

SHAWNEE THORNTON HARDY

ASANAS

for Autism and Special Needs

Yoga to Help Children with their Emotions,
Self-Regulation and Body Awareness



ASANAS FOR AUTISM AND SPECIAL NEEDS

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SHAWNEE THORNTON HARDY

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I would like to dedicate this book to children with autism and special needs who have taught me to be a better teacher and a better human being, and to the parents, caregivers, teachers and other professionals who dedicate their lives to working with such unique individuals.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCLAIMER

Preface

- 1 What Is Yoga?
- 2 Yoga for Autism and Special Needs
- 3 Teaching Body Parts
- 4 Pranayama (Breathing and Breath Awareness) and Guided Imagery
- 5 Emotions and Communication
- 6 Asanas (Physical Poses)
- 7 Self-Regulation and Body Awareness
- 8 Chair Yoga

Summary

REFERENCES

INDEX

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jessica Kingsley Publishers for believing in the value of this topic and helping me share it with the world. I would also like to thank the many professionals, paraprofessionals, parents, guardians and other individuals whom I have worked with throughout the years. Thanks to my mother for instilling a passion for writing and expression early on in my life, to my brothers for showing me that sometimes you just have to go out and create what you want, to my husband for his never-ending support and encouragement, to my daughter Mila for making me strive to be my best every day, to my teachers who have taught me the power of yoga in my own life and most of all to the many children I have worked with throughout the years who have been my inspiration in writing this book.

Disclaimer

Although poses and breathing exercises are taught in a fun and playful way in this book it is important prior to incorporating yoga poses in a child's routine to be aware of any physical limitations, health conditions or challenges the child may have. Many children with special needs may lack a sense of balance, coordination or awareness of their surrounding environment and may have limited fine and gross motor skills. Children with special needs will have a varying degree of flexibility, strength and coordination. It is important to assess the needs of each individual child and make adaptations or modifications in order to support the overall wellbeing and safety of the child when practicing yoga postures. Seated and supine (lying down) yoga postures may be more appropriate for children with poor muscle control or lack of coordination and balance. It is best to start with simpler poses then build up to more challenging poses as the child progresses in their practice. The pictures of poses provided in this book are simply guides and the intention is not that the child looks exactly the same as the photos. Each child will look different in the poses and will require modifications or adjustments based on their unique physical abilities, strengths and challenges. This book is a guide for teaching yoga poses and breathing but it is up to the adult to understand the specific needs of each child prior to introducing them to yoga. Yoga should not replace medical advice or assessment. Specific considerations and precautions must be considered when introducing poses and breathing exercises to a child with special needs.

PREFACE

I look across the room as my students are lying peacefully in their savasana, no sound, and bodies still. I reflect on what a shift this is from their typical display of behaviors such as fidgetiness, stimming, difficulty with focus and at times anxious and disruptive behaviors. I am impressed by the deep and intense focus of the students during the practice of asanas (physical postures) and how they have become so much more aware of their bodies and where they are in space. I draw upon the moment when a class was beginning and the students were droopy eyed and lacked the energy to focus and one of my student's raised her hand and said, "Ms. Thornton, I think we should do bee breath so we can be more awake and pay attention." I remember a time when I asked a student how dragon's breath made her feel and she said, "It helps me get out my anger." I remember when one of my students approached me after yoga and said, "Ms. Thornton, thank you for helping me find my Qi." I think of the many drawings a student has given me of he and his friends on their yoga mats "doing yoga." I remember my conversations with parents telling me their child is doing yoga poses at home that they have learned at school. I smile inside thinking about morning group and how every day the students draw their palms together to their foreheads and I say to the students, "When we say Namaste, what are we sharing?" and they say "Our light."

I write this preface with great enthusiasm and passion. Over the years I have worked with hundreds of children with special needs with a variety of challenges, personalities, characteristics and abilities. What I have found to be a common thread amongst most of the children I have worked with is their struggle coping with anxiety, expressing their emotions and self-regulating their emotional and physical states. I have witnessed the impact anxiety and the lack of communication and coping skills have had on these children. They struggle with developing and maintaining social relationships and being part of the world around them. They struggle with communicating their wants and needs and feelings towards others. They struggle with health problems such as weak immune systems, digestive disorders, insomnia and autoimmune related problems. Many children I have worked with over the years have made huge gains with communication, self-regulation, behavior and academic skills when provided with positive behavior supports, sensory integration supports, visual aids for communication and understanding and a kinesthetic and individualized

approach to learning. It wasn't until I began to immerse myself in learning the therapeutics of yoga that I realized what was missing from their programming in the home and school setting. Through my studies I have learned the devastating impact stress and anxiety can have on our overall health and wellbeing. I now see how everything is interconnected and I have a greater understanding of the autonomic nervous system, how our response to stress can affect our bodies, mood, behavior, thinking and ability to learn. When we are over-stressed, everything is impacted: language and communication, cognition, relationships with others and optimal functioning of our body. I have come to the enlightened understanding that we need to look at these children from a "holistic" perspective. My goal in writing this book is to teach children with special needs *mindfulness* of their own bodies, thoughts and behaviors. My goal is to teach children with special needs how to *breathe* and *move their bodies* so they may learn to calm their nervous systems and change their stress responses in order to live happier, calmer and healthier lives.

Children with autism and many other special needs can struggle with heightened levels of anxiety, over-stimulation, difficulty communicating, limited body awareness and a variety of physical and sensory needs. Yoga for children with autism and special needs can provide a variety of benefits, such as learning skills of relaxation and focus and developing coping mechanisms for anxiety and stress. The combination of asanas (postures), pranayama (breath work) and deep relaxation will strengthen the child's nervous system, increase overall health and facilitate the development of body awareness and concentration. By integrating yoga into their lives, children with autism and special needs can gain new motor, communication and social skills as well as body and breath awareness, self-regulation skills and increased self-confidence and self-esteem. The end result is an overall improvement in their quality of life.

Children with autism and many children with special needs will often have difficulty with expressive and receptive language. Specific teaching strategies must be used to keep the child engaged and support understanding. Often children with communication and language difficulties will exhibit negative or disruptive behaviors as an attempt to communicate wants, needs or feelings. Many children with language processing delays, unique sensory needs and/or communication difficulties can experience high levels of anxiety, over-stimulation or under-stimulation. The incorporation of yoga at home or in the classroom teaches children to be aware of their physical and emotional states. This book will support children's language processing delays and difficulty with

communication by providing suggestions of visual tools necessary for learning, retaining and incorporating the skills into their daily lives.

Managing the challenges of a child with special needs can be stressful, difficult and often overwhelming for parents, caregivers, teachers and the child. I have worked with many families and caregivers throughout the years, consulting and helping develop positive behavior programs, visual strategies and communication tools to support the child and family's needs within the school and home setting. The practice of yoga as a family unit can not only be healing for the family but it can also be a fun and exciting way to spend time together, bond, develop better communication and create a calm and peaceful home environment. This book can be a tool for parents, caregivers, educators and other professionals who work in the field of special education to support and teach:

- ▶ self-regulation and self-soothing of physical and emotional states ▶ body awareness
- ▶ awareness of breath ▶ balance
- ▶ hand-eye coordination ▶ focus
- ▶ coping strategies ▶ language and communication ▶ strength and flexibility ▶ self-confidence
- ▶ motor skills
- ▶ social skills.

This book will give parents, teachers, caregivers and educators the tools to teach simple yoga poses and breathing exercises to children with autism and special needs in a step-by-step manner. The pictures and language are simplified so the child can connect and learn. Poses and breathing can be taught in a repetitious manner with consistent language for optimal learning and understanding.

I have seen the benefits of yoga for children with special needs first hand through incorporating yoga into my classroom and teaching yoga through individual sessions to children with special needs. Their response has been so positive that it has inspired me to write this book. My hope is that this book will be the beginning to a lifelong love and practice of yoga for children with special needs. My desire is that through the practice of yoga poses and mindful breathing, these beautiful individuals will experience life with less anxiety and more balance so they may shine their lights with brightness and magnificence for all to see.

WHAT IS YOGA?

A simplified definition of yoga is union or to “yoke” which refers to a unification of the mind, body and spirit. A more contemporary outlook towards yoga is that the practice of yoga allows for cessation or stilling of the mind, which in turn relaxes the body. Yoga originated over 10,000 years ago in India. In the last decade, yoga has become a popular practice in the west. Although yoga has many different lineages and styles, it has recently become known for its many benefits to physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Yoga is thought to minimize the impact of stress on the individual. Yogic science believes that the regular practice of pranayama and asanas strengthens the nervous system and helps people face stressful situations and events more positively (Iyengar 2008). The two key components that are universal to the practice of yoga are pranayama (breath) and asana (poses). Various forms of meditation, visualization practices and guided imagery are also incorporated in the practice of yoga.

Pranayama, in simple terms, is the practice of breathing techniques that help with calming and/or energizing the mind and body. Many children with autism and other special needs who experience high levels of anxiety and difficulty coping with stress struggle with mindful breathing. Often times when they are anxious and their bodies respond in a fight/flight mode they will either hold their breath (not breathe) or breathe rapidly. Children can learn fun and interactive breathing techniques that will help them cope with stress, anxiety and difficult emotions and will calm their nervous systems in order to bring their bodies to a more regulated state.

Asanas are based on three basic human postures of standing, sitting or lying down. The practice of asana has a beneficial impact on the whole body. Asanas tone the muscles, and strengthen tendons and ligaments. Asanas also strengthen the nervous, lymphatic and metabolic systems. Asanas can be adapted or

modified to meet the needs of any physical or development ability. Through asana practice one develops increased balance, strength and flexibility. Asanas also relax the mind and body, which allows the body to recover from stress and fatigue, strengthening the immune system. Certain asanas are considered to be very beneficial for digestive health, which can be an area in which children with autism and special needs are affected, due to stress, anxiety and limited diet preferences. The practice of asanas (poses) for kids with autism and special needs supports them in learning body parts, understanding where their bodies are in space (body awareness) and increases concentration, focus, flexibility, strength, balance, self-regulation and self-confidence/self-esteem.

Meditation and visualizations are used in the practice of yoga to bring focus and calming to the mind. There can be many forms of meditation. Visualization strategies such as envisioning a relaxing image or envisioning a soothing color can be ways in which one focuses and calms the mind, in turn bringing a calmer state to the body. The use of visualization strategies and guided imagery for children with special needs supports them with calming the mind and body, concentration, language development and imagination.

WHAT DOES NAMASTE MEAN?

At the end of many yoga practices, the teacher will bring their palms together with thumbs touching their forehead and will bow to their students while saying “Namaste,” then bringing their palms to their heart center or heart chakra. Traditionally, Namaste signifies the unity or connection of the teacher and the students. It is an offering of gratitude from the teacher to the students and the students to the teacher for sharing knowledge, space, energy and their hearts with one another. When I say Namaste with the children I explain to them that when we say Namaste we are sharing our lights, what is special and unique about us as individuals. It is an opportunity to celebrate and embrace our unique differences and abilities and share them with one another. It is also my genuine offering of gratitude from myself to the children for being teachers in my life and sharing their lights with me. Namaste is also a signal or cue that the practice is complete or has come to an end. It is up to the adult whether they prefer to teach Namaste to the child at the end of the practice. It is a common gesture in the practice of yoga but is not a necessary element to a child’s practice.

WHAT IS SANSKRIT?

Sanskrit is a classical literary language of India. Most traditional poses practiced in the west have now been given English terms; however, most of the traditional yoga poses have Sanskrit names. I have included the Sanskrit names for poses in this book as a reference for the adult. There are many resources available throughout the web on the subject of yoga. Having the Sanskrit names of poses can be helpful when looking up information. I find that many of the children I teach enjoy practicing the Sanskrit words for poses. They get excited about learning to say poses in another language. However, the words in Sanskrit can be long and may be difficult for the children to pronounce. I teach the children Sanskrit words by clapping with the syllables (example—suk-ha-sa-na for sukhasana; Sanskrit for easy pose or cross-legged pose). Many of the poses in this book have made-up English names to suit the interests of children. It is up to the adult to know the children's language abilities in order to decide whether they should teach the Sanskrit names of poses along with English.

WHAT IS DRISHTI?

Drishti is a specific focal point where the gaze rests during asanas and meditation. Drishti encourages focus, concentration and helps with balance. Drishti allows the mind to focus on one focal point so it does not wander. Focusing on one point also encourages relaxation and being in the present moment.

YOGA FOR AUTISM AND SPECIAL NEEDS

In order to understand the benefits of yoga for children with special needs, it is important to understand the characteristics and challenges that come with each disability. The practice of yoga can be beneficial for any individual or child but can be particularly supportive to children with special needs due to their many physical, physiological and emotional difficulties. The specific disabilities identified in this book include ASD (autism spectrum disorder), ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactive disorder), Fragile X, Down syndrome and Prader Willi. Although these specific disabilities are identified, the poses, breaths and strategies suggested would be appropriate for a variety of disabilities, including, but not limited to, children with developmental delays, anxiety disorders, ED (emotionally disturbed), OHI (other health impairment) and cerebral palsy. The poses and approach to teaching yoga can be modified to meet the needs of low functioning as well as high functioning children with special needs.

Autism is a group of developmental brain disorders, collectively called ASD (autism spectrum disorder). The term “spectrum” refers to the wide range of skills, levels of impairment, functioning, symptoms and disability. A child with ASD may present from mild impairment to severely disabled. The DSM-5™ (Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM–5) specifies the diagnostic criteria for ASD as having persistent deficits in social interaction across multiple contexts (APA 2013) in conjunction with restrictive or repetitive patterns of behavior. The spectrum of disorders identified as ASD include:

- ▶ autistic disorder (classic autism)
- ▶ Asperger’s disorder (Asperger syndrome)

- ▶ pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)
- ▶ Rett's disorder (Rett syndrome)
- ▶ childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD).

According to the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (APA 2013), Children with ASD exhibit deficits in social–emotional reciprocity such as having a reciprocal conversation, responding to or initiating social interactions, sharing or understanding emotions, affect and interests of others. Children with ASD also exhibit deficits in non-verbal as well as verbal communication. Some children have relatively normal communication, some have limited language and some may not use spoken language at all. Children with ASD may have difficulty with eye contact, understanding and using gestures, body language or context cues in social interactions and communication. Children with ASD vary widely in intelligence, abilities and behaviors. Restrictive or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities are also evident. Some typical behaviors include stereotypes of repetitive motor movement with the use of objects or with speech, such as repetitively lining items up in an organized pattern or using echolalia (repetition of words or phrases the child has heard). Unusual responses to sensory information such as bright lights, loud noises and temperature may also be present. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, children with ASD may also develop co-occurring mental disorders including ADHD, anxiety or depression (NICHD 2013). Many children with ASD may also develop OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder).

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD 2013) explains that the main signs and symptoms of ASD involve problems in the following areas:

- ▶ difficulty using and understanding language (expressive and receptive language)
- ▶ difficulty relating to people, objects and events; for example, lack of eye contact, pointing behavior and lack of facial responses; limited social skills and social awareness
- ▶ unusual play or fixation with toys and other objects
- ▶ difficulty with changes in routine or familiar surroundings

- ▶ repetitive body movements or behavior patterns, such as hand flapping, hair twirling, foot tapping, or more complex movements
- ▶ inability to cuddle or be comforted
- ▶ difficulty regulating behaviors and emotions, which may result in temper tantrums, anxiety and aggression.

Children with ASD struggle across all environments with language, communication, social skills, sensory issues, body awareness, handling change in routine or environment, awareness of their and others' emotions, anxiety and many other issues. Explicit teaching of social skills, language, emotional regulation and body awareness are necessary for children with ASD. Due to the many challenges children with ASD face, they may exhibit behaviors deemed as negative or socially inappropriate. Although there are many theories, the exact cause of ASD is not clear.

ADD/ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder that appears in early childhood. It can be referred to as attention deficit disorder or ADD as well as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD. According to the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5*, ADHD involves “a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity—impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development” (APA 2013, p.31). Children with ADD/ADHD can have difficulty inhibiting their spontaneous responses—responses that can involve everything from movement, social situations, speech and attentiveness. Although multiple factors have been indicated, the exact cause of ADD/ADHD is not yet clear.

The most common features of ADD/ADHD include:

- ▶ difficulty sustaining attention (inattention)
- ▶ impulsive behaviors (impulsivity)
- ▶ hyperactive behavior (hyperactivity).

A child with ADD/ADHD may struggle with paying attention in school, as well as other activities that require focus, can be forgetful, may have difficulty organizing thoughts and completing tasks or projects and may have

difficulty with listening skills and following directions. Children who have the *hyperactive* component of ADHD may have difficulty staying still, may bounce from one task to the next, may talk excessively or have difficulty waiting for their turn to speak. Many children with ADHD can be very impulsive both socially and emotionally and may have a quick temper or “short fuse.” A child with ADHD can often be described as “their motor is constantly running.” They often struggle with self-calming and self-regulation of their physical and emotional states. These factors can greatly affect the child’s interactions with others and their ability to make friends and maintain friendships. Some children with ADD/ADHD may hyper-focus on a specific task or activity and may have difficulty when asked to switch to a new task or activity. Due to difficulty with focus, children with ADHD may struggle with following directions or attending to verbal language. Many children with ADD/ADHD may also present as having difficulties with sensory integration and sensory processing.

FRAGILE X

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD 2013), Fragile X syndrome (FXS) is a genetic disorder. It results in a wide range of developmental, physical and behavioral problems and is the most common known cause of inherited developmental disability worldwide. Twice as many males than females inherit Fragile X.

Common features of Fragile X include:

- ▶ attention deficit disorders with or without hyperactivity
- ▶ anxiety (hyper-arousal)
- ▶ extreme reaction or aversion to sensory stimuli (loud noise, touch, strong smells or tastes, eye contact), SPD—sensory processing disorder
- ▶ difficulties with expressive and receptive language
- ▶ sleep difficulties
- ▶ autism-like features including hand flapping and biting (or chewing on clothes)
- ▶ poor eye contact and resistance to changes in routine.

Due to their heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, difficulty with communication and high levels of anxiety many children with Fragile X may exhibit unusual or challenging behaviors. Children with Fragile X can present with mild to moderate or severe cognitive impairment. It is common for children with Fragile X to exhibit obsessive-compulsive or repetitive behaviors or become fixated on thoughts, ideas or specific objects. Children with Fragile X share many common features with those with ASD and often benefit from similar strategies and supports in the home and school setting as children with ASD. Around one in three children who have Fragile X syndrome also meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD (NICHD 2006).

DOWN SYNDROME

According to the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS 2014), Down syndrome is the most common and readily identifiable chromosomal condition associated with intellectual disabilities. It is caused by a chromosomal abnormality. In most cases, the diagnosis of Down syndrome is made according to results from a chromosome test administered shortly after birth. There is a wide variation in mental abilities, behavior and developmental progress in individuals with Down syndrome. Their level of intellectual disability may range from mild to severe, with the majority functioning in the mild to moderate range.

Common features of Down syndrome include:

- ▶ language processing disorders (receptive and expressive language)
- ▶ cognitive delays
- ▶ short attention span
- ▶ impulsive behavior
- ▶ anxiety or depression
- ▶ hyper-flexibility (excessive ability to extend the joints)
- ▶ poor muscle tone
- ▶ thyroid conditions, more often low thyroid
- ▶ digestive problems
- ▶ sleep difficulties

- ▶ delays in fine and gross motor development
- ▶ hearing and vision disorders
- ▶ sensory integration dysfunction.

Children with Down syndrome who have difficulty with expressive or receptive language may exhibit behaviors due to frustration with communication. Many children with Down syndrome may have co-occurring anxiety disorders, ADHD or attention problems as well as sensory integration difficulties, which can affect their behavior as well as socialization and participation in activities. Some children with Down syndrome may also have a co-occurring diagnosis of autism (approximately 5–7%). Obsessive-compulsive behaviors and fixation on specific objects or thoughts may also be present (NDSS 2014).

PRADER WILLI

According to the Genetics Home Reference (GHR 2014), Prader Willi is a genetic disorder that affects 1 in 10,000–30,000 individuals worldwide. Many individuals with Prader Willi may have common physical characteristics such as short stature, small hands and feet and puberty is often delayed or incomplete. Beginning in childhood, affected individuals develop an insatiable appetite (hyperphagia), which leads to chronic overeating and often obesity. Many children with Prader Willi develop an obsession with food which can affect their home life as well as their ability to participate in social events or activities with others. Individuals with Prader Willi frequently have mild to moderate intellectual impairment and cognitive disabilities.

Common features of Prader Willi are:

- ▶ poor muscle tone
- ▶ behavioral issues
- ▶ difficulty regulating emotions
- ▶ compulsive behaviors (picking at skin)
- ▶ obsessive behaviors
- ▶ difficulty with communication
- ▶ sensory integration dysfunction (sensory processing disorder)

- ▶ delayed fine and gross motor skills
- ▶ anxiety.

Due to their extreme obsession with food, children with Prader Willi can experience high levels of anxiety along with obsessive-compulsive behaviors. They often display immature social behavior and may lack understanding of personal boundaries or space towards others. Part of the reason for their lack of awareness of personal space is their difficulty with body awareness (where their bodies are in relationship to others). They may present with difficulties in communicating their emotions, self-regulation and coping skills. Children with Prader Willi may display inappropriate behaviors due to the many challenges of their disability. It is common for children with Prader Willi to have underactive thyroids, which affects their metabolism, level of energy and overall health.

Children with autism spectrum disorder, Fragile X, Prader Willi, Down syndrome and ADD/ADHD share many common factors with their disabilities as well as similar responses to stress. The most common features include anxiety, difficulty with communication, difficulty self-regulating physical and emotional states and with body awareness and sleep difficulties. Many children identified with these disabilities exhibit obsessive-compulsive or repetitive behaviors. These children have the same feelings and emotions as anyone else. Stress, anxiety, worry, fear and anger, are all typical feelings that children have. Often children with ASD and other special needs do not know how to communicate their feelings or emotions and will exhibit their response to stress in inappropriate manners. These children have more difficulty with emotional regulation, making it more challenging for them to identify levels of emotions and regulate their intensity. In addition, many children with special needs have more trigger points that cause heightened anxiety.

There is sufficient evidence that children with autism are more likely to suffer from high levels of anxiety as compared to their neuro-typical peers. One study done to report on the prevalence of anxiety and mood problems among 9 to 14-year-old children with Asperger syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism found that compared with a sample of 1751 community children AS and autistic children demonstrated a greater rate of anxiety and depression problems. These problems had a significant impact on their overall adaptation (Kim *et al.* 2000). According to the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, yoga therapeutic interventions have been successful in addressing each one of the core symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorder (Ehleringer 2010).

While the academic research on the use of yoga for children is more limited than that of adults and is even more limited for that of children with special needs, what has been done suggests that children improve their grades, behavior in school, physical health and attitudes towards themselves. In “Teaching Yoga in Urban elementary schools”, Harper suggests that yoga-based activities have the potential to reduce stress and anxiety, increase health and wellness and teach emotional regulation (2010).

One study tested the effects of yoga on adolescents with anxiety, depression and medical illness. The participants consisted of 21 adolescents aged 13–18 years who obtained a clinically significant score on the anxiety, depression or somatization subscales of the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (BASC). The adolescents participated in 150-minute classes one time per week and were encouraged to practice at home with two yoga DVDs. The final results of the study concluded that the eight week yoga intervention positively impacted targeted symptoms of stress and physical fitness for the adolescents who completed the eight weeks (Kaley-Isley *et al.* 2009).

An additional study was done to evaluate the potential benefits of yoga for adolescent musicians. The adolescent music students were aged 13–18 and were enrolled in a prestigious summer music program that was thought to be a high stress/high pressure program. The music students participated in a six-week yoga research program at the Kripalu Yoga Center. The total group consisted of 84 participants, 51 being in the control group. The participants attended three yoga classes per week and completed self-report questionnaires at baseline and at the end of the program for performance anxiety, positive psychological characteristics, mindfulness, mood and perceived benefit of yoga. The results of the study revealed significant improvements in the participants’ moods, levels of stress, anxiety and ability to cope with stress in their program and overall mental clarity and mindfulness (Shorter *et al.* 2008).

While these studies suggest the practice of yoga helps adolescents with stress, anxiety, coping skills, mood and mindfulness, additional studies have been done to identify the effects of yoga practice as an intervention in the classroom or school setting. Schools are increasingly using yoga therapy to help manage stress and influence wellbeing and behavior. The increased awareness of the potential benefits of yoga for children has resulted in school programs that address anxiety and stress by treating the body and mind. Yoga in the school setting has been reported as calming children, reducing obesity, reducing discipline problems, decreasing anger and panic attacks and enhancing imagination, concentration

and academic performance (Flisek 2001). A review of articles of yoga for school-age children revealed a variety of outcomes. Evidence suggests that yoga is associated with improved cardiovascular status, physical functioning and behavior (Galantino, Galbavy and Quinn 2008).

According to Jensen and Kenny (2004), yoga may improve attention and emotional control. Jensen and Kenny studied 19 boys who had been clinically diagnosed with ADHD and randomly assigned them to either a yoga treatment group or a cooperative activities group. Although both groups of boys showed improvement in certain measured behaviors, the yoga group had more favorable changes in factors such as emotional liability, restlessness and impulsive behavior. Subjects who participated in additional home practice of yoga showed an even greater response (Jensen and Kenny 2004).

Whether yoga is done with adults or adolescents, there are numerous studies on the effects of yoga on the brain and levels of anxiety. A study published in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found that certain types of yoga sessions (a focus on yoga posture, as opposed to breathing) increase gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels in the brain. Anxiety is associated with low GABA levels. GABA is the primary neurotransmitter known to counterbalance the excitatory neurotransmitter glutamate, which in the case of anxiety is over-active. The study found that yoga participants had greater reductions in anxiety and greater improvements in mood than people who walked for exercise. These mood improvements and reductions in anxiety were correlated to changes in GABA levels. The increase of activity in the GABA system found the effects of using yoga postures are similar to the effects of medications prescribed for anxiety (Streeter *et al.* 2007).

Many children with autism and other special needs may struggle with coping in their day-to-day lives in both the home and school setting. The combination of high levels of anxiety, lack of coping and communication skills and difficulty with self-regulation can result in children “acting out,” having difficulty staying engaged in a task and participating in life activities with their families, peers and other individuals. The practice of yoga, incorporating asana (postures) and pranayama (breath) can be a tremendous tool in helping children with autism and other special needs cope with their anxiety, manage their stress and respond to sensory stimuli in a more positive manner. When a child with special needs feels heightened levels of stress or anxiety, their sympathetic nervous system responds in a fight or flight mode. The sympathetic nervous system responds by increasing the heart rate, speeding up breathing, sending out stress hormones to

the body and essentially shutting down the cognitive or “thinking” part of the brain. Yoga can allow the child to tap into the parasympathetic nervous system or the “resting system” in order to bring their bodies and minds to a calmer state. Lack of sleep or abnormal sleep patterns can be a major factor in a child’s ability to focus, complete daily activities and cope with stress. Many children with special needs exhibit irregular sleep problems or insomnia. Insomnia or lack of enough sleep can increase chances of experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression, weakens the immune system, decreases the ability to focus and concentrate, slows the digestive process and affects ability to regulate emotional responses to stress. Yoga supports healthy sleep patterns by bringing the body and mind to a calmer state. Specific poses can be practiced prior to bedtime to decrease insomnia. Getting more rest can have a significant impact on a child’s health, communication and expression of emotions, coping skills and overall wellness.

TEACHING YOGA TO CHILDREN WITH AUTISM AND SPECIAL NEEDS

Because of the unique challenges children with autism and other special needs face, specific strategies must be used to teach yoga. It is important to note that each individual child will require a different level of support or modification. Some children with a higher level of language development and physical ability may be more capable of following verbal cues and doing poses with minimal modifications, other children may require more modeling, physical prompting and modification to poses. The key to introducing yoga to a child with special needs is to make it fun, interactive and to teach poses that allow them to feel successful. As the child learns poses and breathing strategies through repetition, new and more challenging poses can be introduced to build self-esteem and self-confidence.

Visuals, visuals, visuals

Many children with autism and other special needs may struggle with processing verbal language. Because they struggle with receptive language, they often respond more positively to visual supports that aid in understanding and retaining information. 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 memory, word retrieval, language and communication. Visual supports can make learning more interesting and interactive, which in turn becomes more motivating to the child. Use as many visuals as possible. Children with language deficits respond far better to visual cues than they do verbal cues. Verbal cues can easily be lost and misunderstood due to deficits in receptive language (how they receive and process verbal language). A majority of the poses and breathing strategies taught in this book are named after an animal or object and can be represented in a variety of visual ways. This is a benefit because many children with disabilities identified in this book, particularly autism, often find it easier to relate to objects than people.

Modeling

Modeling the pose yourself to the child will support them in learning the poses. It will always be a benefit to model the pose and breath to the child while using verbal and visual cues.

Using images and pictures

Printing out or drawing pictures of the animals, landscapes or other objects that go with the pose or breath may help motivate the child and keep them interested and engaged. The child will be more likely to retain the information and memory of the pose if there is a visual connected to it. Simple drawings of stick figures in the pose will help the child process what the pose looks like so they can explore the pose in their own bodies.

Pictures of the child doing the pose or breath

Many children with special needs may have difficulty relating to others. They can often be self-focused and may 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.

Word and picture walls

Displaying pictures of the pose or breath with the word next to the picture will give the child daily exposure to the poses and breath and will help the child learn and retain the information and vocabulary in their memory banks. Matching pictures to words supports language, vocabulary development and communication.

Social stories

Many children with language deficits respond well to social stories because they are able to process the information more easily when it is presented through words and pictures. Social stories can be created when first introducing yoga to a child with special needs. Social stories can be used to teach a child a single pose, breath or a sequence of poses.

Rule of Five

When it is necessary to use verbal language, follow the Rule of Five. Try not to use more than five words when speaking to the child, speak slowly and clearly and use very specific and concrete language. Every child with special needs will present with varying levels of language processing skills. Adjusting the amount of verbal cues to fit the needs of the child will support the child in processing information and will reduce frustration.

Create a schedule or routine

Often children with autism and other special needs develop a sense of rigidity or need for repetition and sameness. The practice of yoga breath and poses can complement this need as children can learn sequences of poses and breathing through repetition and practice. 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. Using laminated images or actual photographs of the child or someone else in the pose with velcro on the back can allow for the poses to be interchangeable in order for the child or adult to create a variety of sequences on a schedule.

Augmentative communication devices and technology

Children with language processing deficits may have access to an augmentative communication device as a communication tool to support them with receptive and expressive language. There are various forms of augmentative communication devices from a PEC (Picture Exchange Communication) board to a higher level of augmentative device such as a computer. A common device that is being used as a tool for language and communication is the iPad. Specific apps can be utilized to create social stories about yoga poses and breaths as well as schedules and routines for a yoga practice. The camera and video on the iPad allows the adult to take pictures and videos of the child and upload them to various apps on the device. The child can have access to social stories and visuals during times away from their yoga practice to support retention and memory of poses and breaths. It can also be used as a tool for video modeling.

Video modeling

Video modeling is a mode of teaching that uses video recordings to provide a visual model of a targeted behavior or skill. Videotaping the child doing poses and breathing strategies or videotaping other children or adults demonstrating the poses/breaths, then allowing the child to practice along while watching the video, can be motivating, interactive, engaging and will also allow them to see and model the physical movement, sound or action of each pose or breath. An example of a video model would be videotaping a sequence of an adult or another child exhibiting an emotion such as anger or frustration, the adult or another child doing the breath to release that emotion and the adult or another child exhibiting a calm/relaxed feeling after doing the breath. The adult can also videotape the child with special needs moving through the sequence. Video modeling will support the child in developing imitation skills, following multi-step motor activities, learning poses and breathing strategies independently and learning information through repetition. The great thing about video modeling is it is consistent, can be viewed anytime, anywhere and can be watched as many times as necessary for the child to learn the skills taught in the video.

The more visual support, modeling, repetition and exposure to language and vocabulary, the more likely the child will respond to practicing yoga. The key to introducing yoga to a child with special needs is to use as many tools possible to set the child up for success. Along with increased self-confidence and self-esteem, the child will develop increased language and communication skills,

self-regulation skills, increased body awareness and hopefully a lifelong connection to yoga.

Positive reinforcement

Using positive reinforcement such as verbal praise, stickers and rewards following completion of a pose, breath or sequence of poses and breathing can help in motivating the child to learn and practice yoga.

PRANAYAMA (BREATHING AND BREATH AWARENESS) AND GUIDED IMAGERY

Pranayama or breathing is perhaps one of the most important components to teaching yoga to children with special needs. In order to make the connection between breathing and how it affects our physiological and emotional states, it's necessary to understand how the autonomic nervous system works. The autonomic nervous system is divided into two branches, the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

The sympathetic nervous system regulates the more physical response such as responding to emergency or "perceived" emergency situations or physical exercise. When we experience anxiety, worry or fear our body perceives this as there being a threat, then activating the sympathetic nervous system. When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, the heart rate increases and less blood moves towards the digestive and excretory organs because the blood is being pumped more rapidly to the muscles of the limbs, preparing the body for fight or flight. As the heart rate increases, our breathing is also affected. When we are in the fight or flight mode, our breathing becomes accentuated and we typically move into chest breathing to prepare for more physical activity. If our bodies do not actually exert themselves through physical activity, hyperventilation or very rapid breathing may occur. This rapid breathing or hyperventilation exacerbates our emotional and physical response and can then result in a panic attack also

known as an anxiety attack. Because many children with special needs may experience greater amounts of anxiety worry or fear, a heightened sensitivity to their environment and difficulty expressing their emotions, they may reside perpetually in the sympathetic nervous system (the fight/flight response). When the body becomes over-stressed and the sympathetic nervous system is in over-drive, in a constant state of fight or flight, there can be negative effects on our bodies, our moods and our behaviors.

Negative effects of being over-stressed

Physical:

- ▶ muscle tension or pain
- ▶ headaches
- ▶ fatigue
- ▶ insomnia
- ▶ digestive problems
- ▶ autoimmune conditions
- ▶ weakened immune systems
- ▶ heart problems
- ▶ back and neck pain
- ▶ ulcers
- ▶ diabetes

Emotional:

- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ restlessness
- ▶ lack of motivation
- ▶ difficulty focusing
- ▶ irritability or anger
- ▶ sadness or depression

Behavioral:

- ▶ over-eating or under-eating
- ▶ angry outbursts
- ▶ social withdrawal
- ▶ conflict with others
- ▶ obsessive-compulsive behaviors

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

The parasympathetic nervous system (rest and renew response) is involved in controlling resting activities such as slowing the heart rate, aiding in digestion and activating the cleansing process in the body (Rama, Balentine and Hymes 2011). Focused breathing or mindful breathing aids in moving into more of a diaphragmic breathing. Diaphragmic breathing slows the heart rate, which in turn evens out the blood flow in the body, promoting improved circulation and better digestion. Slowed, deeper, more rhythmic breathing allows us to tap into the parasympathetic nervous system, improving the overall functioning in our body. Pranayama is a necessary and key component to the practice of yoga. As described earlier, pranayama stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for activating the relaxation response in our bodies. Children with special needs who experience high levels of anxiety over-stimulate their sympathetic nervous systems and under-stimulate their parasympathetic nervous systems, which can have a drastic impact on their overall health and wellbeing. Children with over-amped sympathetic nervous systems develop habitual stress responses in their bodies. This habitual stress response contributes to illnesses and health problems such as autoimmune disorders, digestive problems, insomnia, joint pain, muscle aches and a variety of other health issues. This habitual stress response also exacerbates anxiety and can contribute to obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The practice of pranayama offers a variety of emotional and physical benefits, including:

- ▶ strengthens respiratory and immune systems
- ▶ reduces stress
- ▶ energizes and increases alertness to the body and brain

- ▶ calms the nervous system (activates the parasympathetic nervous system)
- ▶ promotes healing on emotional, physical and psychological levels
- ▶ supports brain/body connection
- ▶ increases oxygen flow to brain and body
- ▶ supports healthy digestion
- ▶ encourages mindfulness and being connected to the present
- ▶ supports healthy sleep patterns.

Mindful breathing draws attention to the breath, which helps to draw attention away from the thoughts or emotions that are anxiety provoking. Many children with special needs may become fixated on an idea, a worry, a fear or other thoughts that cause anxiety. These repetitive thoughts and worries can lead to acting out with obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The practice of pranayama or mindful breathing brings the child's attention to their breath, allowing them to focus on something other than the triggering event or thought that may have initially brought about feelings of anxiety. When a child learns to control his or her breathing, the amount of oxygen in the body increases, encouraging the body to function at its optimal level. When oxygen levels increase, muscles and organs such as the brain function more efficiently. Children with special needs can often exhibit extremely high arousal states or very low arousal states. They may present themselves as being over-active, having difficulty being still or calm or underactive, being sluggish or sleepy. Various forms of breathing can either relax or stimulate the brain and body. Mindful breathing can support the child in connecting more to their body, increasing mind-body connection and awareness. Children with special needs can be taught to self-monitor and self-regulate their arousal states by learning to connect specific breaths to specific arousal states. The immense physical and emotional benefits that come with learning to breathe mindfully will last throughout the child's life and will support the child in developing a greater sense of wellbeing, promoting a happier, calmer and healthier lifestyle.

Visualization and guided imagery are both forms of meditation, with the intent to bring the mind and body to a state of deep relaxation. We learn best when our minds are in a more relaxed state. Scientists have done specific research on the effects of meditation and deep relaxation on brain waves (Biblioteca Pleyades). Just as we can see wave patterns on a heart monitor, scientists are able to

monitor patterns of the brain through and EEG (electro-encephalograph). Typically the left and right brain waves are independent, peaking separately. Studies have shown that during meditation or deep relaxation, the left and right brain work together in synchronicity, peaking at the same time. Scientists now believe that this “synchronizing” of brain wave patterns lends to more clarity of mind and optimal functioning of the brain.

Visualization and meditation techniques are often taught simultaneously with breathing techniques. The idea is that we can visualize letting go of something (with the exhale) or breathing something in to our energy space (with the inhale). Visualization strategies can also be used as a fun way to get a child motivated and excited about practicing various forms of breathing. Many of the breathing and visualization strategies outlined in this book are geared towards helping the child with regulation of emotions, calming the body, energizing the brain, releasing negative energy or emotions, focus and concentration. Guided imagery is a helpful approach to encouraging imagination and visualization while practicing yoga poses and breath. The adult can use and encourage descriptive language to help the child visualize a scene, a specific animal, color, feeling or emotion to support the child in tapping into the part of the brain that is responsible for imagination and visualization. Visualization strategies can also help the child tap into their five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) to support memory and learning. In *Spinning Inward: Using Guided Imagery with Children for Learning, Creativity & Relaxation* (1987), Murdoch discusses the role our senses play in memory and learning. She concludes that children can more easily access information and memories when they are connected to a sensory experience. She describes how using imagery and visualization increases memory, creativity and relaxation. Many children with disabilities identified in this book may struggle with imagination and visualizing spoken words. The incorporation of visuals and teaching strategies outlined earlier in the book will assist the child in having an image to draw upon while practicing the breathing techniques. This will also support them in retaining the information for future practice.

TEACHING BREATHING

Note: It is suggested that the inhale breaths for the breathing strategies in this chapter and the following chapters are through the nose rather than the mouth.

Encourage the child to keep their lips sealed while breathing in.

Mouth breathing—Inhaling through the mouth can elevate blood pressure, increase respiratory problems, develop patterns of chest breathing rather than diaphragmic breathing; deplete carbon dioxide levels, reduce blood circulation; worsen asthma and sleep apnea and deprive brain, heart and other organs in the body of optimal oxygenation.

Nose breathing—filters, humidifies and moisturizes the air coming into the lungs. Inhaling through the nose can support slower, more diaphragmic breathing; support healthy and cleaner respiration; increase oxygenation to heart, brain and other organs.

BALLOON BELLY (ABDOMINAL BREATHING)

Pre-pose preparation

Use a balloon to show an example of balloon belly. Blow the balloon up and tell the child they are going to turn their belly into a balloon. Hold the balloon in front of your belly to show a visual of belly puffing up. Use a picture of a balloon to show the child in future sessions as a visual tool. Ask the child to picture their balloon. See the color of your balloon. Watch the balloon fill up as you inhale. Watch the balloon empty as you exhale. Listen to the sound of the air filling up your balloon and emptying with your breath.



Instructions for child

1. Sit cross-legged or for more relaxation child can lie down.
2. Put both hands on belly.
3. Close lips.
4. Breathe air into balloon belly (through nose), make belly puff up like a balloon.
5. Breathe out (exhale)—let air out of balloon.
6. Repeat 4–5 times.

Benefits

Awareness of breath, relaxation, visualization, digestion.

BEE BREATH

Pre-pose preparation

Show the child a picture of a bee. Ask the child what color the bee is. Have the child close their eyes and picture the bee in their mind. Feel the soft fuzzy bee. See the bee buzzing around a beautiful flower. Listen to the sound of the bee in your breath.



Instructions for child

1. Sit straight up in chair with hands in lap or sit cross-legged with hands in lap. (You may also suggest the child makes bee wings—fingers touching shoulders/elbows bent.)
2. Take a deep breath in (inhale deep).
3. Breathe out making a buzzing sound like a bee (bzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzz) until breath is empty. (If the child feels comfortable, you may suggest that they cover their ears with their palms, close their eyes and listen to the buzzing.)
4. Repeat 4–5 times.
5. Ask the child how the breath made them feel.

Benefits

Energizes the brain; eases stress and tension; helps reduce insomnia; alleviates frustration, anger and anxiety, good breath to do when child is low energy, sleepy, depressed or anxious.

UJJAYI (WAVE BREATH)

Pre-pose preparation

Talk to the child about the sound a wave makes (play an audio sound of waves in the ocean or show the child a picture of an ocean and demonstrate the sound of an ocean). Picture a blue ocean. Feel the warm water on your toes. Feel the warm sun shining on your body. Listen to the sound of the waves in your breath.



Instructions for child

1. Sit up straight in chair with hands in lap or sit cross-legged with hands in lap (you can also have the child lie down on their mat).
2. Zip lips closed (model zipping lips closed).
3. Breathe in through nose.
4. Keep lips closed.
5. Breathe out through nose.
6. Repeat 4–5 times.

Benefits

Soothes nervous system; relaxes mind and body; improves sleep.

BUNNY BREATH

Pre-pose preparation

Show picture of a bunny sniffing vegetables. Tell child to imagine being a bunny in a garden. See the colors of the vegetables and fruit in the garden. Smell the scent of the vegetables and fruit. Taste a vegetable or fruit. Is it crunchy or sweet?



Instructions for child

1. Sit on heels or edge of chair.
2. Make bunny paws with hands.
3. Sniff the vegetables in the garden (child sniffs quickly with nose sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff until lungs are full).
4. Breathe out—haaaaaa (like a sound you would make after smelling something good).
5. Repeat 4–5 times.

Benefits

Calms the mind; energizes the brain; cleanses; alleviates frustration, anger and anxiety.

THREE-PART BREATH

Pre-pose preparation

Pre-teach three body parts where child will be breathing air into (belly, ribs, upper chest). Have child place hands on belly, then front of ribs and then upper chest just below collarbones. Recite and repeat 4–5 times, “belly,” “ribs” and “chest” as the child places hands on the region. Feel the belly fill with air. Feel the ribs fill with air. Feel the chest fill with air.





Instructions for child

1. Sit cross-legged or on the edge of a chair (you may also have the child lie down on their back).
2. Sit up tall.
3. Close lips.
4. Hands on belly.
5. Inhale—breathe air into belly through nose (make belly puff out).
6. Exhale—breathe out through nose.
7. Hands on ribs.
8. Inhale—breathe air into ribs through nose (make ribs puff out).
9. Exhale—breathe out through nose.
10. Hands on chest.
11. Inhale—breathe air into chest through nose (make chest puff out).
12. Exhale—breathe out through nose.
13. Repeat 2–3 times.

Benefits

Bring awareness to front side of body; relaxes mind and body; oxygenates bloodstream; cleanses lungs; supports digestion.

OPEN MOUTH BREATH

Pre-pose preparation

Teach where lungs are. Show a picture of lungs and talk about how they are like balloons. Put hands on chest and demonstrate full breath in—filling up lungs, chest expanding and hands pushing out. Breathe breath out and show how hands come in towards body.



Instructions for child

1. Sit cross-legged or on edge of chair.
2. Sit up tall.
3. Breathe in deep through nose, fill up lungs.
4. Breathe out through mouth (make haaaaaaa sound).
5. Repeat 4–5 times.

Benefits

Increases relaxation; releases nervous tension; increases lung capacity.

ELEVATOR BREATH

Pre-pose preparation

Show a picture of an elevator or a video of an elevator moving up and down. Tell the child “Let’s make our bodies and breath move up and down like an elevator. I am going to count the floors as your elevator comes up and goes down.”





Instructions for child

1. Crouch down, fingers on mat.
2. Inhale through nose, slowly coming up to count of 1–2–3.
3. Come onto tippy toes (can modify and stay flat on feet).
4. Stretch arms up to sky.
5. Exhale through mouth, bring elevator down 3–2–1.
6. Repeat 3–4 times (option to increase the count each time telling the child, “we are going to go up one more floor on the elevator” to increase elongation of breath, ending with a count of 5).

Benefits

Increases relaxation; relieves nervous tension; increases lung capacity.

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

Pre-pose preparation

Note: the finger placement is modified from the traditional Alternate nostril breathing in order to simplify the finger coordination. Teach child thumb and pointer finger prior to doing the breath. If necessary place a sticker on thumb and use a piece of pipe cleaner to wrap around the pointer fingers like a ring to identify which fingers the child should use for the breath. Red sticker and pipe cleaner for Right, lavender sticker and pipe cleaner for Left. Teach child what a nostril is. "The nostrils are the two holes in our nose." Point to nostrils in nose. "We have a left nostril and a right nostril."

Instructions for child

Right hand (red for right, see page 40)

1. Press right thumb on right nostril.
2. Inhale (breathe in) through left nostril.
3. Remove right thumb.
4. Press pointer finger on left nostril.
5. Exhale (breathe out) through right nostril.



Left hand (lavender for left, see page 40)

1. Press left thumb on left nostril.
2. Inhale (breathe in) through right nostril.
3. Remove left thumb.
4. Press left pointer finger on right nostril.
5. Exhale (breathe out) through left nostril.
6. Repeat both sides 2–3 times.



Benefits

Energizes brain; calms nervous system; improves brain function; merges the left “thinking” brain and right “feeling” brain; improves sleep; enhances relaxation.

TWO–FOUR PART BREATHING

Pre-pose preparation

Pictures or PECs with colors and emotions can be made in advance to use as visual cues for children who need more visual support.

Tell the child we are going to calm our bodies with our breath. We are going to let out a negative emotion. Ask the child what color makes them feel calm or happy. Write the color and emotion down (example: blue = happy) or have child choose color picture/PEC. Ask the child

what color would anger, anxiety, frustration, worry, *etc.* be. Write the color and emotion down (anxiety = red) or have the child choose emotions picture/PEC. Tell the child we are going to breathe in the color blue/happiness and breathe out the color red/anxiety.

Instructions for child

1. Sit up tall in a cross-legged pose, on a chair or lying down on mat.
2. Close eyes (eyes can be open if child needs more visual support for visualization).
3. Zip lips (demonstrate zipping lips together like a zipper).
4. See the color blue. See a happy face.
5. Breathe in blue/happy feelings through nose to count of two: 1–2.
6. See the color red. See an anxious/worried face.
7. Breathe out red/anxiety through nose to count of four: 1–2–3–4.
8. Encourage child to breathe all of the air/anxiety out of their body.
9. Repeat three times.
10. Breathe in blue/happiness 1–2.
11. Breathe out red/anxiety 1–2–3–4.

Benefits

Soothes the nervous system; reduces sleep disturbance, insomnia and anxiety.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

This is an excellent technique to use prior to bedtime to assist with relaxation and promote better sleep. Progressive relaxation can be done on a mat, on a blanket on the floor, on a couch or in the child's bed.

Progressive relaxation is a technique used to release tension in the body. By tensing or clenching muscles in the body, one at a time, then relaxing the muscles, the body is able to release tension and move into a more relaxed and calm state. Progressive relaxation increases body awareness, supports the child in learning and connecting to body parts and helps release tension, stress and anxiety.

Pre-pose preparation

Have the child watch the adult while seated. Describe what the words clench, tense, squeeze or tighten mean. Show the child how to clench, tense, squeeze or tighten the muscles in their body (e.g., adult squeezes fingers into a fist and says, "I clench my fingers"). Count to five as you clench your fists then release fingers and say, "I relax my fingers." Repeat one or two more

examples with different body parts for the child. Soothing music turned down low may be helpful in creating a calm and relaxing environment.

Instructions for child

1. Lie on back.
2. Feet wide apart.
3. Arms wide apart.
4. Close eyes and squeeze them tight for "1-2-3-4-5."
5. Relax eyes.
6. Smile with lips closed for "1-2-3-4-5."
7. Relax lips.
8. Squeeze fingers tight in a fist for "1-2-3-4-5."
9. Relax fingers.
10. Squeeze elbows in tight to side of body for "1-2-3-4-5."
11. Relax arms.
12. Shrug shoulders to ears and hold for "1-2-3-4-5."
13. Relax shoulders.
14. Tighten belly muscles for "1-2-3-4-5."
15. Relax belly muscles.
16. Squeeze butt muscles tight for "1-2-3-4-5."
17. Relax butt muscles.
18. Squeeze legs together for "1-2-3-4-5."
19. Relax legs.
20. Clench toes and hold "1-2-3-4-5."
21. Relax toes.
22. Allow child to rest in savasana for 1-5 minutes (or longer if the child desires).

Benefits

Relieves muscular tension and muscle spasms; decreases anxiety; relieves insomnia and fatigue; soothes the nervous system; supports healthy digestion.

Visualization or guided imagery can be used to promote prolonged relaxation after tensing and relaxing muscles in the body.

Example of guided imagery

"Imagine lying on a towel at the beach. The warm sun is shining on your body. Your body is relaxed. Your towel is soft and cozy. Your body is relaxed. You hear the sound of the waves.

Your body is relaxed. You feel the warmth from the sun. Your body is relaxed. You see the color of the blue waves. Your body is relaxed.”

ASANAS (PHYSICAL POSES)

As described in [Chapter 1](#), “What is Yoga?”, the practice of asanas (physical poses) offers many benefits to the child including strengthening the nervous system, supporting digestion, improving sleep patterns, aiding circulation and improving overall health. In addition, practicing asanas supports children with autism and special needs by improving strength and flexibility, developing body awareness, increasing balance and coordination, supporting sensory imbalances, strengthening motor skills, increasing focus and concentration, developing increased self-esteem and self-confidence and managing stress more effectively. The poses described in this chapter offer specific benefits. The benefits of each pose are provided in order to identify which poses would meet the needs of the individual child.

A NOTE ABOUT BREATHING

The child should be encouraged to breathe and continue the breath while in each pose. Specific breathing strategies are suggested for each pose. If the child is not able to perform each breath just right, simply encourage the child to breathe. Focusing on the breath will bring attention to their breathing and encourage the child not to hold their breath in the poses.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Due to a child with special needs having varying degrees of difficulty with language processing, sensory input (including external sounds and noise), anxiety, possible OCD behaviors along with other acting out behaviors, it is important that the adult have knowledge and understanding of specific triggers, challenges and needs that may come up when introducing yoga to each individual child. It is also important to know any health conditions or diagnosis the child has, as there may be specific contraindications for certain poses and breathing strategies.

RULES FOR YOGA

CHILL:

Calm voice

Have fun

In control

Listening ears

Looking eyes

What you will need:

► yoga mat (preferably plain—visuals on mat may be distracting or confusing) ► colored rubber circles ► pictures/visuals ► colored wristbands (see art activity—red—right, lavender—left on page 40) **Other suggested materials:**

► yoga block ► calming music ► yoga blanket ► eye pillow

YOGA POSE TERMS

Seated—any poses in which the individual is sitting down.

Supine—any pose in which the individual is lying down.

Standing—any pose in which the individual is standing. Standing poses help build strength in the body and support healthy posture.

Balancing—any pose in which the individual is balancing on one foot or on one body part. Balancing poses help build strength in the body and increase focus and concentration.

Flexion—any pose in which the spine is moving into flexion (forward bending poses or lateral bending poses). Forward bending poses increase suppleness in the spine, ease tension in back and neck muscles and decrease anxiety by activating the parasympathetic nervous system to create a sense of calm and relaxation. Lateral bending postures strengthen the oblique muscles, increase flexibility in the spine and support balance.

Extension—any pose in which the spine is moving into extension (back bending poses). Back bending poses open up the front side of the body, realign the spine, support healthy posture, boost the immune system and aid in reducing depression.

Twisting—any pose in which the spine is being twisted or rotated. Twisting poses help restore the spine's natural range of motion, cleanse and detoxify internal organs, support healthy digestion and improve circulation.

Inversion—any pose in which the head is below the heart. Inversion poses improve circulation by reversing the flow of blood in the body and boost the immune system. Cooling inversions suggested in this book (down dog and spider legs up the wall) reduce anxiety by activating the parasympathetic nervous system.

SETTING UP THE ENVIRONMENT

Safety

Create a safe space for the child to move around. Remove any objects from the floor that the child may step on. Allow enough space for the child to practice poses without bumping into or tripping over furniture or objects.

Boundary

Create a visual boundary for the child so they know where to stand and position their body during practice. A yoga mat is a great visual and physical boundary for the child. A rubber circle can also be a helpful tool if the pose requires the child to stand in a more specific or designated spot.

Space

Allow enough space in the environment for the child to move around and practice the poses without feeling too cramped or inhibited.

Sensory supporting

The space where the child practices should be free of bright lights, loud noises or any other factors that could be distressing to their sensory system. Soothing music can be calming and may be helpful as an auditory tool for relaxation; however, some children with sensory integration difficulties may find it distracting.

Clothing

Whenever possible have the child wear comfortable and/or loose fitted clothing. Have them wear layers of clothing that suit the temperature of the room so they are not too hot or too cold. Encourage the child to practice yoga poses barefoot. If the child does not prefer being barefoot they can wear socks, preferably non-slip ones, to practice poses.

Tools and Props

Use tools and materials suggested on page 76 whenever necessary to support the child in doing poses.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Balance

If the child does a pose on one side always attempt to have them do the pose on the opposite side. Using both sides of the body supports activating the left and right hemispheres of the brain, encouraging whole brain integration and motor coordination.

Modifications and considerations

Begin by teaching seated and supine postures to children who have low muscle tone or have more severe difficulties with coordination and balance. Many children with Down syndrome may have hypermobile joints and can hyperextend their joints easily. Encourage them to bend their knees when folding forward in poses and avoid overstretching in poses. Incorporate standing postures in their yoga practice. Standing postures can help stabilize tendons and cartilage in knees and ankles. If a child is overweight or obese avoid poses where they are lying on their belly. Lying on their belly can compress their lungs and make it difficult for them to breathe easily. Always monitor a child's breath and physical response to poses. Incorporate suggestions for modifications to the pose or eliminate the pose altogether if the child is unable to breathe freely, seems to be straining too much or the pose seems too difficult for the child. Although yoga can be a complimentary support for seizure disorders, it is important to be aware if the child has a seizure disorder. Knowing how often they occur and what triggers them will help identify any poses that may be risky (e.g., balancing poses) and be prepared to respond if a seizure occurs. The use of a table, chair or wall in balancing poses can be a helpful modification to support balance and ensure safety.

Diversity

Incorporate a diversity of poses into the child's practice including seated, supine, standing, balancing, flexion, extension and inversion poses (keeping in mind modifications and considerations).

Breathing

Breathing should be encouraged with the practice of any pose. Mindful breathing brings the body into a more relaxed and focused state, which will support the child in doing the poses safely while maximizing the benefits of the pose. Specific types of breathing are suggested for each pose in the book. Although these breathing strategies are recommended, if a breath is too difficult for the child, simply focus on bringing awareness to their breath. The child should never strain while doing breathing strategies. If the breathing strategy seems too difficult or abstract, taking slow and steady open mouth inhales and exhales will still benefit the child.

Predictability

Predictability is important to many children with special needs, particularly children with autism. Not knowing what to expect or how long an activity may be can be upsetting and anxiety provoking to the child. Many children with special needs have difficulty understanding or recognizing the concept of time. Routine and predictability creates a sense of order for a child who feels less in control over their environment. Making the child's yoga practice as predictable as possible will support the child in knowing what to expect and will give them a frame of reference for what, when and how long the activity will be. Developing a predictable routine will support the child in learning the routine. Repetition and sameness supports learning, retention of information and independence.

Energizing versus calming

Be aware of poses that energize versus poses that calm. If a child has high levels of anxiety, a focus on poses that calm the nervous system would be more appropriate. Most forward bending poses help with anxiety and activating the parasympathetic nervous system. Typically more restorative poses that aid in better sleeping patterns and decrease insomnia would be best to practice prior to bedtime. Most back bending, balancing and standing poses energize the brain and body but can also aid in decreasing stress and anxiety. Energizing poses can also be good for a child who has high energy and is highly distractible since the poses require more physical exertion, concentration and focus. It can be helpful to begin with more energizing poses and end with more restorative poses if the overall desired effect is to slow the child's system down.

Descriptions of poses in this chapter provide information on whether the pose is calming or energizing along with the specific benefits of each pose. A combination of energizing and calming poses will give the child a balanced practice. Each individual child will vary in their response to poses. It is up to the adult or guide to identify how the child responds to each pose in order to develop an individualized practice that works for the child.

Timing

Be aware of timing when the child practices specific poses. Choose poses that are soothing and calming when you want the child to relax, such as prior to bedtime. Choose poses that are energizing and invigorating when you want the child to have more energy such as prior to going to school in the morning. Avoid having the child practice poses after eating. Allow for at least 1–2 hours to digest food prior to practicing yoga poses if possible. Poses should only be held for a few breaths at a time.

Energy and mood

It is important to be aware of both the adult and child's emotional energy and mood when practicing yoga. Yoga is meant to be a positive and calming experience. The emotional energy of the adult can transfer to the child during a yoga practice. The experience would be most optimal if the adult is in an emotional place to guide the child with patience and a gentle tone. If the child is resistive to the practice it may be best to suggest doing yoga at another time.

Practicing as a family unit

Yoga is not only beneficial to a child with special needs, it can also be beneficial to the family as a whole. Practicing poses and breathing strategies as a family unit will encourage and support the child in their yoga practice and will benefit the family by reducing the stress, anxiety and tension that often comes with the challenges of living with a child with special needs. Calm, peaceful and relaxing time together as a family can be healing and bonding. Playing yoga games together as a family can be time spent having fun, interacting and enjoying each other. Parents, siblings and family members of children with special needs can benefit physically and emotionally from practicing yoga as well!

SEQUENCING OF POSES

Below is a general guide for sequencing yoga poses when developing a yoga routine for a child with special needs. This guide is simply a suggestion and can be adapted to meet the specific preferences and needs of each individual child. Children with special needs will benefit from practicing any yoga poses that are at their level of ability and may gravitate towards one pose more than another. Being in tune to the child's response to each pose will help the adult develop a sequence that is motivating and enjoyable for the child. The adult will want to take factors into consideration such as energy level, mood, time of day, ability, preference, modifications and considerations, etc., as described in the beginning of this chapter when creating a sequence for the child.

1. *Seated or supine*: It is best to begin the yoga practice seated or lying down (supine). This is a good time to bring focus to mindful breathing, using the breathing strategies suggested in [Chapter 4](#).
2. *Spine awakening*: Spine awakening poses such as down dog and cat/cow will begin to gently stretch the spine and awaken the body.
3. *Sun salutations*: Sun salutations warm the muscles in the body and prepare them for deeper stretching poses. They are also invigorating and energizing. Flowing from one pose to the next to supports sensory processing.
4. *Standing and balancing poses*: Standing and balancing poses strengthen the muscles in the legs, help develop core stability, increase focus and concentration and support sensory processing.
5. *Standing forward folding poses*: Standing forward folding poses can be alternated with standing and balancing poses. This movement from standing to forward bending supports sensory processing and invigorates and calms the body at the same time.
6. *Gentle back bends*: Gentle back bends such as shark, cobra and bridge pose can be both rejuvenating and calming.
7. *Seated forward folding poses*: Seated forward folding poses will support the child's body in slowing down and preparing for rest.

8. *Seated or supine twisting poses*: Seated or supine twisting poses balance out the spine from flexion and extension movements and activate the digestive process to support healthy digestion.
9. *Tensing muscles prior to relaxation*: Encouraging the child to tense their muscles in the body will prepare them for relaxation (e.g., sponge pose, squeezing the body tight like a sponge to release any tension, stress or anxiety from the body and progressive relaxation).
10. *Savasana (resting pose)*: This is the final resting pose that encourages relaxation, stillness and activation of the parasympathetic nervous system or resting system.
11. *Fetal pose*: Having the child roll onto side in the fetal position supports a slow and calm transition out of their yoga practice in order to maintain activation of the parasympathetic nervous system.
12. *Seated and closing of practice*: Having the child come out slowly from a lying down position will support their nervous system in maintaining a calm state.
13. *Namaste*: Depending on preference, the adult may choose to close the practice with Namaste, as described in the beginning of the book (see page 16) or may have a different preference for ending the practice. Reminding the child of their unique light and what is special about them promotes self-love and nurturing feelings towards themselves.

PHYSICAL POSES/ASANAS

Relaxing/calming poses

Relaxing and calming poses activate the parasympathetic nervous system, bringing the body and mind to a calmer, more relaxed state. Forward folding poses such as rag doll, rabbit and turtle, as well as more restorative poses such as spider legs up the wall, fetal pose and savasana, slow the body down and prepare the body for rest. Relaxing and calming poses support digestion, slow the heart rate and allow the muscles and organs of the body to relax and repair.

CHILD'S POSE (BALASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit cross-legged (or stand tall) on mat.
2. Sit back on heels.
3. Spread knees wide apart.
4. Reach fingers up to the sky.
5. Bring forehead to mat.
6. Stretch fingers to front of mat.
7. Palms on mat.
8. Breathe.

Breath

► ujjayi ► open mouth breaths **Benefits**

Releases tension in the back, shoulders and chest; improves digestion; lengthens and stretches the spine; gently stretches the hips, thighs and ankles; improves circulation; stretches muscles, tendons and ligaments in the knee; calms the mind and body; helps alleviate stress and anxiety; encourages strong and steady breathing.

Body awareness

▶ heels ▶ knees ▶ hips ▶ forehead ▶ arms ▶ palms ▶ fingers **Visualization**

Think of a calm, soothing color or place.

Modifications

Block or blanket under forehead, blanket under knees, knees spread wide apart or together, blanket in creases behind knees.

ROCK



Instructions for pose

1. Stand on knees on mat.
2. Sit back on heels.
3. Knees together.
4. Bring forehead to mat.
5. Reach fingers back towards heels.
6. Relax arms to side.
7. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Stretches the hips, thighs and ankles; relaxes the muscles on the front of the body; gently stretches the muscles of the back torso; reduces stress and fatigue; centers, calms and soothes the brain and body; normalizes circulation; strengthens immune system.

Body awareness

▶ heels ▶ knees ▶ hips ▶ forehead ▶ arms **Visualization**

Imagine being a rock sitting in the grass, the warm sun shining down on you, a quiet, calm rock, warm from the sun.

Modifications

Allow hips to lift off heels if needed, place a folded blanket under knees.

CROSS-LEGGED (SUKHASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on mat.
2. Cross legs.
3. Sit up tall.
4. Relax shoulders.
5. Palms face down on knees.
6. Breathe 5–6 breaths.

Breath

▶ falling out breath ▶ ujjayi breath ▶ balloon belly breath **Benefits**

Calms the brain; helps with focus and concentration; strengthens the back; stretches the knees and ankles.

Body awareness

▶ ankles ▶ knees ▶ spine ▶ shoulders ▶ top of head **Visualization**

Think of something that makes you feel calm and happy.

Modifications

Sit on a folded blanket.

RAG DOLL (UTTANASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Stand tall on mat.
2. Inhale—reach arms to sky.
3. Exhale—bend forward.
4. Hold elbows.
5. Nod head yes.
6. Shake head no.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Calms the brain and helps relieve stress and anxiety; stimulates liver and kidneys; stretches the hamstrings, calves and hips; strengthens the thighs and knees; improves digestion; reduces fatigue.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ knees ▶ spine ▶ arms ▶ elbows ▶ fingers **Visualization**

Imagine your body flopping over like a rag doll.

Modifications

Hands on chair, bend knees.

RABBIT (SHASHANKASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Stand on knees.
2. Sit back on heels.
3. Lower top of head to mat.
4. Lift hips (bunny tail) high towards sky.
5. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches hips, thighs, ankles, chest, shoulders and arms; relieves tension, stress and fatigue; calms the mind.

Body awareness

▶ knees ▶ heels ▶ top of head ▶ hips **Visualization**

Imagine being a rabbit, curling up in a ball, lifting its tail to the sky.

Modifications

Lift hips only slightly.

TURTLE (KURMASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on mat.
2. Spread legs wide.
3. Breathe in.
4. Lean forward and stretch arms forward on mat.
5. Bend knees a little.
6. Walk hands underneath knees (right under right, left under left).
7. Forehead can come onto mat.
8. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches hips, groin, hamstrings, shoulders and upper and lower back; supports digestion; calms the mind.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ knees ▶ palms ▶ arms ▶ back ▶ forehead **Visualization**

Imagine being a turtle in its shell, slow and calm.

Modifications

Stop at step 4—stretching arms forward, bend knees more.

DOWN DOG (ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on heels.
2. Spread fingers wide.
3. Come to hands and knees.
4. Fingers spread wide on mat.
5. Inhale.
6. Tuck toes.
7. Exhale.
8. Lift hips up to sky.
9. Look back at heels.
10. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches hands, wrists, shoulders, hamstrings, calves and arches of feet; strengthens arms and legs; supports digestion; calms brain, relieves stress and anxiety; improves circulation and energizes the body.

Body awareness

▶ palms ▶ arms ▶ head ▶ hips ▶ feet ▶ heels **Visualization**

Imagine a dog stretching, lifting its tail high.

Modifications

Bend knees, puppy pose (if down dog is too difficult).

PUPPY (UTTANA SHISHOSANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Come to hands and knees.
2. Inhale.
3. Exhale.
4. Bring elbows to mat.
5. Bring forehead to mat.
6. Lift hips high.
7. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches the spine and shoulders; calms the mind; supports digestion; helps alleviate stress and anxiety.

Body awareness

▶ forehead ▶ shoulders ▶ knees ▶ hips **Visualization**

Imagine a puppy stretching its body, tail lifting to the sky.

Modifications

Puppy pose is a modification for down dog pose.

BUTTERFLY (BADDHA KONASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on mat.
2. Bring bottoms of feet to touch each other.
3. Hold ankles or feet.
4. Sit up tall.
5. Inhale—lift knees up.
6. Exhale—bring knees down.
7. Flap your butterfly wings.
8. Repeat 5–6 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches inner thighs, groins and knees; improves digestion and circulation; helps relieve mild depression, anxiety and fatigue; helps with asthma symptoms.

Body awareness

▶ bottoms of feet ▶ knees ▶ belly ▶ spine ▶ shoulders ▶ hands **Visualization**

Imagine a butterfly flapping its wings. Think of what color your butterfly is. Imagine your butterfly flying in the sky.

Modifications

Bring bent knees higher up from ground, sit against a wall, do pose lying down on mat.

GIRAFFE (PRASARITA PADDOTANASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Stand sideways on mat.
2. Spread legs wide (feet parallel to each other).
3. Reach arms out to side.
4. Inhale deeply.
5. Exhale—lean body forward.
6. Bring hands to mat.
7. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens and stretches inner thighs, hamstrings and spine; improves circulation; calms the brain; helps alleviate anxiety; combats fatigue, headaches and mild depression.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ legs ▶ spine ▶ head ▶ hands **Visualization**

Imagine a giraffe with its long legs spread wide bending down to drink water from a pond.

Modifications

Bend knees, place a soft block or folded blanket underneath head to increase calming effect.
Do pose with back against the wall.

SPONGE



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on back.
2. Bring knees toward body.
3. Wrap arms around knees.
4. Bring forehead to knees.
5. Squeeze knees tight to body—hold for a count of four.
6. Exhale—lay body flat on mat (arms and legs spread wide).

Breath

Hold breath while tensing, open mouth to release.

Benefits

Releases tension in body; relaxes the muscles in the body; soothes the nervous system.

Body awareness

▶ arms ▶ knees ▶ forehead **Visualization**

Imagine your body as a sponge. Squeeze worry, tension or anxiety out of your sponge.

SELF-HUG (BOTH SIDES)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit cross-legged (or stand tall).
2. Reach fingers forward.
3. Cross right elbow over left.
4. Bring fingers to shoulder blades.
5. Inhale—squeeze and hug yourself tight.
6. Exhale—relax hug and say, “I love me.”
7. Repeat inhale—squeeze and exhale—relax 2–3 times.
8. Repeat on opposite side—left elbow over right.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Relieves tension in shoulders, upper back and neck; calms the mind; encourages self-love.

Body awareness

▶ arms ▶ shoulders **Visualization**

When you hug your arms around yourself think of love and happy feelings.

RIVER



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on mat with legs straight.
2. Bend knees, bottoms of feet on mat.
3. Breathe in, reach fingers up to the ceiling.
4. Breathe out, fold forwards, arms down bring fingers down to ground, palms facing floor.
5. Forehead on knees.
6. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Strengthens core; stretches back and shoulders; relieves tension and stress.

Body awareness

▶ knees ▶ legs ▶ belly ▶ arms ▶ fingers **Visualization**

Imagine water in a river gently rising and falling.

Modifications

Arms on ground behind back to support weight.

SPIDER LEGS UP THE WALL (VIPARITA KARANI)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit sideways against a wall.
2. Crawl legs up wall.
3. Bring back onto mat.
4. Spread arms wide.
5. Palms face up to sky.
6. Close eyes.
7. Breathe.
8. Suggested time in pose is 5–10 minutes (modify time to meet needs of child).

Breath

▶ natural breathing **Benefits**

Gently stretches back of legs, front torso and back of neck; improves circulation; supports digestion; helps relieve insomnia, anxiety and depression; alleviates headaches.

Body awareness

► hips ► legs ► back ► shoulders ► arms **Visualization**

Imagine your legs are spider legs crawling up the wall. Think of a color that makes you feel calm.

Modifications

Place folded blanket or towel under lower back, bend knees slightly.

RESTING POSE (SAVASANA)

Doing progressive relaxation or sponge pose prior to savasana will support the child in relaxing the body prior to savasana. The adult can make the decision regarding the amount of time the child stays in savasana based on their individual needs. Recommended time is 5–10 minutes. If the child begins to get fidgety, it is a good sign that they are ready to come out of savasana. Calm music in the background may be helpful in supporting deep relaxation in savasana. Savasana is the ending pose to the yoga practice. Have the child come out of savasana by moving into fetal pose first, then sitting up.



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on back.
2. Spread legs wide.
3. Spread arms wide.
4. Close eyes.
5. Relax body.

Have the child come out of savasana by moving to the fetal position first.

Breath

► natural breathing **Benefits**

Soothes the nervous system; calms the brain; helps relieve anxiety and mild depression; reduces headache, fatigue and insomnia.

Body awareness

▶ legs ▶ arms ▶ palms **Visualization**

Imagine lying in soft, warm clouds.

Modifications

Place a blanket on top of child to increase soothing and grounding effect. Place eye pillow on child's eyes to improve relaxation.

FETAL POSE (ON SIDE)



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on side (right suggested).
2. Bend knees.
3. Close eyes.
4. Breathe.

Breath

▶ natural breathing **Benefits**

Calms the mind and helps alleviate anxiety; is a good transitional pose when coming out of supine poses (such as savasana) into seated pose so the child comes up slowly and maintains a state of calm.

Body awareness

▶ side ▶ shoulder ▶ knees ▶ arms **Visualization**

Imagine a baby curled up, sleeping.

Modifications

Place a blanket on the child to enhance calming, relaxing effect.

Invigorating/energizing poses

Invigorating and energizing poses increase alertness, attention and focus while decreasing fatigue, stress and anxiety. Invigorating poses can calm the mind while physically energizing the brain and body at the same time. Practicing invigorating/energizing poses can provide a natural energy boost when a child is fatigued, lethargic or has low energy. These uplifting poses stimulate the circulation system and awaken the nervous system. When our bodies are stagnant for longer periods of time our energy systems can get stuck. These poses can be practiced in the morning and throughout the day to boost energy and energize the child's brain and body.

CAT/COW (MARJARYASANA/BITILASANA)





Instructions for pose

1. Stand on knees—(have child space knees hip width apart).
2. Put palms on mat (make yourself into a table). Child should have hips stacked over knees and shoulders stacked over wrists.
3. Inhale through nose—drop belly, look up.
4. Press palms into floor.
5. Arch back like a scared cat.
6. Exhale through mouth (or hiss like a scared cat).
7. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

Inhale through nose; exhale through mouth (or hiss like a cat).

Benefits

Stretches spine; releases tension in spine; extension and flexion of spine; opens and stretches upper back and pectoralis muscles in front; energizes the body and calms the mind.

Body awareness

- ▶ fingers spread wide ▶ shoulders/wrists (stacked) ▶ spine ▶ hips/knees (stacked)

Visualization

Imagine a cow in green grass, looking up at sky and a cat arching back when it hisses.

Modifications

Blanket under knees.

BOAT (NAVASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Sit on mat with legs straight.
2. Bend knees.
3. Hold behind knees.
4. Lift toes.
5. Lean back.
6. Sit up straight.
7. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Strengthens hips, thighs and abdominal muscles; improves balance, coordination; improves digestion; stimulates kidneys and thyroid; develops focus and concentration.

Body awareness

▶ bottom ▶ hips ▶ belly ▶ spine ▶ back of knees ▶ feet **Visualization**

Imagine a strong ship or boat sitting in the ocean.

Modifications

Palms on floor next to hips with elbows bent.

PLANK (KUMBHAKASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on belly.
2. Bring palms under shoulders.
3. Spread fingers wide.
4. Inhale.
5. Lift body up with arms (like a push up).
6. Keep knees on mat.
7. Keep arms straight.
8. Pull belly button in tight.
9. Keep neck straight.
10. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens upper body, chest, shoulders, arms and wrists; strengthens the core (responsible for balance).

Body awareness

▶ palms ▶ fingers ▶ arms ▶ knees ▶ belly **Visualization**

Imagine a strong wooden plank on a pirates ship. Make your body into a plank.

Modifications

Folded blanket under knees. This pose is a modified version of the full plank pose.

FROG (ARDHA BHEKASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Squat on floor, balancing on toes.
2. Spread knees wide.
3. Hands on floor between legs.
4. Inhale—lift hips up (head comes closer to floor).
5. Exhale—come back to squat.
6. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

- ▶ ujjayi ▶ cleansing breath (inhale through nose, exhale tongue out like catching a fly on tongue) **Benefits**

Strengthens and tones legs; stretches feet and ankles; stretches back torso and groins; improves heart health.

Body awareness

▶ toes ▶ heels ▶ knees ▶ hips ▶ spine ▶ hands **Visualization**

Imagine a frog sitting on a lily pad getting ready to leap or jump off the lily pad.

Modifications

Sit on a block or thick book.

MOUNTAIN POSE TO MOUNTAIN PEAK (TADASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Stand on mat with feet together.
2. Spread toes wide.
3. Arms to side (palms facing body).
4. Inhale—stretch arms up to sky.
5. Look up.
6. Palms together at top of head.
7. Exhale—palms to chest/front of body.
8. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Strengthens and tones legs, knees, ankles, lower abdomen, shoulders and neck; improves posture; increases self-esteem; supports balance and focus.

Body awareness

▶ toes ▶ feet ▶ legs ▶ belly ▶ shoulders ▶ arms ▶ palms ▶ crown of head

Visualization

Imagine standing strong and tall like a mountain.

Modifications

Feet slightly apart (hip width).

SUN SALUTATION SEQUENCE: MOUNTAIN PEAK, FORWARD FOLD, PLANK, MOUNTAIN





Instructions for sequence

1. Stand at front of mat.
2. Inhale reach arms up—palms together (mountain peak pose).
3. Exhale—fold body forward—fingers towards mat (rag doll with arms stretched out to mat).
4. Inhale—walk hands forward on mat come to knees (plank pose).
5. Exhale—tuck toes (down dog).
6. Inhale—look to front of mat.
7. Exhale—walk feet towards front of mat.
8. Inhale—come back to standing, reach arms up, palms together (mountain peak pose) .
9. Exhale—palms together in front of chest.
10. Repeat 2–3 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Strengthens cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive and circulatory systems; stretches and tones muscles in entire body; strengthens immune system; calms nervous system; energizes the brain and body; strengthens the vestibular and proprioceptive systems.

Body awareness

► Whole body awareness **Additional sequenced poses**

Incorporate any sequence of standing poses, backbends, forward bends, inversions and twists to provide vestibular input.

TRIANGLE (TRIKONASANA)



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand sideways on mat.
2. Spread legs wide.
3. Point toes of right foot towards front of mat (child's front heel should line up with back inner arch of foot—or close).
4. Reach arms out to the side.
5. Bend to the right.
6. Bring right hand down toward mat.
7. Right hand can rest on right shin (avoid pressing hand on knee cap or on yoga block).
8. Reach left hand up toward sky.
9. Look up to fingers reaching to the sky.
10. Breathe.
11. Repeat on opposite side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Expands chest and shoulders; strengthens thigh muscles; increases neck and hip mobility; stretches spinal muscles, calves and hamstrings; energizes.

Body awareness

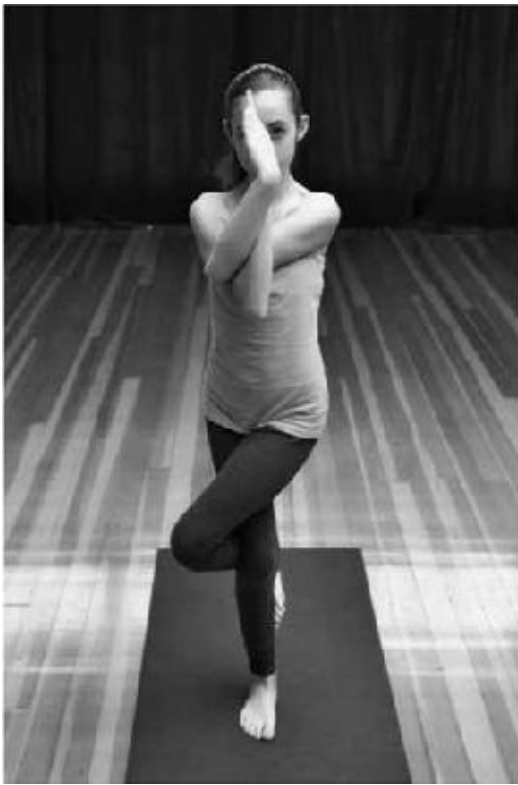
▶ feet ▶ arch ▶ heel ▶ hips ▶ arms ▶ hands **Visualization**

Imagine the shape of a triangle. Turn your body into a triangle.

Modifications

Slight bend in front knee, shorten stance, gaze can be down at the mat or looking forward in front of the body.

EAGLE (GARUDASANA)



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand tall with feet apart.
2. Reach arms forward.
3. Bring right arm under left arm.
4. Bend elbows.
5. Palms together (or close to each other).
6. Look at a spot on the wall (head facing forward).
7. Lift right leg and bend right knee.
8. Cross right leg over left leg.
9. Wrap right toes behind left leg.
10. Look forward at spot on wall.
11. Breathe.
12. If you fall out it's ok! Just come back in and try again!
13. Repeat on other side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi **Benefits**

Strengthens ankles, legs, knees and hips; stretches and releases tension in shoulders and upper back; increases focus and concentration; calms the nervous system.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ knees ▶ legs ▶ arms ▶ elbows **Visualization**

Imagine an eagle sitting high in a tree, standing strong, watching from above.

Modifications

Bring toe to mat alongside the ankle of the standing foot.

SHARK (SHALABASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on belly.
2. Arms to side of body (fingers pointing back towards heels).
3. Chin to mat.
4. Inhale—lift shoulders and feet off mat.
5. Reach fingers back towards heels.
6. Exhale—shoulders and feet come down.
7. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Strengthens the muscles of the spine, buttocks and backs of the arms and legs; stretches the shoulders, chest, belly and thighs; improves posture; stimulates abdominal organs; supports digestion; helps relieve stress.

Body awareness

▶ belly ▶ shoulders ▶ arms ▶ fingers ▶ low back ▶ legs ▶ feet **Visualization**

Imagine a shark swimming in the ocean, legs are tail and arms are fins.

Modifications

Arms reach out in front.

TREE (VRKSASANA)



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand on mat, feet together.
2. Bring right foot to inside of thigh or calf.
3. Find spot on wall to look at (drishti).
4. Bring palms together in front of chest.
5. Inhale.
6. Exhale—grow your branches.
7. Reach arms up to sky.
8. Breathe.
9. If you fall out, it's ok! Just come back into pose and try again!
10. Repeat on opposite side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens thighs, calves, ankles and spine; stretches the groins and inner thighs, chest and shoulders; improves sense of balance and focus; increases self-esteem.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ knee ▶ belly ▶ arms ▶ palms **Visualization**

Imagine being a tree, roots growing out through foot, arms raise up as branches (grow your branches).

Modifications

Bring heel to ankle so toes are still on the floor instead of inside of calf or thigh, keep palms together at chest instead of reaching them up. Use chair, table or wall to support balance.

AIRPLANE (DHEKASANA)





Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand in middle of mat.
2. Inhale—reach arms out wide to the side.
3. Exhale—lean front of body forward.
4. Lift right leg.
5. Stand strong on left foot.
6. Look at a spot on the ground in front of you (drishti).
7. Breathe.
8. If you fall out, it's ok! Just come back into the pose and try again!
9. Repeat on opposite side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens legs; stretches arms and chest; stimulates the abdominal organs, diaphragm and heart; improves sense of balance and focus; increases self-esteem.

Body awareness

▶ toes ▶ feet ▶ legs ▶ knees ▶ arms ▶ shoulders **Visualization**

Imagine being an airplane flying in the sky, arms as wings.

Modifications

Keep the top of back toes on the mat while leaning torso forward; hold a chair or table while balancing.

COBRA (BHUJANGASANA)





Instructions for pose

1. Lie on belly.
2. Chin on mat.
3. Bring hands under shoulders (or to outside of shoulders).
4. Palms on mat.
5. Inhale—press palms into mat, straighten arms and lift shoulders off mat.
6. Exhale—hiss like a snake, shoulders back to mat.
7. Repeat 2–3 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens the spine; stretches chest, shoulders and abdomen; supports digestion; helps relieve stress and fatigue; opens the lungs; therapeutic for asthma.

Body awareness

▶ palms ▶ elbows ▶ shoulders ▶ belly ▶ top of feet **Visualization**

Imagine being a cobra snake, peeking up from the grass.

Modifications

Keep elbows bent.

STAR



Instructions for pose

1. Stand on mat.
2. Spread legs wide to outside of mat.
3. Heels in, toes out.
4. Inhale—reach up—palms facing front of room.
5. Exhale—spread arms and fingers wide.
6. Stand tall.
7. Breathe 5–6 breaths.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches and lengthens body in all directions; aligns spine; improves posture; energizes the body; strengthens legs, ankles, abdomen and back; improves circulation and respiration; helps relieve stress and anxiety and improve concentration and focus; supports balance; improves mood and self-esteem.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ heels ▶ legs ▶ belly ▶ arms ▶ hands ▶ fingers **Visualization**

Imagine your body as a star with five points (head, two arms and two legs).

Modifications

Can do pose lying down on a mat.

WARRIOR 2 (VIRHABADRASANA II)



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand sideways on mat.
2. Spread legs wide. Press hand with bent knee onto wall to stabilize.
3. Bring right foot toward front of mat (child's front heel should line up with back inner arch of foot—or close).
4. Bend right knee.
5. Stretch arms out to side.
6. Look to the right.
7. Inhale and exhale.
8. Repeat instructions for opposite side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Stretches hips, groins and shoulders; improves circulation and respiration; energizes limbs; opens chest and lungs; supports digestion; improves balance and concentration; increases self-esteem.

Body awareness

▶ feet ▶ heels ▶ knees ▶ hips ▶ belly ▶ shoulders ▶ arms ▶ palms ▶ fingers ▶
neck **Visualization**

Imagine being a brave warrior, standing strong and tall.

Modifications

Less bend in knee, shorten stance.

FLAMINGO



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Stand on mat—feet together.
2. Find a spot on the wall to look at (drishti).
3. Bring right heel to your bottom.
4. Reach back and grab top of right foot with right hand.
5. Stand strong on left leg.
6. If you fall out, it's ok! Just come back into pose and try again!
7. Breathe.
8. Repeat on opposite side.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth **Benefits**

Strengthens feet, ankles and legs; increases focus and concentration; encourages balance and coordination; calms the nervous system; helps reduce anxiety; increases self-confidence and self-esteem.

Body awareness

▶ hands ▶ legs ▶ feet ▶ heel ▶ bottom **Visualization**

Imagine being a pink flamingo standing on one leg.

Modifications

Use opposite arm of bent leg to support balance by bringing it wide out to the side. Hold onto chair, table or wall with free arm to support balance.

HAPPY BABY (ANANDA BALSANA)





Instructions for pose

1. Lie on back.
2. Bend knees.
3. Spread knees wide.
4. Grab hold of ankles.
5. Keep back of head on mat.
6. Inhale.
7. Exhale—rock to the right.
8. Inhale—come back to center.
9. Exhale—rock to the left.
10. Repeat 3–4 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Stretches inner thighs and groins; relieves tension in lower back; calms brain; helps relieve stress and fatigue.

Body awareness

▶ hands ▶ back ▶ knees ▶ ankles (inner thighs and calves if modified) **Visualization**

Imagine a happy baby playing with toes, rocking back and forth.

Modifications

Have child grab inside of thighs or inside of calves if needed. Have child stay in center without rocking if rocking is too difficult.

BRIDGE (SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA)



Instructions for pose

1. Lie on back.
2. Bend knees.
3. Make space in between knees (hip width).
4. Feet on floor (parallel to each other).
5. Bring arms to side, palms on floor.
6. Press palms into mat.
7. Lift hips.
8. Breathe.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Stretches chest, neck, spine and hips; strengthens back, buttocks and hamstrings; supports digestion; improves circulation; stimulates lungs and thyroid glands; helps alleviate anxiety and mild depression; reduces fatigue and insomnia; calms the nervous system; reduces backache and headache.

Body awareness

▶ arms ▶ palms ▶ feet ▶ knees ▶ hips **Visualization**

Imagine a rounded bridge. Make your body into a rounded bridge.

Modifications

Place a yoga block lengthwise under the sacrum/lower back.

OPEN BOOK/CLOSE BOOK





Instructions for pose

1. Stand tall on mat.
2. Bring palms together in front of forehead. Encourage child to bring their elbows together if possible.
3. Open arms.
4. Inhale—spread elbows wide. Encourage child to lift elbows to shoulder height.
5. Palms face forward.
6. Exhale—bring palms back together in front of forehead. Encourage child to bring their elbows together if possible.
7. Repeat 4–5 times.

Breath

▶ ujjayi ▶ open mouth breath **Benefits**

Opens up front of body, the heart, lungs, diaphragm and chest; supports better posture; prepares the body for deeper breathing; calms and centers the mind.

Body awareness

▶ arms ▶ elbows ▶ palms **Visualization**

Imagine opening a book and closing a book.

Modifications

This pose can be done seated in a chair.

ROLLER COASTER TWIST



Instructions for pose

Use colored stickers or wristbands to designate right (red) and left (lavender), as described on page 40 if needed.

1. Sit back on heels.
2. Sit up tall.
3. Inhale.
4. Cross left arm over to right.
5. Exhale.
6. Twist to the right (gentle twist).
7. Bring right arm on mat behind body.
8. Look over right shoulder.
9. Breathe.
10. Repeat on opposite side.

Breath

► ujjayi ► open mouth **Benefits**

Massages and cleanses internal organs; supports digestion; restores and maintains normal spine rotation; calms the nervous system.

Body awareness

▶ hips ▶ heels ▶ arms ▶ spine ▶ shoulders **Visualization**

Imagine your spine twisting like roller coaster tracks.

Modifications

Have the child place their back hand on a block or book behind them.

GAMES USING ASANAS

It is important to note that yoga is not intended to be competitive. The games suggested in this chapter are to teach the child yoga poses and breathing strategies in a fun and interactive way. Although some of the games have the option to have winning players, it is not necessary to have a winner. Learning skills such as turn-taking, good sportsmanship, being a leader, interacting with others and following directions are important lessons when learning social skills and how to get along with others. It is up to the adult to know how the child will respond to friendly competition and to make modifications to the game based on knowledge of the individual child. Participants in the game can include family members, siblings, peers, friends and any other individuals that are a support to the child.

GO TAKE A POSE

This game requires at least two players.

What does the child learn?

- ▶ communication skills ▶ vocabulary ▶ turn-taking ▶ counting ▶ good sportsmanship
- ▶ how to do poses!

Materials

- ▶ Pairs of yoga cards with matching yoga poses or breaths (these cards can be printed photos of the child or someone else in poses or magazine/printed pictures of the animals for breaths).
- ▶ Visual cue (if needed): Go take a pose and do you have _____? (adult can write “Go take a pose and do you have _____?” on a whiteboard or piece of paper or enter the cues into the child’s communication device so the child has access to the verbal scripts throughout the game).
- ▶ Yoga mat.

How to play the game

1. The adult passes 5–7 cards out to the child and the other player/players and places spare cards in a pile.
2. Each player checks to see if they have matching poses or breaths.
3. Players set pairs aside.
4. One player asks for example: “Do you have tree pose?”
5. If the other player has the matching pose, they give the card to asking player.
6. If the other player does not have the matching card, they say “Go take a pose.”
7. The asking player does the pose then takes a card from the pile.
8. If the player gets a match from the pile, player sets pair aside.
9. Players take turns.
10. The game is over when one person has no more cards in their hand.
11. The person with no cards left in their hand is the winner!

YOGA MEMORY GAME

This game requires at least two players.

What does the child learn?

- ▶ communication ▶ vocabulary ▶ memory skills ▶ turn-taking ▶ counting ▶ yoga poses and breathing ▶ good sportsmanship **Materials**
- ▶ Pairs of 8–12 matching yoga cards with matching yoga poses or breaths (these cards can be printed photos of the child or someone else in poses or magazine/printed pictures of the animals for breaths).

How to play the game

1. Lay all cards face down on a table.
2. Player chooses a card.
3. Player chooses another card.
4. If the cards don't match the player puts the cards back in their spots and the next player goes.
5. If the cards match the player puts the matching set aside and takes another turn. Player keeps going as long as player gets a match.
6. When all of the cards have been matched, players count their cards.
7. The one with the most cards is the winner!

GUESS THE POSE

This game requires at least two players.

What does the child learn?

▶ vocabulary ▶ communication ▶ turn-taking ▶ yoga poses ▶ memory ▶ good sportsmanship **Materials**

▶ printed pictures of yoga poses (pictures can be of the child or someone else doing yoga poses) ▶ name of poses written on recipe cards or strips of paper or names of poses in child's augmentative communication device or iPad ▶ yoga mat **How to play the game**

(This game may require an additional person to support the child in the game depending on level of independence.) 1. Lay pictures of poses out next to yoga mat for player doing pose.

2. Lay words out in space on floor or at table for the player guessing the pose.
3. Demonstrating player chooses a picture of a pose while the guessing player has eyes closed or is facing away, then demonstrating player places the picture of the pose where the guessing player won't see it.
4. Demonstrating player demonstrates the pose.
5. Guessing player tries to guess the pose (can use words on table to help with memory).
6. If the guessing player gets the pose right they keep the card. (Option to lay two cards in front of child with correct pose and choice of another pose so child can choose which pose is the correct pose to support child with memory and set the child up for success.) 7. Players take turns.
8. After all of the cards have been demonstrated, players count their cards.
9. Whoever has the most cards is the winner!

MUSICAL POSES

This game requires multiple players (at least four players).

What does the child learn?

- ▶ listening skills ▶ attention skills ▶ counting ▶ yoga poses ▶ good sportsmanship

Materials

- ▶ rubber circles (or colored pieces of cardstock to put on floor) ▶ music **How to play the game**

1. Adult places rubber circles (or colored paper) to equal one fewer than total number of children (e.g., five rubber circles for six children) on floor in a circle.
2. Adult plays music as children walk around circle, stepping on rubber circles.
3. When music stops, children attempt to step on remaining circles and then children must do a yoga pose on the circle.
4. The child who did not make it on a circle sits out.
5. Adult takes another circle away.
6. Repeat until only one child is left on a circle.
7. Child left stepping on and doing yoga pose on last circle wins!

YOGI SAYS

This game requires multiple players (at least four).

What does the child learn?

- ▶ listening skills ▶ attention skills ▶ imitation skills ▶ leadership skills ▶ turn taking ▶ yoga poses ▶ socialization skills ▶ good sportmanship **Materials**
- ▶ yoga mats ▶ popsicle sticks

How to play the game

1. Adult has children space their bodies or stand on mats.
2. Adult says, "Yogi says do _____ pose." (e.g., "Yogi says do airplane pose.") 3. Children do pose (adult can model pose if needed).
4. Adult tries to trick children during game by omitting Yogi and saying "Do _____ pose."
5. Children who do pose without *Yogi* says in sentence get a popsicle stick in their container.
6. Children can take turns being Yogi.
7. Game can last for as long as adult decides (use a timer to signal end of game).
8. Children count their popsicle sticks.
9. At the end of the game whoever has the *fewest* popsicle sticks is the winner!

MIRROR ME

This game requires two players.

What does the child learn?

- ▶ imitation skills ▶ social skills ▶ turn-taking ▶ yoga poses ▶ breathing strategies ▶ emotions ▶ perspective-taking **Materials**
- ▶ star or sticker chart (the adult can reinforce the child's imitation skills by putting a sticker on a chart after mirroring pose or breath) ▶ adult, sibling, peer or any other person who can guide child in doing poses and breathing **How to play the game**

Pose

1. Guide and child stand facing each other.
2. Guide models steps of pose one motion at a time.
3. Guide can do physical prompting if necessary.
4. Child mirrors guide.

Emotion and breath

1. Guide models facial expression such as anger.
2. Child mirrors expression.
3. Guide models volcano breath to release anger.
4. Child mirrors volcano breath.
5. Continue for as many poses and breaths as desired.
6. If child is capable, child and guide can switch so the child is the demonstrator and the guide mirrors the child.

This is a great game for practicing, recognizing and imitating body movements, facial expressions and breaths. If children are capable, pairing two children together to play mirror game can facilitate socialization and perspective-taking.

ART ACTIVITIES

The adult can engage the child in learning and doing poses by allowing them to color or draw their own images. The adult can print black and white images of animals, landscapes or objects and allow the child to create their own images to use when practicing poses. Having the images on hand while doing the poses will help activate the child's memory and imagination.

Suggested art activities:

- ▶ Make a sun for Waking the Sun pose.
- ▶ Make animals to match animal poses.
- ▶ Make apples and oranges for apple and orange picking.
- ▶ Color a beach scene for wave breath and visual imagery.
- ▶ Have child make color cards.
- ▶ Have child color and cut out an image to use on the wall for drishti.
- ▶ Have child draw pictures of emotions to use during breathing activities.
- ▶ Design a butterfly for butterfly pose.

SUMMARY

It is my belief that children with autism and special needs have the same wants, needs and desires as everyone else. They want to be free of worry and anxiety. They want to communicate their thoughts and emotions. They want to feel comfortable in their bodies. They want to feel connected to themselves and others around them. They want to be happy and healthy. I believe the first step in helping these children to live happier, healthier lives is to teach them how to self-regulate their arousal states so they may learn to respond to stimuli in their environment more effectively. Mindful breathing, guided meditation and the practice of physical poses will support the child in responding to stressors in healthier ways. Practicing pranayama and asanas that support expression of emotions, activate the parasympathetic nervous system and bring the body and mind to a calmer state will benefit the child emotionally, physically and behaviorally. When yoga is practiced consistently, the nervous system is strengthened and has a greater capacity for enduring stress. Helping these children develop stronger nervous systems leads the way to healthier digestion, stronger immune systems, better sleep patterns, increased focus and less anxiety. Our ultimate goal after all as parents, family members and educators is to help raise calmer, happier children. Taking a holistic approach to helping these children involves looking at the bigger picture. In order to learn academics, effective communication skills, social skills and functional life skills, the child must be free of stress and tension. By minimizing the negative impact of stress on the child we are able to activate the cognitive, thinking and expressive parts of their brain. By teaching children how to self-regulate their bodies and responses to sensory input they learn lifelong coping skills. By teaching children to express their emotions and release anger, worry, fear and tension from their bodies, they learn how to self-soothe and regulate their emotions. By teaching children poses and breathing exercises, through the use of words, pictures and visualization, they develop greater language and communication skills. By teaching children body parts and connection to their own bodies through music and movement they develop a greater sense of body awareness. By teaching children how they can be in control of their emotions and their bodies' responses to stress, they develop a greater sense of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-empowerment. The physical benefits of flexibility, strength, motor skills and coordination will help children with autism and special

needs navigate the world with stronger, healthier, more balanced bodies. My ultimate desire is to empower children with autism and special needs with tools that will support them throughout their life.

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Index

adolescents

effect of yoga on [25–6](#)

Airplane (Dhekasana) [125–6](#), [153](#)

Alternate Nostril Breathing [56–8](#), [168](#)

anxiety
and ASD [25](#)
as common factor of special needs [25](#)
effect of yoga on [25-7](#)
APA [19](#), [20](#), [21](#)
Apple Picking [171-2](#)
art activities for asanas [147-8](#)

asanas

- additional considerations 75–6, 78–81
- Airplane (Dhekasana) 125–6
- art activities for 147–8
- Boat (Navasana) 109–10
- Bridge (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) 136–7
- Butterfly (Baddha Konasana) 95–6
- calming 80, 83–107
- Cat/Cow (Marjaryasana/Bitilasana) 108–9
- Child’s Pose (Balasana) 83–4
- Cobra (Bhujangasana) 127–8
- Cross-Legged (Sukhasana) 86–7
- description of 15–16
- diversity of 79
- Down Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana) 92–3
- Eagle(Garudasana) 120–1
- and emotions 80–1
- energizing 80, 107–40
- environment for 77–8
- Fetal Pose (On Side) 106–7
- Flamingo 132–3
- Frog (Ardha Bhekasana) 112–13
- games using 141–7
- Giraffe (Prasarita Paddotanasana) 97–8
- Go Take a Pose 141–2
- Guess the Pose 143–4
- Happy Baby (Ananda Balsana) 134–5
- invigorating 107–40
- Mirror Me 147
- modifications to 78–97
- Mountain Pose to Mountain Peak (Tadasana) 114–15
- Musical Poses 144–5
- Open Book/Close Book 137–9
- Plank (Kumbhakasana) 111–12
- and pranayama 75, 79
- Puppy (Uttana Shishosana) 94–5
- Rag Doll (Uttanasana) 88–90
- relaxing 80, 83–107
- Resting Pose (Savasana) 104–6
- River 101–2
- Rock 85–6
- Roller Coaster Twist 139–40
- and routine 79–80
- Sanskrit words for 16–17
- Self-Hug (Both Sides) 100–1
- sequence of 81–2
- Shark (Shalabasana) 121
- Spider Legs Up the Wall (Viparita Karani) 103–4
- Sponge 98–9
- Star 129–30

Sun Salutation Sequence [116–17](#)
teaching directional concepts [39–40](#)
terms used in [76–7](#)
timing for [80](#)
Tree (Vrksasana) [123–4](#)
Triangle (Trikonasana) [118–19](#)
Turtle (Kurmasana) [91–2](#)
visual supports for [29](#)
Warrior II (Virhabadrasana II) [130–2](#)
Yoga Memory Game [142–3](#)
Yogi Says [145–6](#)
attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)
 common factors with other special needs [25](#)
 description of [21–2](#)
 effect of yoga on [26](#)
auditory and kinaesthetic teaching [33–5](#)
auditory processing disorder [61](#)

augmentative communication devices
as teaching strategy [30](#)
autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
and anxiety [25](#)
common factors with other special needs [25](#)
communication deficits [61–2](#)
description of [19–21](#)
Ayers, A. Jean [149](#)
balance [78](#)
balancing [77, 82](#)
Balentine, R. [45](#)
Balloon Belly [48–9](#)
Bee Breath [49–50](#)
Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (BASC) [25](#)
Bell, N. [63–4](#)
benefits of yoga [25–7](#)
Bicycle [165–6](#)
Boat (Navasana) [109–10, 153](#)
Body Bingo [38–9](#)
Body Part Memory Game [37–8](#)

body parts

auditory and kinaesthetic teaching 33–5

directional concept activities 39–41

games for 36–9

tactile and kinaesthetic teaching 35–6

boundaries 77–8

breathing *see* pranayama

Bridge (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) 136–7

Bunny Breath 51–2

Butterfly (Baddha Konasana) 95–6

Butterfly to Cocoon 178–9

calming asanas 80, 83–107

Cat Breath 69–70

Cat/Cow (Marjaryasana/Bitilasana) 108–9

chair yoga

- Apple Picking [171–2](#)
- benefits of [169](#)
- Butterfly to Cocoon [178–9](#)
- Clock Neck Roll [183–4](#)
- Eagle Arms [181–2](#)
- Ear Stretch [187–8](#)
- Heel Lift [173–4](#)
- Mix It Up [185–6](#)
- Open Book/Close Book [170–1](#)
- Reach to the Moon [188–9](#)
- Seated Mountain [180–1](#)
- Seated Twist [174–5](#)
- Self-Hug [189–90](#)
- Shoulder Shrug (I Don't Know, Let It Go) [176–7](#)
- Show Me Ten [191–2](#)
- Squeeze Orange Juice [177–8](#)
- Wake the Spider [192–3](#)
- Challenging Child, The (Greenspan) [150–1](#)
- Child's Pose (Balasana) [83–4](#)
- Clock Neck Roll [183–4](#)
- clothing [78](#)
- Cobra (Bhujangasana) [127–8](#)
- Cobra/Snake Breath [70–1](#)

colors

to teach directional concepts [40](#)

communication deficits
and ASD [61–2](#)
visual supports for [63–4](#)
and visualization [63–4](#)
Cross-Legged (Sukhasana) [86–7](#)
crossing the midline [163–6](#)
Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM–5 (DSM–5–TM) (APA)
and ADD/ADHD [21](#)
and ASD [19, 20](#)
directional concept activities [39–41](#)
diversity of asanas [79](#)
Down Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana) [92–3, 153, 154, 162](#)

Down syndrome

common factors with other special needs [25](#)

description of [23-4](#)

modifications to asanas [78-9](#)

Dragon's Breath [65-6](#)

drishti

description of 17

Eagle (Garudasana) 120–1, 153, 161

Eagle Arms 181–2

Ear Stretch 187–8

Ehleringer, J. 25

Elevator Breath 55–6

emotions

- and asanas 80–1
- Cat Breath 69–70
- Cobra/Snake Breath 70–1
- Dragon’s Breath 65–6
- exercise environment 64–5
- I Don’t Know, Let It Go Breath 72–3
- Let It Go Breath 71–2
- Lion’s Breath 68–9
- regulation of 62–3
- Volcano Breath 66–7
- energizing asanas 80, 107–40
- extension 77
- eye-tracking exercises 166–8

families
 practising yoga 81
fetal pose 82
Fetal Pose (On Side) 106–7, 162
Flamingo 132–3, 153
flexion 77
Flisek, L. 26
Fragile X syndrome (FXS)
 common factors with other special needs 25
 description of 22–3
Frog (Ardha Bhekasana) 112–13
Galantino, M. 26
Galbavy, R. 26
games for body parts 36–9
games using asanas 141–7
Gardner, Howard 64
Genetics Home Reference (GHR) 24
gentle back bends 82
Giraffe (Prasarita Paddotanasana) 97–8, 153
Go Fish 36–7
Go Take a Pose 141–2
Gouze, K.R. 151, 152
Grandin, Temple 63
Greenspan, Sally 150–1
Guess the Pose 143–4
Happy Baby (Ananda Balsana) 134–5
Harper, J.C. 25
Head, Neck, Shoulders, Wrists and Elbows 33–4
Heel Lift 173–4
Hymes, A. 45
I Don't Know, Let It Go Breath 72–3
International Journal of Yoga Therapy 25
inversion 77
invigorating asanas 107–40
Iyengar, B.K.S. 15
Jensen, P.S. 26
 Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, The 27
Kaley-Isley, L. 26
Kenny, D.T. 26
Kim, J.A. 25
Kripalu Yoga Center 26
Let It Go Breath 71–2
Lion's Breath 68–9
Make Your Own Wristbands or Ankle Bands 40–1
materials for yoga 76, 78

meditation
 use in yoga [16](#)
Mirror Me [147](#)
Mix It Up [185–6](#)
modeling [28](#)
modifications to asanas [78–9](#)
Mountain Pose to Mountain Peak (Tadasana) [114–15](#)
mouth breathing [47](#)
multiple intelligences [64](#)
Murdoch, M. [47](#), [163](#)
muscle tensing [82](#)
Musical Poses [144–5](#)

Namaste

description of [16](#)

in sequencing of asanas [82](#)

National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) [23](#), [24](#)

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

and ASD [20–1](#)

and Fragile X syndrome [22–3](#)

nose breathing [47](#), [168](#)

obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) [20](#), [25](#)

Open Book/Close Book [137–9](#), [170–1](#)

Open Mouth Breath [54](#)

parasympathetic nervous system [45–7](#)

Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) [30](#), [58](#)

Plank (Kumbhakasana) [111–12](#)

poses *see* asanas

positive reinforcement [31](#)

Prader Willi disorder

common factors with other special needs [25](#)

description of [24-5](#)

pranayama

- Alternate Nostril Breathing [56–8](#), [168](#)
 - and asanas [75](#), [79](#)
 - Balloon Belly [48–9](#)
 - Bee Breath [49–50](#)
 - Bunny Breath [51–2](#)
 - description of [15](#)
 - Elevator Breath [55–6](#)
 - mouth breathing [47](#)
 - nose breathing [47](#)
 - Open Mouth Breath [54](#)
 - and parasympathetic nervous system [45–7](#)
 - Progressive Relaxation [59–60](#)
 - Three-Part Breath [52–4](#)
 - Two-Four Part Breathing [58](#)
 - Ujjayi (Wave Breath) [50–1](#)
 - visual supports for [58](#)
- predictability *see* routine
- Progressive Relaxation [59–60](#)
- proprioceptive system [154–66](#)
- Puppy (Uttana Shishosana) [94–5](#), [154](#)
- Quinn, L. [26](#)
- Rag Doll (Uttanasana) [88–90](#), [153](#)
- Rama, S. [45](#)
- Reach to the Moon [188–9](#)
- relaxing asanas [80](#), [83–107](#)
- Resting Pose (Savasana) [104–6](#)
- Resting Pose (Savasana) with Deep Pressure [163](#)
- River [101–2](#)
- Rock [85–6](#), [160](#)
- Roller Coaster Twist [139–40](#)

routine

and asanas [79–80](#)

as teaching strategy [30](#)

Rule of Five [29](#)

rules for yoga [76](#)

safety [77](#)

Sanskrit
description of 16–17
savasana 82

schedules

as teaching strategy [30](#)

seated [76](#), [81](#)

seated and closing of practice [82](#)

seated forward folding poses [82](#)

Seated Mountain [180–1](#)

Seated Twist [174–5](#)

seated twisting poses [82](#)

Self-Hug (Both Sides) [100–1](#), [161](#), [189–90](#)

sensory integration dysfunction
Alternate Nostril Breathing 168
Bicycle 165–6
crossing the midline 163–6
description of 149–52
Down Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana) 162
Eagle(Garudasana) 161
eye-tracking exercises 166–8
Fetal Pose 162
proprioceptive system 154–66
Resting Pose (Savasana) with Deep Pressure 163
Rock 160
Self-Hug 161
Sneaky Peek 167–8
Sponge 160
Supine Twist 155–6
Tug-of-War 156–7
Twisted Triangle 158–9
vestibular system 153

sensory support 78
Shark (Shalabasana) 121
Shorter, S.M. 26
Shoulder Shrug (I Don't Know, Let It Go) 176–7
Show Me Ten 191–2
Smith, K.A. 151, 152
Sneaky Peek 167–8
social stories 29
space for asanas 78
Spider Legs Up the Wall (Viparita Karani) 103–4
spine awakening 81
Spinning Inward: Using Guided Imagery with Children for Learning, Creativity and Relaxation (Murdoch)
47
Sponge 98–9, 160
Squeeze Orange Juice 177–8
standing 76, 82
standing forward folding poses 82
Star 129–30
Streeter, C.C. 27

strategies for teaching yoga
 augmentative communication devices 30
 modeling 28
 positive reinforcement 31
 Rule of Five 29
 schedules and routines 30
 social stories 29
 video modeling 30–1
 visual supports 28, 29
sun salutations 81
Sun Salutation Sequence 116–17, 153
supine 76, 81
Supine Twist 155–6
supine twisting poses 82
sympathetic nervous system 44–5
 effects of over-stress 44–5
tactile and kinaesthetic teaching 35–6
Tap Tap Tap Your Body Parts 34–5
“Teaching Yoga in Urban elementary schools” (Harper) 25
Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism (Grandin) 63
Three-Part Breath 52–4
timing for asanas 80
Trace and Label My Body 35–6
Tree (Vrksasana) 123–4, 153
Triangle (Trikonasana) 118–19, 153, 154
Tug-of-War 156–7
Turtle (Kurmasana) 91–2
Twisted Triangle 158–9
twisting 77
Two-Four Part Breathing 58
Ujjayi (Wave Breath) 50–1
vestibular system 153
video modeling 30–1

visual supports

for communication skills 63–4

and pranayama 58

as strategy for teaching yoga 28, 29

Visualizing and Verbalizing (Bell) 63–4

visualization

and communication deficits [63–4](#)

and parasympathetic nervous system [46–7](#)

Progressive Relaxation [60](#)

use in yoga [16](#)

Volcano Breath [66–7](#)

Wake the Spider [192–3](#)

Warrior II (Virhabadrasana II) [130–2](#), [153](#)

yoga

and ADD/ADHD [26](#)

and adolescents [25–6](#)

and anxiety [25–7](#)

benefits of [25–7](#)

description of [15–17](#)

families practising [81](#)

rules for [76](#)

Yoga Memory Game [142–3](#)

Yogi Says [145–6](#)