

# Can a child with special needs practice Yoga?

By [Stacey Chillemi](#)



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## Living With a Special Need

Growing up with special needs can be frustrating and very stressful. I know because I grew up with a special need. I developed epilepsy at the age of five years old and not only was it traumatic for me, but it was hard for my family to deal with as well.

Having a special need can affect your physical well-being, your emotions and your self-esteem, but the good news is that Yoga can teach you and your family ways to cope improving your strength, your health and you will quickly begin to view life in a way you probably would not think possible.

Yoga can transform your life and give new meaning to your existence. Not only can it help the person who has special needs, but also it can help the family members who yearn to see their loved one happy. It can help the family members by bringing joy to their life and giving them the opportunity to bond with their loved ones by participating in Yoga with them. Yoga can also teach family members coping skills so they can learn to cope with the stress and frustration resulting from having to see their loved one struggle and deal with their own personal obstacles.

## Everyone Benefits from Yoga

All kids can benefit from Yoga, but parents of special needs kids may find it challenging to include Yoga into the lives of their children. While medical or behavioral concerns can make it hard for some kids to participate with their siblings and peers, in many cases they can still take part in Yoga. Various Yoga moderations can be incorporated into their program depending on the child and their special needs. Certain Yoga poses can benefit specific conditions more than other yoga poses can, the yoga teacher will be able to determine the best Yoga poses and mediation techniques for your child.

## Find Yoga Programs That Tailor To Your Childs Needs

Enroll your child in a Yoga program that is tailored to meet their specific needs. Usually, Yoga for children with special needs will focus on basics in human movement—especially constant human movement. Activities of daily living, which include sitting, standing, relaxing, and stretching can be included in a user-friendly format to help children successfully increase gross motor skills. Kids Yoga is a safe and fun way for your child with special needs to get extra help handling the challenges that come into their lives. The physical and mental benefits of Yoga have proven to be helpful on many levels physically, emotionally, spiritually and educationally.

## Don't Give up

It can be frustrating at times for parents of kids with special needs to find the best activities for their child to participate in. Give your child a sufficient amount of time to adjust to Yoga. It takes time to learn all the different poses and meditations. Your child can do it and your child will definitely benefit from Yoga. Believe in them, encourage them and tell them you are proud of them. Your words of encouragement will go a long way.

## How YOGA Can Help Your Special Needs Child

1. **Down syndrome** - Yoga poses (asanas) help people with Down syndrome to stretch, tone and strengthen the entire body. Asanas benefit the internal organs and help to balance and rejuvenate the endocrine glands. Children with Down syndrome who practice Yoga stay slim and flexible, while those who do not practice Yoga tend to put on weight as they age. In combination with Yoga breathing exercises, which have a beneficial effect on the central nervous system, asanas help in the development of body awareness, concentration and memory. These are very important skills for any child with a developmental disability.

2. **Cerebral Palsy** - The practice of Yoga poses (asanas), followed by deep relaxation, can help significantly reduce high muscle tone, which is characteristic of most children with cerebral palsy. Holding an asana gives the muscles and tendons a relaxing stretch, releasing overall stress and tightness throughout the musculature and around the joints. Asanas relax the body, they also provide just enough resistance to exercise low muscle tone areas of the body. Asanas actually improve both high and low muscle tone problems in children with cerebral palsy.

Perhaps the most important aspect of asana practice for children with cerebral palsy is its ability to stretch and realign the spine. Asanas flex and twist the spine in all directions. This scientifically designed series of stretches and counter-stretches helps to create more space between the vertebrae and reduce pressure on the disks and nerves that branch out of the spine. Reducing the pressure on these radial nerves reduces the release of muscular tension throughout the body and enhances overall nerve function. As a result, the child is able to develop a greater range of movement and coordination, as well as greater independence.

3. **Microcephaly** - The term microcephaly simply means "*small head.*" It term is used when the head size is less than that of 97% to 99% of the population. In most cases, microcephaly reflects a reduction in the size of the brain. The effects of microcephaly vary considerably, from very mild to profound developmental delays. Microcephaly may be present at birth (congenital) or it may develop in the first few years of life. Some children with microcephaly have multiple diagnoses, such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, visual impairment and feeding difficulties.

#### **How Yoga Can Help:**

Yoga poses (asanas) provide a gentle, yet effective way to stimulate blood circulation and tone the internal organs, which is vital for those who are less physically active. Yoga breathing exercises (pranayama) increase oxygenation of the blood, which strengthens the immune system and aids in cell repair. By oxygenating the blood, pranayama also sends more oxygen to the brain, which helps to improve nerve function and strengthen the central nervous system. Yoga helps children with microcephaly develop greater body awareness and enhanced cognitive and motor skills.

4. **Autism** - The first step in teaching Yoga to a kid with autism is to establish a strong bond with the child. To do this the Yoga teacher will need to enter the world that the child lives in. They will have to relate to the child on his or her own level. Once accomplished, the Yoga trainer will be able to gain the child's complete confidence. Massage, music, dance, rhymes and stories are some of the different techniques that the Yoga trainer can use to connect with the child. As the child and the Yoga trainer slowly build up a foundation of trust and friendship, the Yoga teacher can start some teaching the child some of the Yoga poses (asanas) and breathing exercises (pranayama) that will help to bring the child with autism out of his or her shell and into the world of social interaction. After the student becomes familiar with these introductory poses, the Yoga trainer may add some more asanas little by little to the routine, as well as deep relaxation techniques. The combination of asanas, pranayama and deep relaxation will strengthen the child's nervous system, increase overall health and aid the development of body awareness and concentration. By creating optimal physiological and psychological integrity, Yoga therapy helps children with autism gain new motor, communication and social skills.
5. **ADD** - Attention Deficit Disorder is a behavioral disorder formally defined as a major deficiency in age-appropriate attention, impulse control and rule-governed behavior, which is easy to detect in early childhood years.

#### **Symptoms Include:**

- ✓ Difficulty in following instructions
- ✓ Speaking or acting before one thinks
- ✓ Poor organizational skills
- ✓ Restlessness
- ✓ Impatience
- ✓ Forgetfulness
- ✓ Low self-esteem
- ✓ Hyperactivity

Some experts believe that attention deficit disorder is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, but there is no documented proof that this is actually the case. The incidence of attention deficit disorder varies from three to 15 percent for school age population, depending on the severity of the diagnosis.

Sometimes referred to as ADD or ADD/WO (**attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity**), children with this disorder generally do not perform well in school, though most of them test at average or above average intelligence.

First, it is important for the Yoga trainer to create a strong bond with the child, in order to gain the child's trust and attention. Then the next step is to focus on the kids breathing since breathing is connected to the emotions. Teaching yoga-breathing exercises (pranayama) is a great way to start working with children who have attention deficit disorder.

In addition to its positive effect on connecting with the child and helping them connect with their emotions, pranayama also stimulates vital areas of the brain and central nervous system. Children practicing Yoga regularly with attention deficit disorder develop greater body awareness, emotional balance and concentration increasing their capacity for schoolwork and creative play. As overall performance improves, so does their self-esteem and self-confidence.

- 6. ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)** - is a behavioral disorder formally defined as a significant deficiency in age-appropriate attention, impulse control and rule-governed behavior, which manifests in early childhood.

#### **Symptoms Include:**

- ✓ Hyperactivity
- ✓ Speaking or acting before one thinks
- ✓ Difficulty in following instructions
- ✓ Poor organizational skills
- ✓ Restlessness
- ✓ Impatience
- ✓ Forgetfulness
- ✓ Low self-esteem
- ✓ Poor social skills

Children with ADHD find it difficult to slow down, even when their body wants to slow down and relax. They appear to look clumsy and uncoordinated to other individuals. Some experts believe that ADHD is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, but there is no documented proof that this is actually the case.

The incidence of ADHD varies from three to 15 percent for school age population, depending on the strictness of the diagnosis. Sometimes referred to as ADD/WH or "*minimal brain dysfunction*," children with ADHD generally do not perform well in school, though most of them test at average or above average intelligence. Currently, more than four million children in the U.S. diagnosed with ADD/ADHD.

#### ***There are many factors contributing to this behavioral disorder:***

- ✓ TV violence
- ✓ Poor nutrition
- ✓ Prenatal drug use by parents
- ✓ Sensory overload
- ✓ Pollution
- ✓ Crowding
- ✓ The breakdown of the family structure

#### **How Yoga Can Help:**

Yoga uses physical postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama) and deep relaxation techniques to calm and strengthen the central nervous system. It helps children and teenagers with ADHD get in touch with their bodies in a relaxed and non-competitive way. Children with ADHD often experience learning delays due to their hyperactivity and distractibility. Yoga teachers will usually find it

easiest to introduce pranayama and a few asanas to these children before teaching them an entire Yoga routine. This will help them to relax so they are able to follow the Yoga teacher's instructions.

Alternate nostril breathing will be of particular benefit to children with ADHD because of its ability to calm the mind and to balance the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Teaching special needs children proper respiration is an important aspect of their Yoga training. Once the child with ADHD is able to follow instructions, the Yoga teacher can slowly introduce more asanas and the deep relaxation to their Yoga routine.

- 7. Learning Disabilities** - Approximately 15-20% of the U.S. population have some form of learning disability, according to figures derived from the latest research conducted under the auspices of the National Institutes of Health. Learning disabilities hinder a person's ability to store, process or recall information. They can affect a child's ability to read, write, speak, or compute math, and often affect the student's ability to acquire socialization skills. Learning disabilities have distinct characteristics and are it is not the same as other diagnoses, such as mental retardation, autism, deafness, blindness and ADD/ADHD. Even though there is some overlapping of diagnoses with ADD/ADHD and other behavioral disorders, learning disabilities are different then the other diagnosis's mentioned above. The symptoms for learning disabilities are different for each child and occur at different periods in a child's life. Early diagnosis and appropriate intervention may help to prevent loss of self-esteem, school dropout and illiteracy.

#### **How Yoga Can Help:**

Yoga provides an effective therapeutic alternative for children with learning disabilities. Yoga breathing exercises (pranayama) stimulate the central nervous system and strengthen the immune system. In combination with Yoga poses (asanas) and deep relaxation, pranayama makes it possible for the child to develop body awareness, balance, memory and concentration. Students with **dyslexia** often receive special benefit from practicing the yogic eye exercises, which strengthen the optic nerve, relax facial muscles and stimulate various centers of the brain. These exercises improve the eyes' ability to focus and improve word recognition skills. Eye exercises are only one example of how Yoga can be modified to reduce specific learning problems. The primary goal for a child with a learning disability is to enhance all areas of a child's development.

These are just a few ways; yoga can help improve the quality of life for children who have special needs. Yoga can help every special needs child in some way, shape or form. Yoga is a phenomenal form of exercise that has numerous benefits for special needs children. What is nice is that parents and family members can practice yoga together with the special needs child. This will create a strong bond between them and they can learn a lot from each other. Another wonderful benefit from yoga is that they will be able to see life from a new positive light. The magic of Yoga will give you a happy, healthy and productive life. Life does not end because you have a special need. The best is yet to come. Let yoga show you how.

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