

Breathing some serenity into special-needs kids' lives // Yoga breaks down barriers to learning and coping, say parents. Series: kidyoga.1204: [1 Edition]
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The quality of life of special-needs children is sometimes compromised when vast amounts of time and energy are spent managing behavior, said Michelle Demes, a yoga therapist at Yoga for the Special Child, in Chicago. Demes was introduced to yoga two years ago when she came to the center seeking help for her autistic daughter. Betsy Desimone, director of rehabilitation services at Children's Hospital of Orange County, in Orange, is integrating yoga into the physical, occupational and speech-therapy programs of some patients. With their doctors' consent, children with cancer, brain and spinal- cord injuries have participated in yoga at CHOC.

Some parents and professionals are looking to yoga as a healthy practice for children with a variety of special needs: mental, emotional and physical. They say it helps break through barriers to concentration, learning and communicating.

The quality of life of special-needs children is sometimes compromised when vast amounts of time and energy are spent managing behavior, said Michelle Demes, a yoga therapist at Yoga for the Special Child, in Chicago. Demes was introduced to yoga two years ago when she came to the center seeking help for her autistic daughter. "It was difficult at first," Demes said. She explained that for autistic children, getting in touch with their bodies is often extremely hard.

"Some sensory things are blocking them from accepting their environment," Demes said. "Yoga seems to be able to stimulate without causing more aggravation."

The results can include relaxation, concentration, understanding of emotions, heightened awareness and learning, Demes said. Yoga is helping improve the quality of life of children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, microcephaly, autism and attention deficit disorder, among other things, according to the Yoga for the Special Child Web site. "You can calm their nervous system ... you need that first before you can have mental ability," Demes said, acknowledging that big changes often occur over time.

Betsy Desimone, director of rehabilitation services at Children's Hospital of Orange County, in Orange, is integrating yoga into the physical, occupational and speech-therapy programs of some patients. With their doctors' consent, children with cancer, brain and spinal- cord injuries have participated in yoga at CHOC.

"This just becomes another approach in the repertoire," Desimone said. "It's not always medication that's going to make the difference."

A six-week yoga series will begin for CHOC patients in January. Several staff members have been trained in yoga instruction, and a physical therapist will begin a one-year training course in February.

"There's a lot of support from the physicians," Desimone said. "They see it as a huge benefit."

In New York, Alice Shulman takes her autistic daughter, 5-year-old Emma, to a yoga class for kids with special needs once a week.

"She can be with children in a way that's not as scary for her," Shulman said. "There's something about it that helps her calm down."

Shulman also likes the idea of offering exercise in a safe, noncompetitive environment. "They can go at their own pace and enjoy it," she said. "It's a very gentle way." At home, Emma will sometimes get into a pose she learned in class, "especially the dog," Shulman said. She plans to try some additional yoga poses at home with her daughter on a regular basis.

"I'm not saying this is a cure for autism," Shulman said. "But it's something that she gets benefit from."

(714) 796-3566 or dtalanian@ocregister.com

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