

Chapter 19

Special Yoga for Children and Young People With Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Special Yoga has been a provider of therapeutic yoga practices and training since its inception. The non-profit organization started with a yoga center in London, UK. The Special Yoga London center offered a therapeutic and nourishing, nurturing space for families of children with special needs who were welcomed with love, compassion, and totally nonjudgmentally with open arms. The work spread globally through the London-based trainings and the therapeutic yoga that was offered to children at the center and within education. This chapter will discuss my experience and understanding of the efficacy of yoga for children and young people, specifically those with cerebral palsy and autism and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The author shares some of the practices, benefits, and case studies of two separate research studies that were undertaken by Special Yoga for each population. The author also shares other case histories of children that they have worked with.

BACKGROUND

Special Yoga has been a provider of therapeutic yoga practices and training since its inception. The non-profit organization started with a yoga centre in London, U.K. The Special Yoga in the London centre offered a therapeutic and nourishing, nurturing space for families of children with special needs who were welcomed with love, compassion and totally non-judgmentally, with open arms. The work spread globally through the London based training and the therapeutic yoga that was offered to children at the centre and within education.

Author's note. This chapter is a personal account and will discuss the author's personal experience and understanding of the efficacy of yoga for children and young people, specifically those with cerebral palsy and autism and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The author will share

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some of the practices, benefits and case studies of two separate research studies that were undertaken by special yoga for each population. The author will also share other case histories of children that they have worked with.

MEETING THE CHILDREN

(Here, the author writes in the first person as this account was particularly meaningful to the author and a first-person description makes that evident).

I recently attended a Breath-Body-Mind training with Richard P. Brown MD (Psychiatrist, Columbia University) and Patricia L. Gerbarg MD (Psychiatrist, New York Medical College). One of the first things Dr. Brown shared as he opened the training was “Your presence matters”. This has always been the under- pinning of our work.

Working with these beautiful children is work of the heart and they teach us to truly open our hearts. I believe that children with special needs are our teachers (they can teach us so many things). I believe that these children have been brought here to show us the correct way of ‘being’. They embody unconditional love, the primary quality that is deeply needed in the world today.

Our mental state does matter significantly. As Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), says:

“Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values and your values become your destiny.”

It is said that 80 percent of communication is non-verbal. Our thoughts are a form of energetic communication. If for example, we are carrying judgments of how we think the children ‘should’ be or ‘should’ behave, or carry expectations of what we want to achieve from the sessions, we are not fully open-hearted to them. When we can meet them with the utmost humility, compassion, empathy (not sympathy), kindness and love, with no expectations, we create a powerful relational field in which the child can receive the benefits of these invaluable practices. Without the practitioner fully embodying these qualities the tools are unquestionably much less useful, and often in my experience may not be effective.

The relational field I refer to here is where two individuals meet to form a third field of conscious awareness. It is where the two fields become interconnected. “A relational field that maintains the qualities of warmth, mirroring, empathy, compassion, loving kindness, safety, and trust must be established by the practitioner/teacher with appropriate boundaries (spaciousness) and contact free from the intention of “producing a result” (Shea, 2007; Shaw, 2017). Using principles of neurobiology, we learn how to listen to, and interact with, another person through embodied awareness. The yoga practice of embodied listening allows us to ‘feel’ within ourselves, giving us a pathway of authentic communication. It invites deep listening and to trust our intuitive sense to guide us. Conscious empathetic embodied listening supports the facilitation of the fullest expression of others.

Breathing together is a beautiful, simple and profound pathway to create a healthy relational bond between the practitioner and the child. Yoga practice starts with the breath and the impact of the use of correct breathing patterns has well been recorded. Due to its relationship with the nervous system the breath is very powerful and an essential element of an authentic yoga practice. Conscious and regulated breathing is the simplest way to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system.

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