yoga, which is similar in the movement and the breathing," she says. "It felt like a nice fit for me, and I'm so glad I found it. I took it and ran with it." ■



Petite Yogi | Wilmington, Delaware | hello@petiteyogi.com | petiteyogi.com