

## Using the Benefits of Yoga with Children

By Megan-Lynette Richmond, M.S., CCC-SLP and Tara Calder, OTR/L

***\*\*Before beginning a yoga program, or any program involving physical activity, consult your child's physician.***

Children with developmental, genetic, or neurological disorders all have unique therapeutic needs. While there is no global therapeutic treatment for children with special needs, using yoga as therapeutic intervention is beneficial for all children. With correct instruction, yoga supplements traditional therapeutic interventions to improve fine and gross motor strength, breath support, concentration, and communication skills.

The word "yoga" is Sanskrit, meaning "union." The principles of yoga combine relaxation, physical postures, and imagery, allowing almost all ages and ability levels to benefit from its focus. Rehabilitation therapists have a long history of using yoga as a supplement to therapy. There are many reports highlighting the therapeutic benefits of yoga for children with Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder/Pervasive Developmental Delay, Cerebral Palsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and Sensory Processing Disorders.



### How is Yoga Beneficial?

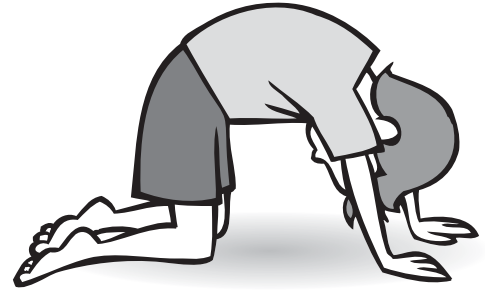
#### **Yoga teaches children to breathe effectively.**

Breathing effectively increases the amount of oxygen moving to the brain, therefore improving concentration, learning, and vocal support (speech and voice), as well as encourages deep relaxation which helps calming and self-regulating techniques. Additionally, effective breathing enhances postural stability, as the same muscle groups are necessary for both activities.

#### **Yoga encourages body awareness.**

Children with special needs often have difficulty with body awareness. Yoga uses slow and fluid movements which bring awareness to the muscles we use when practicing different postures. When a child feels a muscle working while stretching and holding postures, it reinforces body schema and awareness. As the child practices a posture, he/she increases muscle strength, range of motion, and flexibility. Additionally, many yoga poses require children to use their muscles in their mid-range rather than in full flexion or extension. This teaches children how to grade the force of their movements. (Caution: Practicing poses with children who have Cerebral Palsy or Down syndrome should be under the observation and advisement of a physician and/or supervision of a trained professional or therapist.)

A child's ability to know where his/her body is in space is dependent on awareness of the midline of the body and where to position various body parts in relation to the midline. Using yoga positions, the child works on aligning the trunk, limbs, neck, and hips to improve midline awareness. During yoga practice, the child moves and then holds his/her body in different positions. The teacher brings attention to which part of the body is working and how to move and hold it correctly in relation to the midline.



## Incorporate Yoga into Daily Activities

### Play simple games.

Yoga games are very simple to play. For example, have the children pretend to be a tree in a forest. Have them hold the tree pose with both hands over the head or on the hips. Work on balance and concentration to see who can “quietly” hold the pose. If a child has physical limitations, have other children help support him/her in the pose. Have one helper support the child's trunk. Have another child hold the child with physical limitations leg up in place. Don't push the children to hold poses too long.

Always give a break between poses. Use imagery to pretend the wind is blowing, and encourage slow fluid movements like bending and swaying.

### Do poses during stories.

Use children's books/stories with animals in them to practice and combine poses. For example, when reading about a farm, every time you talk about a cow, have the child do a cow pose (have the child come down on all fours, encouraging him/her to press palms deep into the floor and keep his/her back flat). If a story talks about a cat, have the child do a cat pose (while the child is on all fours with knees and palms pressed into the ground, have the child arch his/her back up “like a Halloween cat”). These stories and poses keep the child engaged in the story and help him/her learn the pose and about the animal.

### Use imagery before naptime or bedtime.

Have the child lie on the floor (preferably on an exercise or yoga mat) on his/her back, with palms facing up. Instruct the child to close his/her eyes. Begin to tell the child to focus on a scene such as the beach. Encourage deep breathing by telling the child to let his/her tummy rise and fall like the ocean's tides. Use several adjectives and paint a picture about what the child sees, hears, and feels while at the beach.

For more information on the benefits of yoga with children, please visit the web sites listed below.

#### Resources

<http://www.karmakidsyoga.com/poses.htm>

<http://www.yogakids.com/>

<http://www.childrencyoga.com>

<http://www.specialyoga.com/>

[http://www.abilitymagazine.com/news\\_kidsyoga.html](http://www.abilitymagazine.com/news_kidsyoga.html)