

ASANAS FOR AUTISM

In recent years the benefits of yoga and mindfulness for children and adolescents has become a growing topic of interest. More schools have begun to incorporate yoga and mindfulness in their program settings as part of their curriculum and have seen positive outcomes. Research suggests that yoga and mindfulness in school settings cultivates mind-body awareness, increases focus and concentration, improves self-regulation and supports social-emotional development. With this movement of yoga and mindfulness for children, comes the question of how we can make yoga accessible to children of all abilities. In particular, children with autism, who process information and learn differently than other children.

Children with autism face many challenges. These challenges include:

Language processing difficulties - difficulty expressing their thoughts, ideas and emotions as well as difficulty processing verbal language, gestures and social cues from others. Language processing challenges can impact a child's ability to communicate, their behaviour, their social interaction and understanding the world around them.

Sensory processing challenges - difficulty processing sensory information, both internal and external. Sensory processing challenges can impact children's fine and gross motor skills, body awareness, motor coordination, attention, behaviour and ability to cope with the world around them.

Rigidity and difficulty with unexpected changes - Often children with autism develop a sense of "rigidness" based on a need to feel a sense of organization and control over their environment. Children with autism can also struggle with adapting to unexpected changes. This sense of rigidness can impact their mood, behaviour, coping skills and ability to engage in a variety of activities.

Because of these challenges, when teaching yoga to children with autism, specific strategies and supports are needed in order to make yoga accessible and engaging and to set them up for success.

How to Make Yoga Accessible to Children with Autism Visuals, Visuals, Visuals

Because they struggle with receptive language, children with autism often respond more positively to visual supports that aid in understanding. Visual supports

help children with language processing deficits transition more smoothly to activities, relieves the stress and anxiety of having to remember what comes next and supports word retrieval, memory, language processing and communication. When teaching a pose or a sequence of poses, offering the child a visual of the pose or visual sequence of poses supports understanding, helps them to know what to expect and makes the experience more engaging and motivating. Using pictures of animals that poses represent, colours, landscapes and other images and pictures that tap into the visual sense will support the child with imagination & memory.

Modelling

Children with autism often struggle with body awareness as well as kinesthesia. Modelling in front of the child helps children develop imitation skills and gives them a visual idea of how their bodies should move. It will always be a benefit to model the pose and breath to the child while using direct and concrete verbal and visual cues.

Teach Body Parts

Teaching body parts and body vocabulary prior to teaching the poses will connect the child to their body and will support

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body awareness and knowing which body parts are used in which poses. Learning the body parts and vocabulary in advance is important and necessary for supporting the child with learning the poses.

Pictures of the Child

Children with autism will often have difficulty relating to others. They may be more self-focused and have little interest in those around them. Taking pictures of the child doing the pose can be an easier way for them to connect to the pose and see the relationship of the pose to themselves and their own body.

Social Stories

Many children with autism respond well to social stories because they are able to process information more easily when it is presented through words and pictures. Social stories can be created when first introducing yoga to a child with autism. Social stories can also be used to frontload expectations to the child or let them know in advance when there will be a change in their routine. This will support children with understanding and knowing what to expect, which can greatly decrease frustration and increase the willingness to participate.

Create a Schedule or Routine

Often children with autism can develop a sense of rigidity or need for repetition and sameness. The practice of yoga poses and breathing strategies can complement this need as children can learn sequences of poses and breathing through repetition. Developing a schedule or routine of poses will allow the child to feel a sense of control and awareness of what to expect. Allowing the child to choose poses for the sequence will assist them in feeling a sense of importance and involvement in their yoga practice. Having the ability to make choices allows the child to feel more in control over their environment. As the child begins to feel a sense of independence or familiarity with the routine, new poses and breathing strategies can be added.

Speak the Child's Language

Meeting the child where they are at and using their language such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), Pictures, Written language, Sign language, etc. will foster trust, support understanding

and will ensure a more positive experience for both the child and adult.

Positive Reinforcement

Using positive reinforcement such as verbal praise, stickers and rewards following completion of a pose, breath or sequence of poses can help in motivating the child to learn and practice yoga. Investigating specific interests of the child such as favourite movie characters, toys or activities and incorporating the child's interests in the practice or as rewards can also be helpful with motivating the child and making the experience more personal and relatable to them.

When taught from a mindful and accessible approach, using the strategies suggested, teaching yoga to children with autism can support and teach:

- Self-regulation
- Social Skills
- Body Awareness
- Awareness of Breath
- Balance & Coordination
- Coping Strategies
- Attention & Focus
- Fine/Gross Motor Skills
- Sensory Processing
- Language & Communication
- Expressing & Releasing Difficult Emotions
- Self-confidence/Self-esteem

Teaching yoga to children with autism can be a challenge, but the benefits yoga can provide to children with autism far out weighs the challenges. By incorporating strategies and supports in their practice, the experience can be incredibly positive and rewarding for both the child and the adult!

If you are interested in teaching, a brilliant Yoga Curriculum/Toolkit for children of all abilities is available to purchase online here: www.asanasforautismandspecialneeds.com/product-page/c-a-l-m-m-yoga-tool-kit

This curriculum helps teach yoga poses, breathing strategies, body awareness, self-regulation and how to identify and cope with difficult or uncomfortable emotions. The course includes yoga cards, games, large print visuals and much more. The cards are appropriate and interesting for all ages. Illustrations are unique, creative and one-of-a-kind. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawnee Thornton Hardy is an Educational/Behaviour Specialist, (Registered Children's Yoga Teacher), Yoga Therapist and M.Ed. Shawnee has worked with children and adults with autism and special needs for over 17 years. She specialized in working with children who have significant cognitive and language delays, sensory processing deficits, as well as severe behaviour challenges. She has experienced (first hand) the benefits yoga can provide to health and overall well-being. Her goal is to bring the experience of yoga to all individuals no matter their differences or challenges. Shawnee has presented at conferences on Yoga to Reduce Stress and Increase Relaxation for teachers and other professionals who work with youth, Yoga for Children with Autism and Special Needs, Yoga to Support Children with Sensory Processing and Self-Regulation, and Yoga for Teens facing the challenges of mental illness. She is author of *Asanas for Autism and Special Needs – Yoga to Help Children with Their Emotions, Self-Regulation and Body Awareness* and is the creator of the C.A.L.M.M Yoga Toolkit. She started a Yoga School through Yoga Alliance and travels throughout the US and internationally to train others in yoga approaches to support children and young adults with autism and special needs. Shawnee is dedicated to helping support youth in developing strategies to cope with stress in order to live happier, healthier more peaceful lives.



Above: Yoga cards from Shawnee's toolkit