

Yoga for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract: *In this paper we point out importance of the yoga practice for children and youth with disabilities. We indicate possibility of adapting certain asanas (body postures) and make them available for children and youth with disabilities, but with a full effect, i.e. with needed attention.*

We can conclude that benefits of yoga practice should be searched in balance of digestive, cardiovascular, skeletal and muscular systems. There were noticed positive changes in development of children: motor coordination is enhanced, increased body awareness and orientation are achieved. Yoga practice improves studying, creativity and imagination. Therefore yoga is more and more used to complement an individual's already established medical care, therapy program and exercise regime.

Key words: *yoga, children with disabilities, development, health.*

Introduction

Yoga appeared in India as the discipline of self-improvement. It involves training of the body and mind with the aim to achieve balance, i.e. unity and it has many health benefits. .

Yoga enables practitioners to be healthy, both physically and mentally, and able to reach their highest potential. *Asanas* (body postures) stimulate internal organs, nervous system and promote circulation in all the body's major organs and glands. Practice of yoga enhances concentration, mind and body relaxation and calmness.

Students who practice yoga have fewer disciplinary problems, higher grades and are more physically fit. They have greater level of self-respect and confidence.

Benefits of the yoga practice are specially important in children and youth with disabilities. Many physiotherapists, being informed about the effects of yoga practice, recommend it to children and youth with disabilities. Yoga appeared helpful for children with Down syndrome, cystic fibrosis, attention deficit and autism.

By practicing yoga they can refine their motor skills, gain physical elasticity, awareness of the muscle groups and movement, better articulation, improved eye contact and social skills. If the child has physical limitations, poses (*asanas*) can be adapted to his or her possibilities.

Yoga helps development of healthy habits in youth. They can keep that till the end of their lives. The aim of this paper is to explain how yoga practice can contribute to the health of children and youth with disabilities.

Significance of yoga practice

In the present time, more and more people are resorting to yoga to find cure for chronic health problems and attain a peace of mind. They are also curious about knowing what exactly is yoga and what are included in it. Although yoga involves physical postures (*asanas*), it is much beyond that. Yoga is whole system that includes "union of mind, body and spirit". Yoga as a discipline helps practitioner to gain the balance between body and mind, leading him/her towards the expansion of awareness. Yoga methodology includes: *yama* and *niyama* (ethical and philosophical part) *asanas* (body postures), *pranayama* (techniques of the energy control through

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breathing), *pratyahara* (awareness about sensory impressions), meditation, concentration and achievement of the higher states of consciousness. Yoga practice is associated with a healthy lifestyle with a balanced approach to life.

Health benefits for children and youth with disabilities

Each pose (*asana*) can be modified or adapted to meet the needs of the student. *Asanas* can be performed while seated in a chair or wheelchair. The “Chair Yoga” was developed for individuals with: arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis and consequences of stroke.

Yoga practice influences the whole person. It is suggested for alleviation of anxiety, mild forms of depression, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder and stress-related medical illnesses.

Yoga is used to complement already established medical care, therapy program and exercise regime. In addition, yoga helps in:

digestive system - as the bending and stretching poses stimulate the abdominal organs; in healing cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary systems (heart and lungs) - as the more active poses increase heart rate and lung capacity through aerobic activity; lymphatic system (important components of immune system). We shouldn't forget importance of active interaction among the lungs, diaphragm and thorax. Practitioners mostly stress out importance of yoga practice for the health of skeletal and muscular systems, achievement of extensibility and vitality of the muscular system.

In children and youth with disabilities, yoga practice has developmental benefits:

- 1) Enhancement of motor coordination
- 2) Increased body awareness and orientation
- 3) Developed concentration
- 4) Improved learning skills, creativity and imagination.

Yoga practice can give both preventive and therapeutic benefits. According to the literature, many health benefits are the following:

- 1) improves flexibility and muscle joint mobility;
- 2) strengthens, tones, and builds muscles;
- 3) corrects posture;
- 4) strengthens the spine;
- 5) eases back pain;
- 6) improves muscular-skeletal conditions such as bad knees, tight shoulders and neck, swayback and scoliosis;
- 7) increases stamina;
- 8) creates balance and grace;
- 9) stimulates the glands of the endocrine system;
- 10) improves digestion and elimination;
- 11) increases circulation;
- 12) improves heart conditions;
- 13) improves breathing disorders;
- 14) boosts immune response;
- 15) decreases cholesterol and blood sugar levels; and
- 16) encourages weight normalization.

Yoga practice is connected with increased body awareness, overcoming stress, stretching the muscles, relaxation of the mind and body, centered attention, sharpened concentration.

Different studies show significance of yoga practice as help in overcoming arthritis, arteriosclerosis, chronic fatigue, diabetes, asthma and obesity.

We should bare in mind that children with disabilities have the same needs as the other children: the need to be accepted, respected, to feel confident, to have friends, to play and be concentrated. It was noted that children with disabilities who practice yoga study better, they are emotionally more opened and they express greater need for company.

Those who work with children understand that there are no two children who are alike. This is important to keep in mind when giving yoga classes to the children with disabilities. Holistic approach in yoga allows us to approach every child in a unique manner.

It is the best to think about child with all his/her needs and potentials. The disability is one of many aspects of the child's personality and does not define who he/she really is, what he/she is capable of achieving. It is good that parents or caregivers can understand yoga as one more possibility that can complement the support that maybe child already has from the family and specialists.

It is best for persons with disabilities or with chronic alignments to practice yoga with certified yoga therapists or certified yoga instructors with experience and background knowledge in teaching children and youth with disabilities.

In a yoga class for individuals with disabilities, yoga poses (*asanas*) are modified or adapted, and may be performed with the instructor's active assistance as needed. Although the instructor assists the child in getting into and out of a posture, one should keep in mind that the child is still "doing the exercises". Yoga instructors should know that children with disabilities should have only individual classes in the beginning, then progress to group classes when the child is ready.

Before the very first yoga session with a student, certified yoga instructor needs to ask parents or caregivers about existing medical findings, recommendation from the child's medical doctor, approval of the parent or caregiver and after examination he/she determines the level of spasticity, hypertonicity or hypotonicity of the muscles, i.e. current strength of the person with disabilities, endurance and physical challenges. An interview with the student's parent or guardian is helpful in getting information on any medications that the student is currently taking, or recently stopped taking. This may affect the student's physical, mental and emotional states. Certain medications may make it unsafe to let the student do inversion poses (*asanas*). Therefore, certified yoga instructor should:

Ask for the written opinion or consultation with the child's medical doctor (physiotherapist); explains details of different postures (*asanas*) that student can perform and gets approval from the doctor and parents or guardian to start with the program of exercises.

Knowledge of other medical conditions prepares the instructor to prepare himself/herself in appropriate manner. Information about a student's diet is also helpful.

When designing an appropriate yoga session for the student, the personality, behavior, and attention span of the student should be taken into consideration. If a student is agitated, hyperactive or easily distracted, the instructor may have the student spend less time in each *asana* and more time doing *pranayama* and relaxation with music. They should choose body postures (*asanas*) that build focus and concentration, and are calming at the same time. Making a game or a storytelling activity incorporating the body postures (*asanas*) keeps the student active and involved in the yoga session. Yoga instructor should be creative with each session, while adhering to the main structure of the class. If an instructor is leading a group class (45-60 minutes), he or she is still expected to give equal time, i.e. attention, and/or assistance to each student.

Equipment for yoga class for persons with disabilities

Yoga practice does not require any accitional equipment. Yoga can be practiced anywhere, indoors or outdoors in nature. Typically, a yoga mat or rug is used. Latex-free and eco-friendly mats are also available. Having some facial tissue within arms reach comes in handy during breathing exercises when the individual needs to clear his/her nostrils. A light blanket can be used during deep relaxation.

Yoga postures (*asanas*) coordinate breath and movement and strengthen different parts of the body. Practicing yoga postures (*asanas*) is the ideal complement to other forms of exercise, especially running, cycling and strength training, as the postures systematically work all the major muscle groups, including muscles of the feet, legs, arms, stomach, back, buttocks, neck and shoulders. Yoga postures (*asanas*) vitalize major and minor muscle groups and organs as they simultaneously impart strength and increase flexibility and activity.

Although most poses (*asanas*) are not aerobic in nature, they do, in fact, send oxygen to the cells in the body by way of conscious deep breathing (*pranayama*) and sustained stretching and contraction of different muscle groups.

The wisdom of giving yoga class

Even the greatest yoga masters think of themselves as yoga students. There is no such thing as the perfect yoga pose and there is no end in learning. Yoga instructor teaches to their students two basic concepts: that everyone has a beautiful body (concept of accepting) and that development of each student goes in its own rhythm (principle of attaining personal daily maximum). One yoga pose (*asana*) may be comfortable for one person but may be challenging for somebody else (even if both people belong to the same family). When guardian practices yoga with a child, he/she should encourage him/her to “do his best” in the limits of the pleasant feelings. It goes for yoga instructors, as well. They should praise children’s efforts often. They should be encouraged to feel proud of themselves and their effort. Certified yoga instructor can make yoga pleasant, easy and amusing for children and youth with disabilities.

Allow the child to do the pose (*asana*) in a way that feels right for his body.

Don’t expect from student to do poses the way they look in yoga manuals. In the tree pose (*vrkasana*), foot can be put on the ankle, shin or thigh. If this is too challenging, you can rest the toes on the floor while the heel touches the ankle. Help your child get into poses as he/she works toward doing them by herself. For example, in downward dog pose, you can hold up your child’s hips. In the tree pose, you can hold up your child’s arms. Encourage your child to breathe deeply when holding a pose.

Try yoga in pairs. It appeared beneficial to experiment with the double tree pose (*vrkasana* in pair). Facing a mirror, both you and child do the tree pose with your child’s back body leaning against your front body (you can hold your child’s arms up for extra support or as help each other to balance). Look in the mirror and smile at each other with support and encouragement.

Encourage the child to work on poses (*asanas*) all by himself/herself: Encourage children to do poses next to the wall. Use the wall for balance. Help children to strengthen concentration (*tratak*) by placing a small object about 1-2 meters away in front of them so they have something to focus on while balancing. During the relaxation, offer to those who are afraid of closing the eyes to cover them with a towel or soft fabric, by themselves.

Set up a pleasant yoga atmosphere: To help the child get ready for yoga class, find a special place that is as neat as possible. Make sure the setting you choose is quiet and free from distractions. Before the yoga class, you can also play soft music, and dim the lights to set a peaceful tone.

Use a sticky mat: Mat should keep feet and hands from slipping. Mats are also a great way of helping child with disability to learn about space and boundaries.

Make sure to have a clear beginning and ending: It is recommended to start yoga session by closing the eyes, focusing on the breath and peace, at least for one minute. You can also start with a saying like “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me”. The end is just as important. After relaxation, thank to the children for spending the time together.

Conclusion

Yoga means union of the body, mind, and spirit. Yoga may be perceived as important help in developing physical, mental and emotional health of children and youth with disabilities. Through yoga, children learn how to relax, focus their energy and develop poise, strength, balance and flexibility, they learn how to develop mindfulness and self-awareness. Yoga practice can improve mental and motor skills in children with learning and developmental disabilities.

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