

THAMARAI HEALTH & WELLBEING

ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023



Thamarai Health & Wellbeing Project

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Introduction

The Thamarai Health and Wellbeing Service stands for full potential, dignity and empowerment for all. We aim to nurture health and wellbeing through a sound combination of yogic and traditional health practices and techniques and other natural healing approaches, with primary health care methods and support services. We work from an understanding and perspective of health founded in the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

During this past year 2022-2023 the project continued the work of offering outreach services involving targeted education and instruction in traditional health and yogic practices, along with access to natural healing and primary health resources to people from the villages near Auroville. The aspiration of the holistic approach of this project is to develop consciousness of the body, mind, energy and psychic layers of being towards integral health.

“The outer nature has to undergo a change of poise, a quieting, a purification... of its substance and energy by which the many obstacles in it... disappear; it then becomes possible to pass through to the depths of our being and from the depths so reached a new consciousness can be formed, both behind the exterior self and in it, joining the depths to the surface. There must grow up within us... a consciousness more and more open to the deeper and the higher being.”

Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 938

“The psychic being is the real individuality of the true and divine individual within you. For your individuality means your special mode of expression and your psychic being is a special aspect of the one Divine Consciousness that has taken shape in you.”

The Mother, *MCW*, Vol. 3, pp. 62-3

Intention of the Project

This project is founded on the philosophies, teachings and guidelines for conscious evolution and integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, combined with the science and techniques of Hatha and Raja yoga, and traditional knowledge, resources and methods of the Tamil culture, with the aim to develop and support holistic wellbeing throughout the villages surrounding Auroville.

The main objective of the project is to share knowledge, techniques and practices that support the development and integration of health consciousness across mental, physical, psychosocial and spiritual domains for our participants from the local villages. Our programs focus on building awareness, and on supporting an individual's inner desire to change and flourish towards their full potential. We aspire to empower our participants towards holistic wellness by building their knowledge, confidence and experience of yogic science, natural health and traditional health practices.

We aim to promote awareness of common health risks, methods for addressing ill-health and for supporting healthy lifestyle choices, and practices that enhance wellness and foster the alignment and integration of all layers of the person. We provide education and a “toolbox” of techniques and practices that assist our participants to build their own capacity for self-management of their health and wellbeing, and for those of their families and communities. The programs include guided experiential and reflective learning, primary prevention approaches and a wide range of self-care strategies for application in their everyday lives.

Scope of the Project

The Health and Wellbeing project continued this year within the broader team at Thamarai Education projects, and in collaboration with Auroville outreach unit Arulvazhi, with fellow Auroville health therapists from, amongst others, Maatram and Integral Health, and with various other Aurovillian and local bodies.

The people we share to and where:

The project runs outreach programs intended for supporting residents of the rural villages near Auroville. This year our participants were mostly from Edayanchavadi, Annai Nagar, Alankuppam and Sanjeevnagar, Bommayapalayam, Kottakarai and Moratandi. Participants largely consisted of village residents who work in one of the Auroville units, attend one of the outreach schools or education programs, or attend one of the three local government schools where we restarted the Schools Program.



Project Components:

1. Schools Program
2. Women's Wellness Classes
3. Wellbeing Walk-in Mornings
4. Health Program @ Thamarai Learning Centres
5. Youth Empowerment; Alcohol misuse prevention and recovery
6. International Yoga Day Program
7. Special One-day programs

1. Schools Program

Yoga and health education in 3 bioregion government schools and 2 Auroville Outreach schools:

The Schools Program provided yoga and health education this year to three government schools in the region surrounding Auroville; Edayanchavadi primary, Bommayapalayam primary and Sanjeevnagar primary. We also returned to Isai Ambalam, an Auroville Outreach school, and Muthukumari continued her teaching role at Arulvazhi Outreach School.



This program focused on providing education and experiential learning to primary school children; on building their knowledge, confidence and experience of yogic sciences, natural health and traditional health practices in order to enhance their overall wellbeing and to develop their health consciousness of body, mind, emotions and psychic layers of self. We offered traditional wisdoms, practices and techniques, in tandem with primary and hygiene healthcare strategies, that supported children's holistic development of a healthy body, mind, and bioenergy system. Around 320 students had an opportunity to participate in the program.

The main aim of the program was to empower the children by providing opportunities for inner connection, enriching their sense of self and helping build their self-confidence and resilience as they faced daily stresses and challenging environmental circumstances. By taking a capacity-building, full-potential approach, we aspired to spark the children's innate desire for learning and awaken their



knowledge and possibilities from within. A secondary objective of the program was to enrich the awareness and health consciousness of the school teachers, and to equip them with a toolbox of practices and techniques to continue applying with their students outside of the program sessions.

The program modules were based on the wisdoms, practices and techniques of Hatha yoga, traditional Tamil culture, and the first four limbs of Ashtanga Yoga (per the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali); Yama (restraints), Niyama (personal observances), Asana (physical postures) and Pranayama (breath control). A solid foundation of yogasana and pranayama was shared to benefit the physical body, the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, digestive, endocrine and other internal systems and organs, as well as to impact steadiness of mind and activate the bioenergy system. Mudras, mantras and some basic techniques of seated concentration were also introduced. Education and training was additionally provided on basic body structure and mechanics, the biofield and pranic energy structure, nutrition and healthy eating, relaxation, acupressure and self/oil massage, local Tamil herbs and traditional home remedies for common ailments, the importance of hygiene and water for wellbeing, exercises for eye health, and menstrual education and period management.



Specific program material included:

- ❖ *asana*; variety of standing, seated, twists, backbends, inversions, arm balances etc, and including technique, alignment and benefits, and warm up movements and postural cues for healthy joints and muscles,
- ❖ *breathing techniques and pranayama*; such as Bhramari, Nadi Shodhana, Kapalbhati, Sheetal and Kaki, with focus on quality of breath and the relationship between breath and movement/ stability,
- ❖ *mudras*; such as Chin, Prana, Shankh and the mudras of the Pancha Bhuta (five elements) etc, and including the particular benefits/ effects of each,
- ❖ *concentration practices* and focusing exercises,
- ❖ *mantras and hymns*; such as Aum chanting, Gayatri and Guru Mantra etc,



- ❖ *Yamas and Niyamas*; to encourage healthful and ethical life choices and behaviours,
- ❖ *theory of yogic science*; the Pancha Kosha (five layers of being) and pranic body/ human bioenergy system, including the Nadi energy network (with three main channels Ida, Pingala and Sushumna) and the seven ascending Chakras,
- ❖ *eye exercises* and basic vision checking,
- ❖ *hygiene*; including healthy toilet habits and the importance of water for hydration and health of all organs and body systems,
- ❖ *nutrition* and eating for good health,
- ❖ *herbal plants and traditional Tamil home remedies*,
- ❖ *self-massage/ acupressure*; including oil massage methods and routines.



Qualitative survey of school program participants

Primary School Children

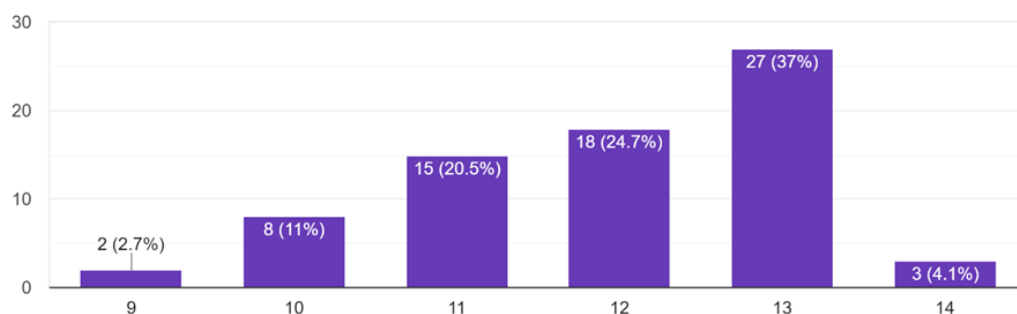
Towards the end of the program we carried out a simple qualitative survey with the school children participants from 4th to 8th Standard (so over 8 years and up to 14 years old) from Edayanchavadi Government school and Isai Ambalam Auroville Outreach School, in order to explore their attitude towards their Health & Wellbeing sessions, what they liked and what they learned, any changes they had noticed in themselves and what they “took home” with them.



With the invaluable help of Jagadeswari (Lead Facilitator at Thamarai Annai Nagar Learning Centre), we had 72 responses translated from

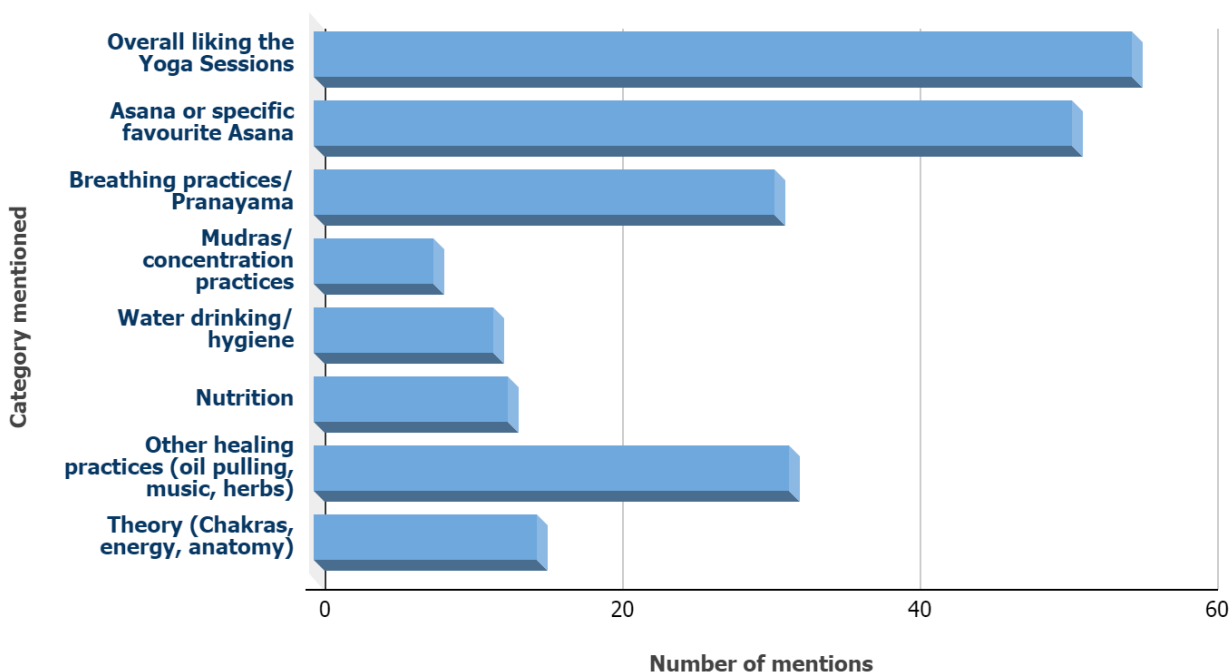
Tamil to English; 43 from Isai Ambalam outreach school and 29 from Edayanchavadi government school. Their age distribution is shown below, with the majority (total 45) aged 12 or 13 years.

My age is
73 responses

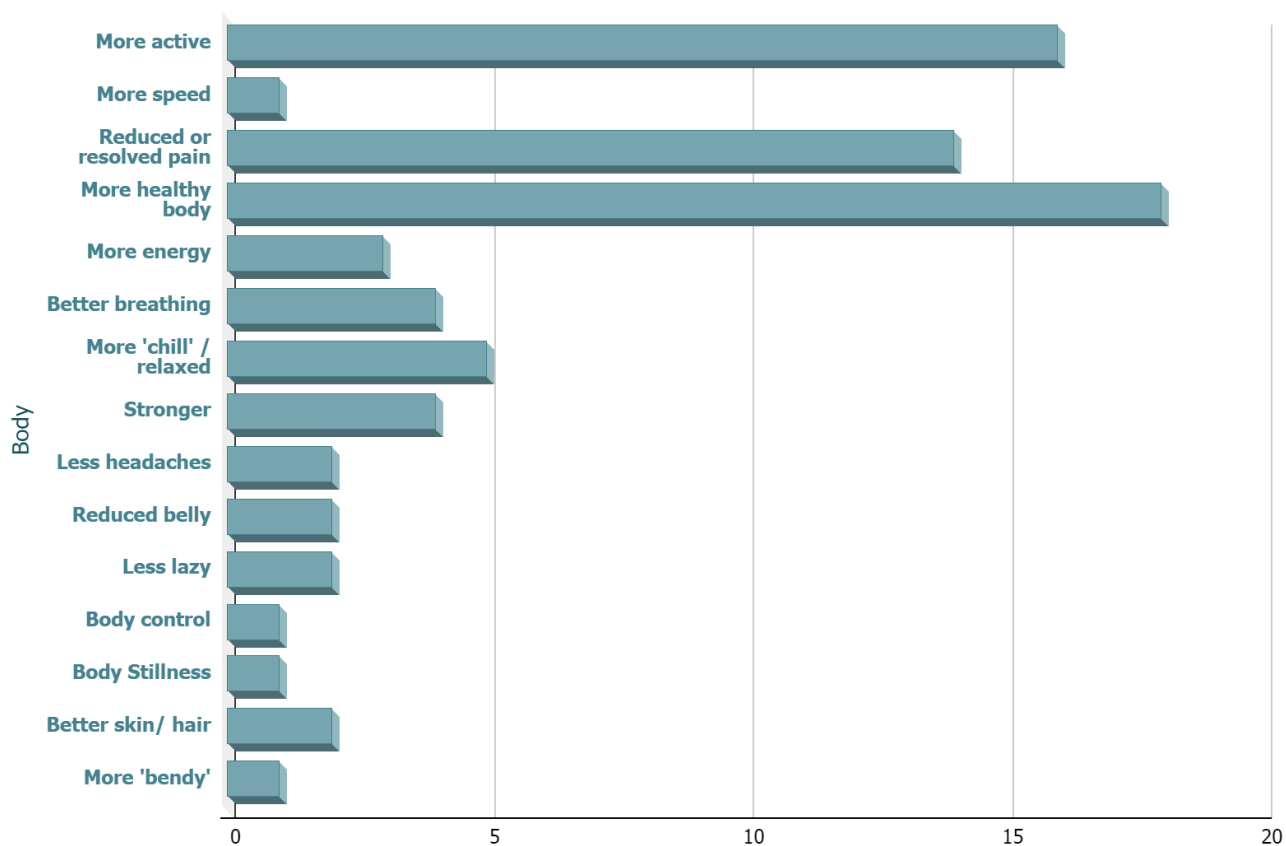


Implementing the surveys was challenging in key ways, and we took many lessons away from the experience. Not least, issues like mode of delivery (paper and pen; and difficulties with written expression), environment of delivery (large groups in busy school areas), novelty of the format and time of delivery (it was exam period, so there was likely issues from both teachers and students receiving the survey as 'another exam'), and possibly conceptual gaps in some of the children's understanding of the questions. Perhaps mostly related to the last two points, there was seemingly too much verbal explanation and/or leading of the questions with the students from the interpreter/ teacher, and some children evidently shared and/or copied their answers, so the results cannot be considered to have good validity. However, we can use the results for some general indication of what the children related to in the sessions, and as a valuable learning experience on which we can improve on for next time the school program is offered.

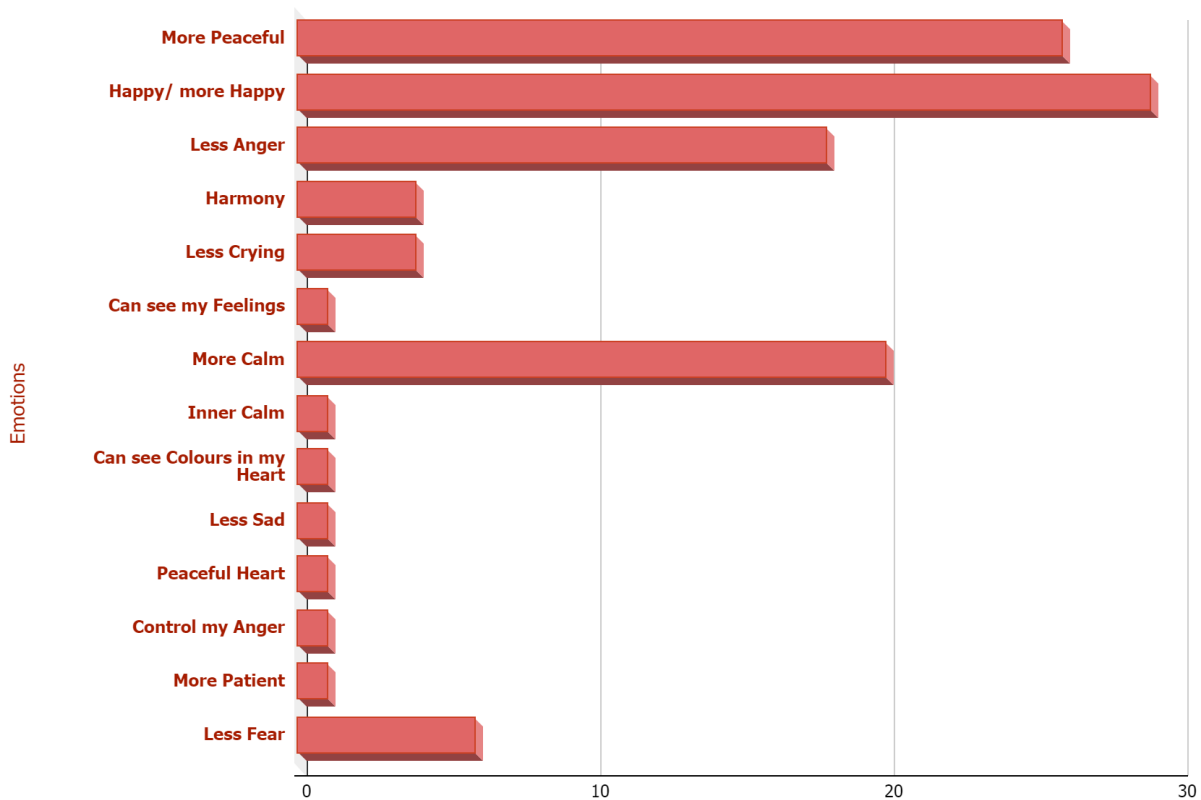
What the students reported they liked learning in their sessions:



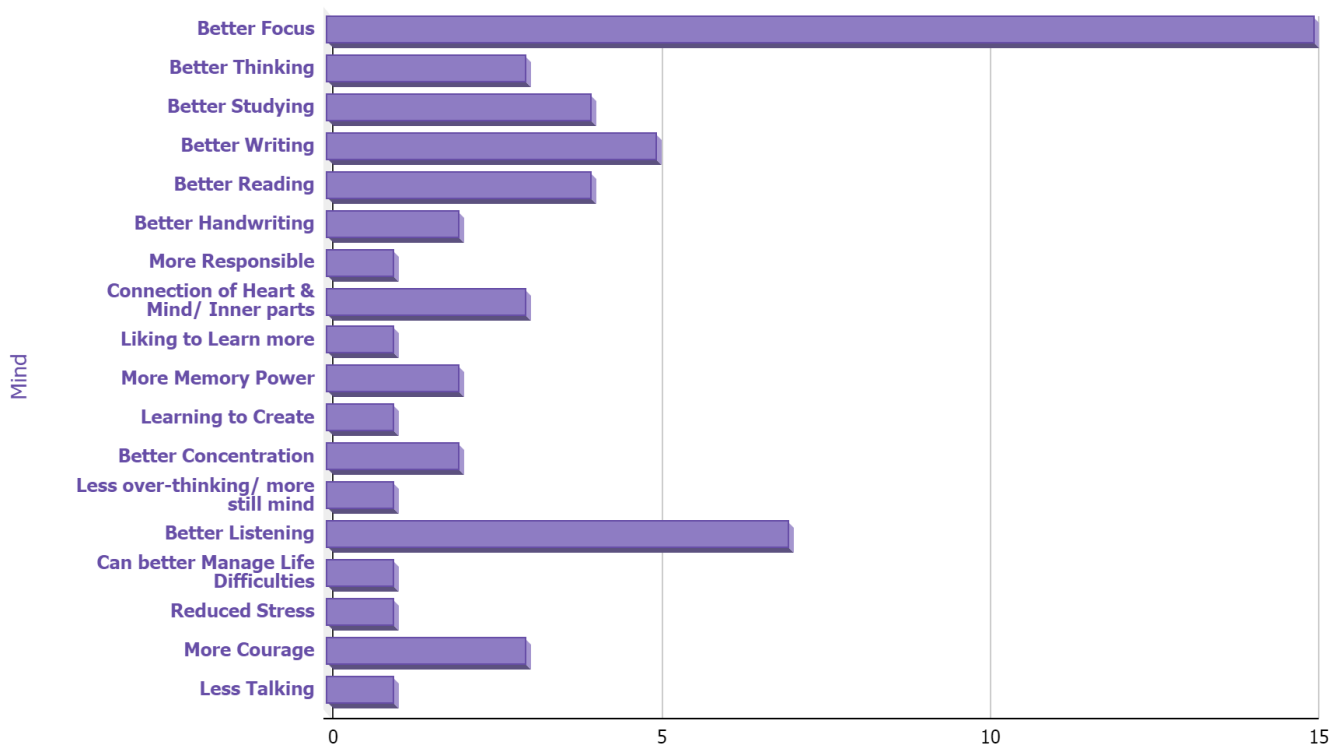
Changes reported in the body:



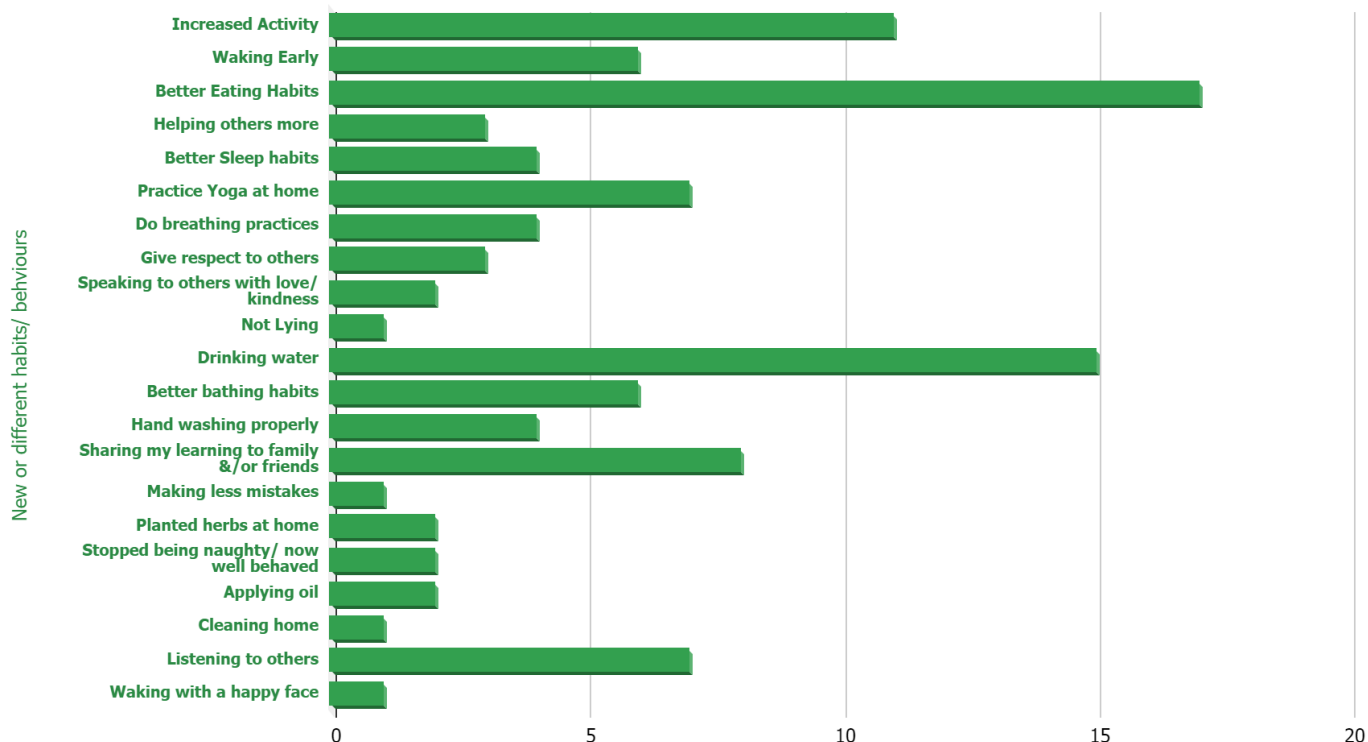
Changes reported in emotions/ feelings:



Changes reported in the mind/ thinking:

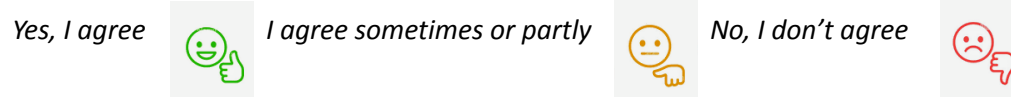


New or different habits/ behaviours:

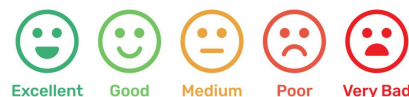


Small children's survey:

We also used a simple scale to try to capture basic aspects of the subjective experience of the smaller children (ages 5 to 7, inclusive). For the first two questions the scale included colour-coded representational “smiley” faces and “thumbs up” symbols offering three levels of responding:



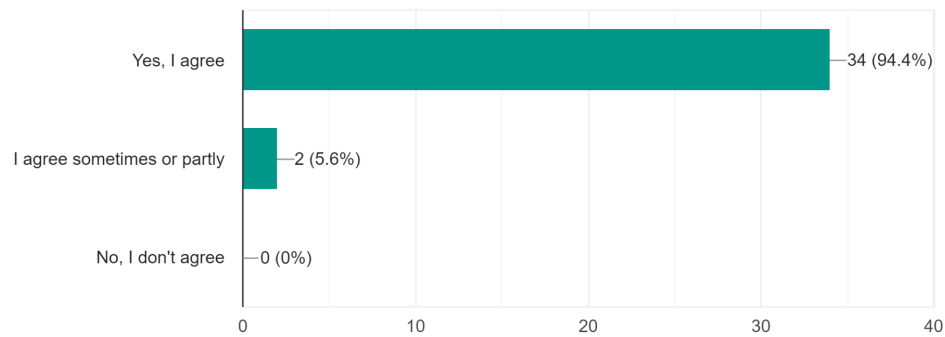
For the final question, a similar “smiley face” 5-point picture scale was employed for the children to express how they usually felt after the class:



We received 36 responses from each Bommayapalayam government school and Edayanchavadi government school, and by far the majority of the small children agreed that they liked going to the Yoga & Health Class at school, and that they learned a lot and enjoyed the activities.

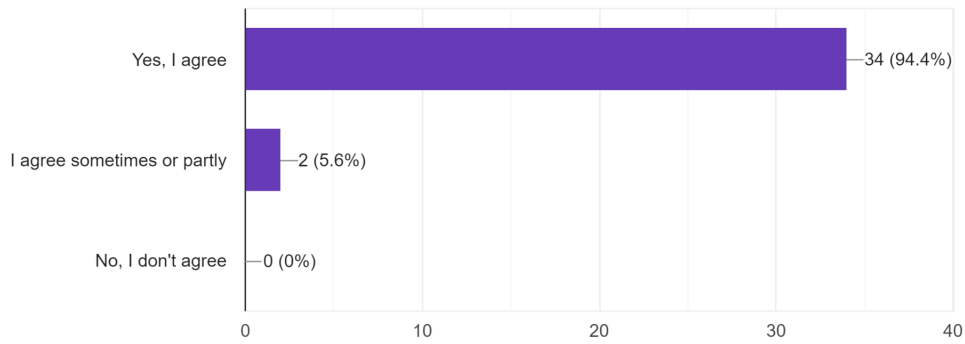
I like going to the Yoga and Health Class at school

36 responses



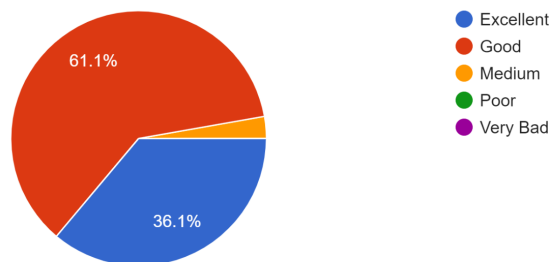
I learn a lot in Yoga Class and enjoy the activities

36 responses



Usually, after the Yoga/ Health Class I feel...

36 responses



Teachers B. Sumathi & M. Rekha from Edayanchavadi Gov. school shared their impression of the program and the impacts they observed on the students:

Since adding the yoga and wellbeing class hour our students are now obeying, and they have developed good self respect and memory power.

I can see through yoga our students get good habits and memory power. I am welcoming the good habits from yoga.

B. Sumathi

Yoga is very very important for each and every human being. While children are growing up, yoga is helping them to get good habits

Yoga its helping them to get more confidence, stronger and more healthy.

M. Rekha

Doing yoga practice children are feeling more patient, increasing their talent, they are more still, and they show good changes in study and body condition.

This class was very useful. By learning yoga we got stronger body, mentally and physically changed.

2. Women's Wellness Classes

This program is designed to support and empower women from the local villages to improve and self-manage their own, their family's and their community's health. Aspects of the program include techniques of yogic sciences and healthy lifestyle education, which are interwoven with traditional cultural and spiritual practices.

The program aims to enhance the women's own sense of self-efficacy in changing health routines and lifestyle behaviours to encourage better physical and psychological health. The learning and experience gained can then be shared amongst their family and friends for wider community impact.

In this ongoing program we offer sessions in various locations for women working within Auroville or residing in one of the surrounding villages. We currently provide this service in three locations, covering approximately 77 participants over the year:

- ☐ **Bharat Nivas
(Auroville)**
- ☐ **Arulvazhi
(Moratandi Village)**
- ☐ **Illaignarkal School
(Auroville)**





"I have been attending this yoga program at Bharat Nivas for 7 months. I feel very good. I went for many other classes and treatments also, but I feel these sessions help me a lot.

I had neck and shoulder pain complaints for a long time... But after these regular sessions I don't feel much worry about problems. I feel good and relaxed, my husband also likes to attend the session.

At home the atmosphere is difficult to practice, but I am happy to do it with all the other women who were really inspired and motivated me to do it regularly."

Sarojini, 32 years, Auroville.



"I have been attending for 2 yrs the yoga and wellbeing program. I like it very much, because I feel a very good and peaceful mind. Before yoga programs, I had joint pain, irregular menstrual cycle, obesity issues , after yoga sessions I learned so much from this class .

I learned the concept of how health issues are caused by unhealthy lifestyles and habits. If we change our lifestyle practices, we can maintain a healthy body without disease.

Nowadays I don't have joints pain, my menstrual is normal and no tension in family. I am practicing pranayama everyday at home, and also following natural health practices,foods etc. I am using it in my family also.

Other ladies from my team also feel happy and increased confidence by attending yoga and wellbeing sessions.."

Prapavathy, 30 years, Tailoring teacher at Illaignarkal School.

3. Wellbeing Walk-in Mornings

A walk-in Wellbeing morning is being held monthly in the Thamarai Learning Centre in Annai Nagar village. This started in August 2022 and is currently ongoing.

In collaboration with natural and traditional therapists and healthcare providers from within

Auroville, we are offering primary health checks (including blood pressure, heart rate, blood glucose level), naturopathy, homoeopathy, yoga therapy, mental health and addiction counselling, and craniosacral therapy.



We recorded some basic data on the attendances for six of the monthly Wellbeing mornings between September 2022 and April 2023, including:

- ☐ key demographics (name, age, sex, village),
- ☐ an initial assessment of a few primary health measures; pulse, blood pressure, blood sugar, (and weight and haemoglobin on a couple of occasions),
- ☐ the attendee's presenting health issues/ complaints,
- ☐ the service/s they attended on the day (e.g. homoeopathy, counselling, yoga therapy etc), and
- ☐ the interventions/ treatment/ recommendations from each therapist consulted.

Most visitors were aged over 50 years, and so the many age-related health concerns we recorded were to be expected. We also observed evidence of the impact of modern life-style behaviours and the associated health risks. The most common potential health concerns we identified on initial assessment were recordings of high blood sugar levels (often correlating to already medically diagnosed Diabetes Mellitus Type 2), instances of high and low blood pressure readings, and, on the occasion that readings were taken, some occurrences of low haemoglobin, indicating iron-deficiency anaemia.



The issues most frequently self-reported were musculoskeletal complaints; low back and hip pain, neck and shoulder pain, and leg and knee pain – and often these were reported as chronic (long-term/ delayed recovery) and with related functional restriction or impairment. Other common concerns reported were recurrent headaches and vision problems, and skin issues (also often chronic/ recurrent).

In the six months we documented, we had a total of approximately 100 walk-in visitors, mostly from Annai Nagar village (where Thamarai Centre is located) with a few from the neighbouring village Alankuppam and a few from Auroville. Of these attendances, around ten people returned on multiple occasions. Our Lead Facilitator for Annai Nagar village, Jagadeswari, has told us that she is happy to see these monthly health mornings available in the village, and has encouraged us to continue them. As we move forward with the program, we are urging the visitors to follow-up for ongoing review; with the aim, along with more thorough and consistent record-keeping, to be able to monitor any changes in observed and self-reported health and wellbeing levels in those who visit us regularly. We are also hoping to build on the health and natural therapies offered on the day, for example acupuncture, increased emphasis on nutrition education, connecting to group mental health awareness sessions etc.



4. Health Program @ Thamarai Learning Centres

After-school Children's Classes (Annai Nagar and Edayanchavadi)

Throughout the year, yoga, relaxation and occasional nutrition and education sessions were held at both Annai Nagar After-school and at Edayanchavadi After-school.



Offered ongoing within the schedule of the after-school programs to those who attend each Learning Centre, the focus of these sessions is to provide the opportunity for the children to learn and enjoy yoga asana, breathing and concentration practices, relaxation to music and instrumentals, education on theory of yogic sciences and traditional Tamil healing methods, local foods and herbs. The aim is to contribute to their holistic, healthful development and facilitate their connection to all layers of their being; the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.





Women Facilitators Sessions

A weekly yoga & wellbeing session is held for the female facilitators in the Annai Nagar Centre. We take this time to focus on and explore the ladies individual wellness needs, challenges and progress incorporating a yogic therapy approach; using body movements and postural cues for healthy joints and muscles, a variety of yoga asana (including technique and alignment cues, and benefits of particular asana), engaging the breath through movement and stillness, various pranayama and mudras, wellbeing check-ins, and education on theory of the human bioenergy system, the pancha koshas etc.



Aurokiya Eye Camp for children in Annai Nagar After-school:

On 2 September 2022 Auroville Unit Aurokiya Eye Care held an eye camp for primary eye care with Thamarai children at the Annai Nagar centre. Four children were identified by the eye screening as being in need of referral for review/ further check up. Meetings were also held with the parents of these children to inform them and give education on supporting their children's eye health through specific practices and nutrition.

5. Youth Empowerment; Alcohol & drug abuse prevention and recovery

We continued our efforts in this space through 2022-23, in collaboration with other Thamarai team members, local and non-local mentors, and Palani and Rashmi from Maatram. Aspects of this multipronged program this year included services, supports and resources directed towards **prevention**; through individual and peer behavioural change and broader community culture shift:

- **Yoga Classes for male youth** in Annai Nagar village and for Shifu students,
 - Yoga classes were held for male youths two mornings per week in the Learning Centre in Annai Nagar for six months
 - Yoga classes for Shifu students (Shifu is a program of STEM Land Auroville, for youth to master skills, competencies and inner capacities) were held once per week for six months.
- **Girls Frisbee training,**

This empowering and norm-challenging activity continued through the year for girls from Annai Nagar village. Held weekly in the village sports field across from the Learning Centre, the girls are coached and guided in learning the sport by experienced players. The girls report that they are



very happy to be able to participate in these sessions, as generally opportunities to play sports are limited for village girls once they reach pubescent age. Our Lead Facilitator for Annai Nagar village, Jagadeswari, emphasised this and the fact that the girls now wear shorts to play sports in the middle of their village; this is a major cultural norm change! The training has a broad aim beyond teaching the girls how to play Frisbee, including; increasing physical stamina and fitness, improving health issues like menstrual problems and under/ overweight, and psychological gains such as greater self-confidence, resilience and courage. A few of the regular participants have had the rewarding opportunity to experience playing the sport in Chennai and other places.

➤ **career guidance,**

Experienced Facilitator and community worker Muthukumaran from Tata Institute of Social Sciences has provided regular support and guidance for career and tertiary education opportunities to local village youth, assisted by members of the Thamarai team.



➤ **Maatram Village Theatre,**

Rashmi, psychologist at Maatram, co-created with youth from Yuvabe a street theatre play exploring the widespread issue of mental illness (such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse). The play confronted the topic of mental health within the local context, aiming to build awareness of the circumstances and impacts of mental ill-health, and emphasising the potential for people to seek help and recover. They performed the play twice in Annai Nagar village; once in Thamarai Learning Centre and the other at the Annai Nagar village International Women's Day celebration.



A **treatment** oriented strategy was also made available throughout the year for those presently living with problematic alcohol and or other drug use, involving:

- **Individual Counselling** (with Palani from Maatram)
- **Alcoholics Anonymous** in Auroville, and
- **Referral to 28 day residential rehabilitation** (at Mother Care Foundation in Pondicherry)

6. International Yoga Day Program

The year 2022 we celebrated the International Day of Yoga with the 150th Birth Anniversary year of Sri Aurobindo. A 45 day early morning program at the Matrimandir Amphitheatre led up to the event on 21 June. This was organised in cooperation with Arulvazhi Education Centre and we were joined by other yoga teachers and practitioners from within Auroville. Approximately 200 children from Auroville outreach schools attended at some point over the time. Asana, pranayama, mantra, seated concentration and collective sankalpa were practised in the early morning daily sessions, and then on the day itself, the children and others from within and around Auroville joined together in a special celebration of yoga and Sri Aurobindo.





International Day of Yoga



Sri Aurobindo 150th Anniversary

Vanakkam,
In celebration of 'International Day of Yoga' festival and 'Sri Aurobindo's 150th Anniversary' we warmly invite you to a special event at the Matrimandir Amphitheatre with Auroville community, Arulvazhi Education Centre, Auroville outreach schools and Auroville schools. Our aspiration is for 150 students to participate in this historic event.

We request your presence and participation on:

21/06/2022 from 6:00 am to 8:00 am
at Matrimandir Amphitheatre, Auroville

Enter via second Banyan gate, from 5:30am

*In gratitude,
Arulvazhi Education Centre & Yoga Team*

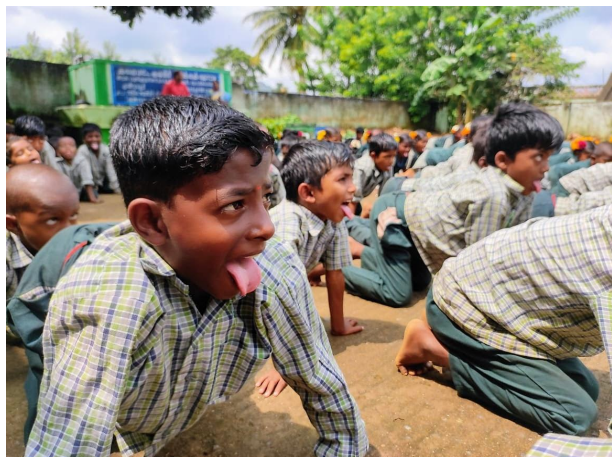


7. Special One-Day Programs

Kalvarayan Hills Village School Session



In October 2022, in collaboration with Auroville unit EcoPro, we provided a yoga and wellness session to Kalvarayan Hills government school, located in a remote mountain village, Kallakurichi district, around four hours from Auroville. The children here face significant challenges related to long distances and insufficient transport and infrastructure, and poor nutrition and health care, amongst others. In the brief time we had with them, we did body warm-up and asana, some breathing and simple concentration techniques, and shared information regarding hygiene and food and water intake advice.



Annai Nagar yoga performance for International Women's Day

Nine women from Annai Nagar practised a yoga routine for five days with Muthukumari, and performed the demonstration at the village International Women's Day celebration in March 2023.

Marakkanam Teacher's Wellness Session

In August 2022, a one-day program was held for approximately 60 teachers from the Marakkanam school district. The session covered basic concepts and techniques of yoga, traditional Tamil healing and nutrition advice, and discussed ways



to introduce this learning into their classrooms for the benefit of their students.

Gratitude

In gratitude to the broader Thamarai team, the many supporters and donors of Thamarai Projects both within and outside Auroville, the collaborative community of Auroville health therapists and, most especially, the participants in our programs who joined in sharing with us so much effort, learning, joy and healing.

“Each man has a mission to fulfil, a role to play in the universe, a part he has been given to learn and to take up in the cosmic Purpose, a part which he alone is capable of executing and none other. This he has to learn and acquire through life-experiences... to acquire experiences and to gather from them the thread — the skein of qualities and attributes, powers and capacities — for the pattern of life he has to weave.”

The Mother, MCW, Vol. 15, pp. 335-36

For feedback and enquiries, or to offer donations or other support, please feel welcome to contact us:

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