

A calming influence

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Headnote

A **yoga** centre helping children with special needs has been achieving some impressively positive results, reports Catherine Cooper

SUMMARY

Yoga can improve the lives of children with special needs and their parents, say its advocates.

Keywords

Yoga . Special needs . Training . Relaxation . Breathing . Muscle tone

'Any child can benefit from **yoga**,' says Jo Manuel, founder of The Special **Yoga** Centre in north London. Ms Manuel has been providing **yoga** therapy sessions for children with a variety of special needs, from autism to **cerebral palsy**, since 2001. She says: 'With **yoga** you are speaking to a child's soul, so whatever their mental or physical capacity or incapacity they can still benefit.'

Ms Manuel has been practising **yoga** since she was a teenager, training as a **yoga** teacher in 1998. In 2001 she went to the United States for basic training in **yoga** for children with special needs. She says: 'Somehow bringing **yoga** to these children seemed to make perfect sense.'

Ms Manuel and her 12 colleagues see around 500 children per week at the London centre and in schools. Other **yoga** therapists, having trained with Ms Manuel, see hundreds more around the UK.

The programme for each child is different, says Ms Manuel. Obviously a child with physical disabilities will have different needs to those with learning difficulties or autism. Even a child who seems unable to communicate can be calmed by yogic breathing. If I sit close to a child, I can breathe slowly and rhythmically, and they will pick up on that. Similarly, chanting can be effective.'

Physical **yoga** benefits can be related to stretching, strengthening, balancing and generally complementing a child's physical therapy. Ms Manuel adds: 'The breathing and holistic aspect of **yoga** is always important, whatever a child's ability and however young. I have practised **yoga** with babies as young as six weeks.'

'When parents first bring their children to me they are often understandably anxious and stressed. They will tell me their child "cannot do this or that", as that is what they have been told.'

'We do not work miracles, but we often find that a child is capable of much more than the parents or medical team initially believe.'

Ms Manuel likes to encourage parents to take up **yoga** too. 'It depends on the person, of course, but for many it can help them feel calmer and less anxious, which will have an effect on their child.'

Emma Sutton, from Kensal Rise in north London, brought her daughter India to Ms Manuel in 2004 when she was ten months old. India has a rare condition called hypopituitarism and had hypoglycaemia at birth, which resulted in acute brain damage. She is visually impaired and cannot walk, talk, crawl, feed herself or speak.

Ms Sutton says: 'The beginning of India's life was incredibly hard, overwhelming. There is so much negativity. You are constantly being told what your child will not be able to do, never what they might achieve.'

'I searched for positive therapies that we could do together. I was fortunate enough to meet Jo and started the **yoga** programme for the special child. At first India was passive, floppy and absent. We gradually built up the sessions and she slowly became stronger and more alive.'

The doctors had told Ms Sutton that India would probably not be able to hold her head up and almost definitely would not sit up. 'Not only does she hold her head up proudly, but she now sits unaided and even does a wonderful cobra,' says Ms Sutton. 'I truly believe that **yoga** has

played a vital part in her development, both physically and mentally. It makes me feel I am doing something positive for her. It gives us something to share that we both love.'

Ms Manuel helps several children with **cerebral palsy**, one of whom is 13-year-old Jack from Pulborough, West Sussex. Jack is completely reliant on equipment to support his life and uses eye pointing to communicate. She started working with him before she set up the **yoga** centre.

Jack's mother Karita says: 'Jack had never cared much for his mainstream physiotherapy and in the past spent most of his sessions angry and crying.

'It was a joy to listen to Jo asking Jack for his permission to touch each part of his body before she started to work on it and then explain what she was going to help him do, before going into the stretches and postures. It was beautiful to watch the enabling of movement, using her own body, breath and voice as a nudge to encourage Jack to go with her.'

Jack took to **yoga** and Jo straight away, and it was a relief to his mother to see a more relaxed child emerge, with a better understanding of how his body worked and how he could use breathing to help calm himself.

His speech therapist also commented on how much more vocal he had become and how positive and determined he was in using other aids to communicate.

Many children with **cerebral palsy** and some other disabilities have trouble co-ordinating inhalation and exhalation. Yogic breathing can help with this, says Ms Manuel. It can also promote a stronger immune system and even digestive health by improving muscle tone. In Jack's case it has helped with his trunk and head control, which is vital for using his communication aid.

Yoga therapy sessions cost £35 per hour, but The Special **Yoga** Centre is a charity and no one is ever turned away. 'We receive grants from organisations such as Children in Need and Help a London Child, but like all charities we could always do with more,' Ms Manuel says.

'Having a child with disabilities can put a great strain on relationships, and many of my clients are single mothers who have to care for a child with special needs 24 hours a day, sometimes with little financial or actual support. I am not going to deny her or her child the help they need because she cannot afford it.'

Since 2004 Ms Manuel has trained around 150 new therapists. Some of these are parents of children with special needs whom she has helped. Nathan Roth from Hanwell, west London, whose daughter, ten-year-old Eyar, has **cerebral palsy** and has been working with Ms Manuel for eight years.

Mr Roth says: '**Yoga** makes Eyar more flexible and easier to handle. It calms her down. Through **yoga** her breathing has improved significantly, which is the basis for improved speech. It has also helped her stability, increased her muscle tone and developed her co-ordination.

'I took the **yoga** for the special child training course and have been working with Eyar daily for two years. Our pediatrician and physiotherapists are amazed by her progress. She is doing things they never thought would be possible' NS

Sidebar

Jo Manuel says the breathing and holistic aspect of **yoga** is always important

'IT WAS SUCH A RELIEF TO WITNESS THE EMERGENCE OF A MORE RELAXED CHILD'

Advantages of **yoga**

- * Brings about relaxation.
- * Improves muscle tone.
- * Helps with balance.
- * Improves breathing co-ordination.

For further information go to www.specialyoga.org.uk

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