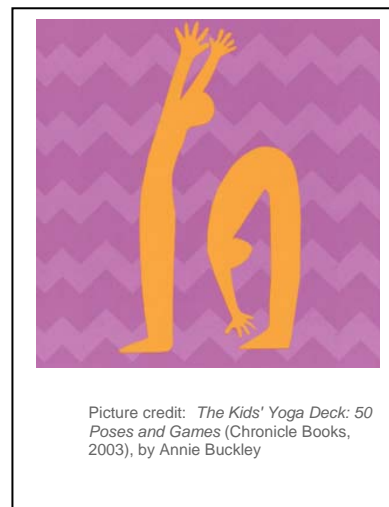


Beyond Breathing – The Benefits of Yoga on Children with ASD

Plus tips and resources for bringing a little practice to your home

Many practitioners have come to appreciate the profound effect that yoga has on children with ASD. Its natural capacity to integrate both the physical and emotional aspects of a person makes yoga an effective treatment option that can be part of a wider whole-child approach.

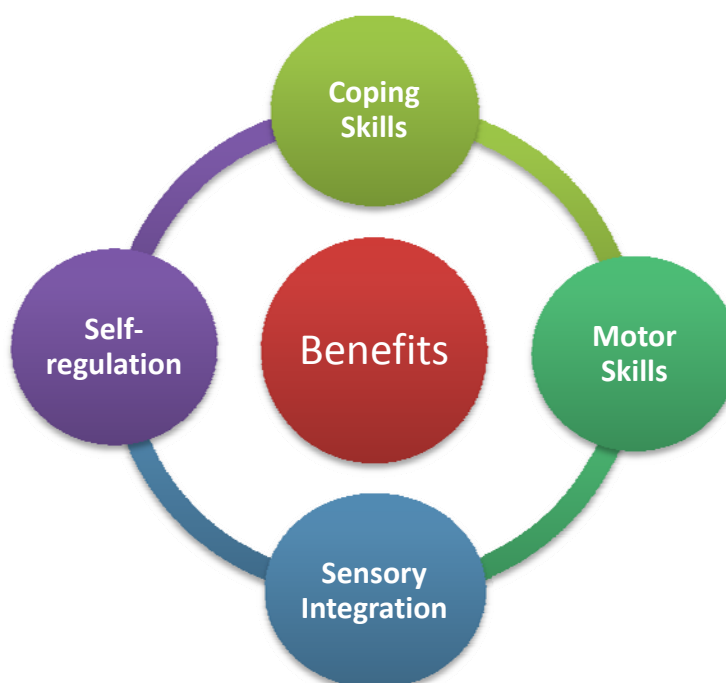
A central goal of Aspire’s yoga practice is to enable children to form a connection to themselves and to others in a safe, therapeutic environment. Yoga also provides children with an opportunity to learn and play in a setting that embraces their individuality. Yoga with children is fun and creative. Using the children’s creativity and imagination to makes the group fun AND enhances the therapeutic- effects on the children. As we all know, when children are having fun they sometimes don’t know they are learning something new.



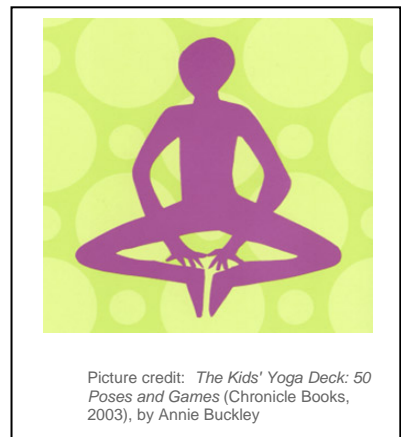
Four Main Benefits of Yoga

Children with ASD often times are unaware of where their bodies are in space (bumping into people/things), how they act when upset (loud voices, flailing body limbs) and how their words can impact others. Over time yoga can help children with ASD become more aware of these challenges.

Here is an overview of four of the most compelling benefits of yoga for children with ASD.



1. Development of **coping skills** – Yoga stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system which among other things calms the body when under stress. Helping children recognize their bodies feeling stress and calmness is an aspect of yoga participation that develops coping skills. Breathing techniques and yoga postures help them recognize and release tension in the body, making a state of relaxation attainable.
2. Increased **motor skills** – Moving our bodies during yoga postures tones muscles, enhances stability and balance, and improves coordination. This leads to a greater sense of control of the physical self in space and in relation to others, which greatly contributes to body awareness, social connections, and increased self-esteem.
3. Enhanced **self-regulation** – Learning self-control through breathing techniques, yoga postures and movement improves self-confidence. When children realize they are able to control their breathing, their body movements, and hold balance poses longer they develop a greater sense of confidence and self-control. This ability allows them to improve attention, control emotions and focus on the present moment.
4. The use of **sensory integration** – yoga creates a calming and therapeutic environment that encourages the use of the senses by stripping out the noise of life. By creating a calm exterior environment (i.e. dim lights, limited sounds/soothing music) internal sensory connection and focus improves in many children. Yoga involves multiple senses working together; for instance, the tactile sense of the bottom of a foot on the mat, the balancing that requires the vestibular sense to modify and adjust one’s position, and the vision that helps to focus on a still point and others.



These four aspects of yoga are *tools for life* and can greatly improve the functioning of children with ASD. It helps them to understand their breath, bodies, and movement which can influence their social development, self-concept and coping skills. In Aspire’s yoga groups we practice many of the basic postures (i.e. downward dog, cat) and breathing techniques (belly breath).

Try it for 15 minutes!

As you know children with ASD tend not to generalize skills learned in one environment to another so why not try yoga at home? This will also help them to generalize skills.

We all need to decompress and de-stress. But this is particularly important for children with ASD. Many children with ASD hold it together during the day only to fall apart at home. One of the best parts of practicing yoga, as millions of people have found, is that entire families and people of any age, background, and physical skill can participate. So no excuses! You and the whole family can join in. Even 15 minutes per day will provide many benefits. [*](#)

Poses and Getting Started

There are several good resources on the internet. The following links will help you get started. You'll find pictures of the postures and articles to read to inform you as you set up a 15 minute yoga practice for everyone in the family.

Helpful LINKS for practicing at home:

For yoga postures:	For breathing/relaxation:
<p>Parentables</p> <p>http://parentables.howstuffworks.com/slides/hows/health-wellness/10-family-friendly-yoga-poses-all-ages/</p> <p>Parents Magazine</p> <p>http://www.parents.com/fun/activities/indoor/yoga-for-kids/</p>	<p>WebMD</p> <p>http://fit.webmd.com/jr/recharge/article/belly-breathing-activity</p> <p>Kids Relaxation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • http://kidsrelaxation.com/?cat=11

More than the Breath

Yoga is the integration of the mind and body. This integration provides access to our emotions, intellect, senses, and spirituality . Through yoga practice we can reach a level of awareness and integration that might seem to be entirely beyond our grasp. This is true for children with ASD as well as adults.

I leave you with a quote from the renowned [MGH Benson Henry Mind Body Institute](#):

“Among both novices (eight weeks of practice) and long-time yogis (years of experience), *just 15 minutes* of yoga-like relaxation techniques was enough to trigger biochemical changes in the brains and cells of the downward doggers... At the same time, those 15 minutes of yoga practice also switched off some genes related to inflammation and other stress responses, the study authors found. These benefits help explain why a large review study from Germany linked yoga to lower rates of anxiety, fatigue, and depression.”

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MGH Aspire is a program of the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Massachusetts General Hospital for Children. For information on Aspire's yoga and other programs for individuals with a high cognitive autism spectrum disorder or a related profile, go to our website at MghAspire.org.

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