

Yoga Therapy for Autistic Children

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By Miriam Behar



Autism is a developmental disability characterized by atypical, repetitive behaviors and deficits in social and communicational skills. Autism is more common in boys than girls, and it is estimated that 1 in 300 individuals are affected by autism in the United States.¹ According to Linda Brzustowicz, PhD, MD, a genetics professor at Rutgers University, the numbers of cases has risen since the late 1980's and 1990's.² As a school-based pediatric occupational therapist, I have also seen the numbers of autistic children rise dramatically since I first started practicing over twenty years ago.

Yoga as a Therapeutic Modality

Many children on the autism spectrum have difficulty processing and organizing sensory input from their nervous systems. Traditional therapy techniques for autistic children tend to use external techniques of sensory integration, providing stimulation to the tactile (sense of touch), vestibular (movement and gravity) and proprioceptive (awareness of one's body in space) systems.

Each activity is specifically designed to address the particular system that is out of balance. Some of these techniques include deep pressure massage, or placing the child in equipment—such as a swing—that provides vestibular input to the nervous system. These activities are limited by the fact that the child has to rely on others to receive the therapy.

Yoga is a promising therapy for autistic children. Yoga improves sensory processing and enhances one's sense of personal space, improves gross motor skills and the ability to transition from one activity to another, develops self esteem, and improves communication and relationship skills.

In contrast to other therapies, Yoga helps autistic children calm themselves, rather than relying on someone else to provide this comfort for them. After a child has learned the various poses, breathing practices, and visualizations, he can accomplish this by himself or with a parent.

Pilot Program

A pilot program was designed to see if Yoga could have a positive impact on autistic children. The nine-week program consisted of yoga classes for the parent and child. Six children and parents participated in the pilot program.

After the nine-week session, parents were given an extensive questionnaire that asked about the following: various sensitivities that the child experiences, diet, language, ability to focus, eye contact, socialization, transitioning from one activity to another, motor planning, overall happiness, and how their behavior affected the family unit.

Results

The pilot study showed encouraging results. In the area of focus, parents reported that their children are able to stay on a task for a longer amount of time. Some of the parents also reported that it is easier for their children to go from one activity to another, just as they have learned to transition from one pose to another in Yoga class. The children are communicating more, some non-verbally.

They also showed an improvement in calming themselves with the breathing practices taught in the Yoga session. Parents reported that the children used a breathing technique frequently throughout the day on their own, or with some verbal prompting from the parent. The parents have shared that their children appear happier since learning the poses and express a sense of accomplishment in their new achievements. Many children have been showing their classmates the Yoga poses in school with great pride. The parents report that this program had a positive effect overall on the family unit.

A Typical Yoga Session

Because autistic children are highly distractible, the mats are already set up, with as few visual distractions around the room as possible. The lights are dimmed and soft music plays in the background. Most of the parents participate with the children throughout the sessions. Some choose to observe, as their child

feels more comfortable offering the Yoga by themselves. The child's needs always come first, and the most comfortable and motivating environment is provided for each child.

The session starts with lying in classic relaxation pose. The teacher speaks gently and softly, guiding students through a brief visualization. The next part of the class consists of a cleansing, calming breath (see sidebar, "The Breath of Peace") and gradual stretching. As the children sit in easy pose, they practice *pranayama*. They then begin a series of poses. The class progresses with various kneeling poses, inverted poses such as *ardha sarvangasana*, supine poses, prone poses, and standing poses, including *tadasana* and *vrksasana*. In each pose, the teacher reminds the children to breathe in and out slowly.



Because children with autism learn visually, the poses are taught both by teacher demonstration and Yoga cards. Throughout the session, the instructor is very aware of the children's attention span and needs, and

will adjust the class to accommodate the children. To keep their attention and interest, she may offer various Yoga games that incorporate the poses. One of the games follows a familiar song: "If you're happy and you know it be a tree," using a different pose for each verse.

Case Study

Stephen, a 3-year-old child, participated in the pilot program for seven out of nine sessions. Stephen demonstrated remarkable progress from the first session to the end of the program.

During the first two sessions, he cried throughout the sessions, clinging to his mother. During the third session, he began to calm down and attempted some of the Yoga poses. During the rest of the sessions, to our amazement, he began to practice at least twenty Yoga poses. Stephen is a visual learner, as are most children on the autistic spectrum, and was therefore shown various poses by both the therapist and on Yoga picture cards.

Yoga has helped him to plan movement, integrate and coordinate both sides of his body, increase focus, improve sensory processing, and calm himself. His ability to practice consecutive poses has also helped to build his self-esteem.

Stephen's mother has reported that he now practices Yoga poses and breathing techniques at home. She has found this to be a very effective way for him to calm anxiety and to focus.

The progress that Stephen has demonstrated is also being seen with many other students who have participated in the pilot program, as well as in similar programs that we offer through the Center For Special Needs and at Celebrate the Children. □

The Breath of Peace

The Breath of Peace is repeated throughout the session, sometimes between poses, to bring the children back to a calm and centered place.

Sit in easy pose with a tall straight spine, the hands gently placed on the thighs with the palms facing up to the sun, eyes closed. Bring your focus to the center between the eyebrows and slightly above. See a beautiful light within. Breathe in slowly and quietly through the nose, feeling the breath flowing all the way up the body until it reaches the top of your head. Then slowly and gently release the breath through the mouth, feeling peace and calmness throughout the body.

The Center for Special Needs, Inc.



The Center for Special Needs, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded by the School of Complete Yoga, an international school centered in Ontario, Canada. The school offers programs for autistic and special needs students at the Yoga studio, as well as in both public and special needs schools. Due to the success of these programs, many schools have expressed interest in bringing a program into their classrooms.

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References

1. Cosac, a non-profit agency providing outreach and services for the autism community: www.njcosac.org.
2. Scott, J.M. April 12, 2005. "Where Autistic Kids Can Be Kids." *The Star Ledger*.