

Yoga as a therapeutic modality in **Autism** Spectrum Disorder

The ancient art of yoga is proving to have great benefits for children on the autism spectrum. Yoga comprehensively addresses their heightened anxiety, poor motor coordination and weak self-regulation, something that otherwise is very difficult to do.

Treatments for autism come in all shapes and sizes, and as families well know, what works for one autistic person doesn't necessarily work for another. Choosing an intervention must be based on an autistic individual's specific needs and the family's emotional and fiscal comfort. An increasingly popular choice which is gaining a greater foothold in the scientific community is Yoga. It doesn't require expensive medications or time-consuming doctor's visits. Once learned with the guidance of a specially-trained instructor it's a simple movement and breathing activity that researchers say can have far-reaching physical and psychological effects. In fact, a wide range of people on the spectrum can practice yoga, even at home, with limited supervision and with little more than an exercise mat.

Largely in response to parental demand, more yoga teachers than ever before are getting trained to teach classes specifically adapted to students with autism. And in contrast to past years, when most of these students were young, Yoga-For-Autism classes are increasingly geared to older teens and adults. Moreover, there's a growing recognition that yoga, to be truly effective, must be specifically geared to the unique needs and healing potential of those with ASD.



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Sceptics in the medical establishment may question the helpfulness of yoga, but Manner at the Comprehensive Autism Medical Assessment and Treatment Centre states that her experience and that of other pioneering yogis already offers powerful evidence that yoga "works." Yoga can be just simple laughter or a smile, "It's about connecting with the self. In this sense, "To be in the moment".

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.

As "A Physioyoga Therapist" I believe 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 "TO CALM THEMSELVES"

The first step in teaching Yoga to a student with autism is to establish a strong bond with the child. To do this the Yoga teacher will need to enter the world that the child lives in -- to meet the child on his or her own level, so to speak. Only then will the teacher be able to gain the child's complete confidence.

Yoga Postures for Autistic Children



The Postures may be started very slowly and one posture may be practised at a time otherwise the child may get irritated too. Yoga Postures should be practised on a "Sticky Mat". The sticky Mat is to make the child feel that his/her feet are stable in the Yoga Poses. The child should not feel

The children should not wear socks while practising Yoga poses as this will not provide the needed stability. The child should wear loose, light and non binding fabric cloths.

The postures should be practised regularly and best advice is at least three times a week. Short sessions of 10-15 minutes are better with frequent repetitions rather than long sessions as child may not be able to concentrate and get frustrated easily. Consistent practise will increase child's energy levels, concentration, attention, endurance, stamina and coordination. that "I will slip off or slide on the mat" while practising.

Anytime of the day is appropriate for the child to practise yoga as far as the interest level is maintained. But the same time should be chosen every-day for the sessions

Each pose is geared to relieving stress and pressure in the "autonomic nervous system," It is "easy to teach and easy for children to remember."

After the student becomes familiar with these introductory poses, the Yoga teacher may progressively add more asanas to the routine, as well as deep relaxation. The combination of asanas, pranayama and deep relaxation will strengthen the child's nervous system, increase overall health and facilitate the development of body awareness and concentration.

The Breath of Peace (Yogic Breathing)

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

Yogic Breathing Exercises have a great influence in taking care of psychological issues in autistic children. Yogic Breathing exercises are breathing deep down into the belly rather than just shallow breathing in the chest.

Instruction: There should not be breathing like a super hero-"Chest in & out", but instead it should be as "air filling into the belly" with inhalation and "air squeezing out" of the belly in exhalation.

Meditation

Practise of "Shwasan Dhyana"(Breath Watching Meditation) & Reverse Counting Meditation have proven to be of great interest and fun to the children which helps in relaxation and calming down.

Technique: 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 centre 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, specifically intended to help children contend with their escalating emotions.

How is Yoga good for Autistic Children?

■ Yoga develops motor skills

Kids with autism frequently experience delayed motor development, which can be improved as yoga tones muscles, enhances balance and stability, & develops body awareness and coordination. As motor skills develop, children have a greater sense of their physical self in space and in relation to others, and can improve their gait and stability.

■ Yoga improves confidence and social skills

Poor coordination often yields low self-esteem as kids may be singled out or teased for not moving or behaving like other children, or not excelling in sports and outdoor activities. By learning self-control and self-calming techniques through yoga, they are likely to grow confidence in interacting with other children and refine their social skills.

■ Yoga provides sensory integration

Children with autism often suffer from a highly sensitive nervous system and are easily over stimulated by bright lights, new textures, loud noises, strong tastes and smells. Yoga's natural setting of dim lights, soft music, smooth mats, and "inside" voices creates a comforting environment largely protected from unknown or aggressive stimuli in which calming down becomes enjoyable. Yoga's physical poses allow nervous energy to be released from the body in a controlled manner, also leading to a calming sensation.

■ Yoga provides coping techniques to both kids & parents

Whether teaching the child breathing techniques for self-calming, talking the class through a guided visualization the child can use when getting anxious, or sharing flashcards of the day's poses with parents to use at home, yoga provides an awesome toolbox to parents and siblings. It is a transportable practice that both parents and kids can draw from for a lifetime and share a meaningful home activity.

■ Yoga facilitates self-awareness

Yoga is particularly instrumental in helping kids with autism learn self-regulation. By becoming aware of their bodies and aware of their breathing, yoga provides them with the ability to cope when they start to feel anxious or upset. Many 'Yoga for Autism' classes teach yoga poses or breathing techniques specifically intended to help children contend with their escalating emotions. Since these children are visually oriented, savvy instructors add a visual element so that the child has a colour picture of each pose near his or her mat.

■ Yoga engages the emotional brain

We all know that yoga is far from purely physical, and this combination of movement, music, breath work and storytelling activates the brain's emotional region. This encourages children to develop awareness of their emotions and those of others, as well as keeps their attention in the class. Music is another powerful tool that the yoga instructor can share with parents to use at home to recreate the environment of a yoga class.

■ Yoga is orderly & consistent

Ideally, the class will be scheduled at the same time and same day of the week, with the students' mats in the same layout, in the same room, with the same instructor(s) to impart a sense of trust and steadiness. This element of order is very important for a child and communicates stability. The class should have an opening and closing routine or practice - singing, tuning in, etc. - that further supports the students' need for order.

Yoga is not competitive, but practise of some yoga poses can stay with the child for lifetime. Yoga as a complimentary treatment for autism is growing in popularity. A new book by South Florida yoga teacher Louise Goldberg provides techniques for teaching yoga poses to children with special needs.

Titled "Yoga Therapy for Children with Autism and Special Needs", published by W.W. Norton and company, this book offers ways to present poses and structure a class for children with autism and other special needs. In contrast to other therapies, Yoga helps autistic children calm themselves, rather than relying on someone else to provide this comfort for them. By establishing optimal physiological and psychological integrity, Yoga therapy helps children with autism gain new motor, communication and social skills. The end result is an overall improvement in their quality of life.

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