

NEWS REVIEW

Thirteen tiny bodies are firmly swung and rhythmically bounced, and the smiles on their faces show they love it

Yoga for happy babes

By Celia Hall, Medical Editor

FRANCOISE Freedman's views on babies should be distilled, bottled and given to every mother after childbirth.

Baby yoga classes may sound like something from the barmier fringe of the alternative health market but the delight of the babies is so obvious, their mothers' pleasure so tangible, that it is impossible to resist the idea that it is doing them anything but good.

Dr Freedman, a social anthropologist at the University of Cambridge, has been teaching yoga for many years. She developed specialised yoga classes for pregnant women and more recently she has adapted classic yoga exercises for babies.

Even Dr Freedman doesn't know how it works. "I still find it totally marvellous myself. At the start of a set of classes there may be 16 screaming babies and I really don't believe I will do anything. But within a few weeks there are major changes. I really cannot explain how it happens," she said.

In the final class of a set of six, based at the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital this week, babies aged five weeks to six months were put through their paces.

The sound of 13 babies chortling as they were firmly swung about or rhythmically bounced, or had their legs crossed to touch opposite shoulders or their arms moved to punch the air, is remarkable by itself. They loved it and their faces showed it.

Even more astonishing was the absolute silence at the end of the session when the well-exercised babies and their mothers practised deep relaxation. To be fair not everyone had got the hang of it and there was quite

a bit of wriggling. But three-month-old Mia Ledger, from Clerkenwell, lying along the relaxed body of her mother, Amarjot, was out for a count and as still and as floppy as a bean bag.

"Breathe deeply," Dr Freedman told her class. "When your baby cries your breathing gets shallower. Learn how to breathe deeply. The deep relaxation is something that mothers and babies have to practise. It does not happen straight away. It is very hard for Western women to learn how to relax. When they can, the baby perceives it and learns how to relax with them," Dr Freedman said.

Her theory is based on her observations during a field study in the Amazon, 20 years ago, of how aboriginal women behaved with their babies.

Later, with her own first baby, she lived with the women of the Jackwash Lamista people in the foothills of the Western Amazon.

"Western babies do not get enough exercise. They are strapped in car seats and their abdomens get compressed. They are put down in their cots.

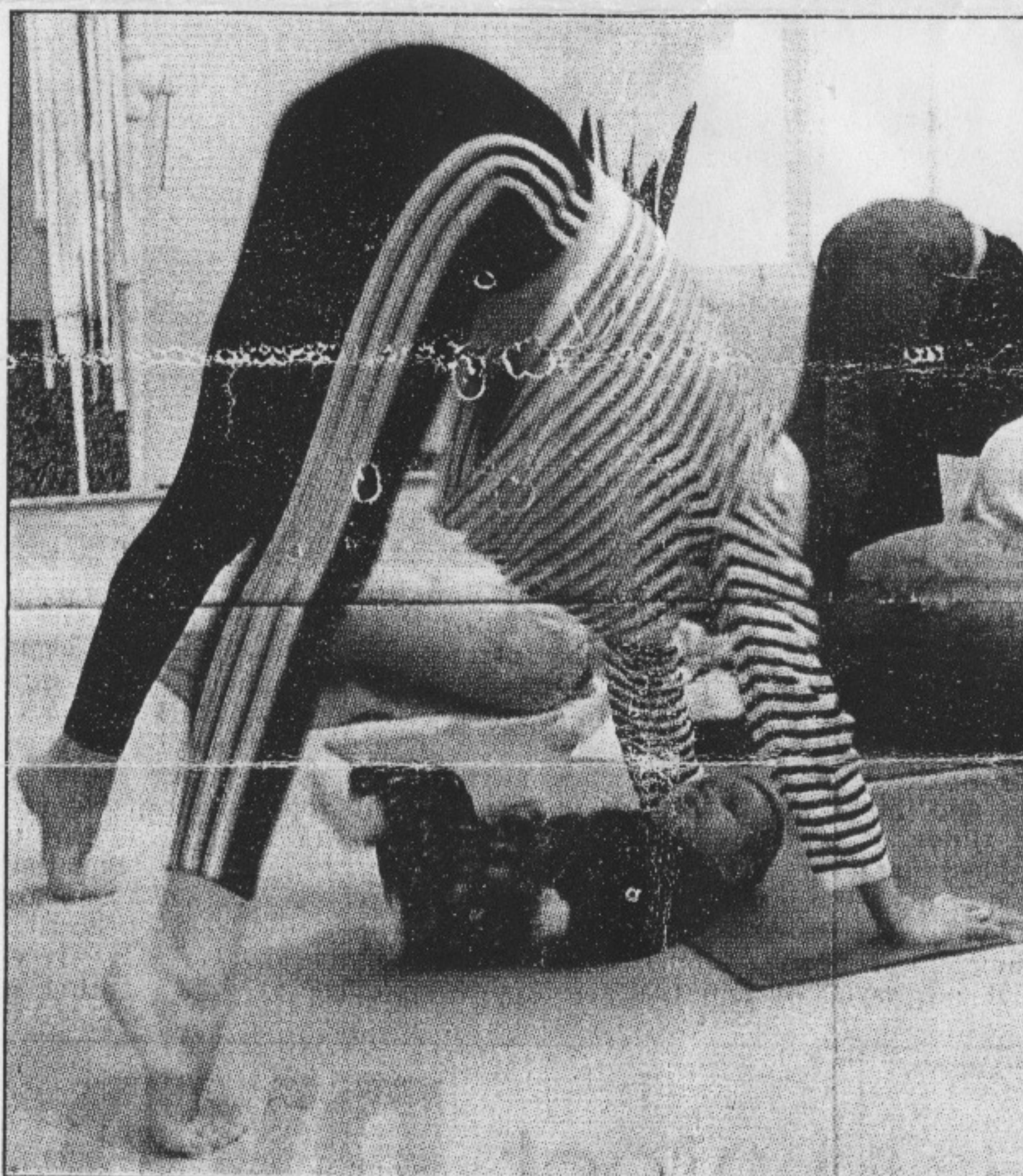
"Aboriginal babies move all the time. They know how to cling on. Their mothers are working, moving, carrying, climbing over rocks," she said. This she demonstrated by jogging vigorously round the room, a happy baby slung unceremoniously under one arm.

The whole idea is for mothers and babies to work together. The exercises tone muscles used in pregnancy and labour and the weight of the babies is often used to work the mothers' bodies harder. Baby massage is incorporated into the sequences.

Alice Morgan, whose daughter, Islay Rose, is 20 weeks, does a session almost



There's the rub: a chortle as a baby receives a massage. 'The approach is to use your baby to tone yourself and have fun at the same time'



Stretch with mother: a kick of the leg shows baby is getting the idea. 'A happy baby makes you happy, and when you are happy, she is'



'Even more astonishing is the absolute silence at the end of the session when mothers and babies relax'

babies do get bored when you leave them lying under things they can look at. I think she likes the exercise."

Dr Shears, who does a couple of 15-minute sessions with Lara every day, said: "I carry her about a lot more now. A happy baby makes you happy, and when you are happy, she is. I just like the extra physical contact with her. I come away from the class feeling very positive. It is something I look forward to."

Dr Freedman said that most of the mothers join three or four of the sets of six sessions. She said babies need to start before the age of 18 months, when the development of language seems to intervene.

"Mothers need to do post-natal exercises and most of them do them in hospital and take the sheet home that the physiotherapist has given them. But most of them stop after a few days.

"With the baby they have no time to themselves. Especially for first-time mothers they have this conflict about putting their babies down while they do their exercises. My approach is, use your baby to tone yourself and have a lot of fun at the same time."

HER view is that Western babies have too much sensory stimulation and too little physical. "All the babies develop regular sleep patterns. They fall into deep sleep and they stay there," she said.

At first sight, the baby exercises seem altogether too boisterous for young infants, but Dr Freedman stresses that they are safe. The first lessons concentrate on firm two-handed holds and mothers and babies grow in confidence together.

"There has never been a single instance of a mother telling me she dropped or nearly dropped her baby. It has never happened."

She said that when fathers take part they have a tendency to do the exercises too quickly. The movements need to be smooth and the walking or running with the babies needs to be rhythmic.

"The secret is firmness, not roughness. The movements are straightforward and energetic."

The babies mimic their mothers. Small arms reached out as adult arms stretched. Their bodies were supple and co-operative. When any baby cried, Dr Freedman took it, whizzed it about a bit in the cradle of her arms and it stopped. Every time.

Classes take place at the Yoga Therapy Centre, Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, Great Ormond Street, London WC1 3HR

every morning. She knows she cannot prove that baby yoga makes a difference. But she says: "The days I don't do it she is crotchety. When I do, it seems to set her up for the day. I have learned how to

relax. It helped me to make a connection with the baby.

"I don't think that carrying her a lot makes her more demanding. When I put her down she doesn't whinge. She doesn't cry when I leave

the room," she said. "Did you notice? All those babies together and sometimes it is completely quiet?" Mrs Morgan may be a regular but is still amazed.

The principle is that well

exercised babies also need physical rest. Reportedly they sleep better and cry less. Another student is Dr Debbie Shears, 32, whose daughter Lara is 14 weeks old. She also found the sessions remark-

able. "I had never seen anything like it," said Dr Shears, a researcher in medical genetics. "Of course all babies develop at different rates, so it is hard to say how she has benefited. But I believe