

Yoga for Kids with Autism

Benefits:

Increased social-communication skills

Studies have shown that yoga may be an effective way to increase imitation and cognitive skills, and to improve social-communicative behaviors in children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder). The ability to understand one's actions and imitate the actions of others is directly correlated to the development of social-communication skills. Yoga has been found to improve kids' abilities to imitate others and to make eye contact.

Improved awareness and expression of emotion

Breathing exercises have been shown to help students release difficult or uncomfortable emotions in a healthy and constructive way

Reduced anxiety

Due to difficulty with communication, people with autism often deal with heightened states of anxiety and are often stuck in fight/flight mode. The breathing exercises and focus on deep breath in yoga can be helpful to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and calm the nervous system, reducing anxiety.

Increased Body awareness

By identifying body parts through yoga and movement, kids can develop a greater sense of body awareness, which can be challenging for people with autism.

Positive Sense of Self

Yoga can help kids with autism improve self-confidence, self-esteem.

Improved Strength, Flexibility, Balance, and Coordination

Yoga helps all students improve their strength, flexibility, balance, and coordination.

Improved Ability to Focus and Concentrate

Yoga helps kids with autism learn to focus on their breath and tune out distracting sounds and activities. Yoga practice can help kids learn to focus on one thing at a time, regardless of the environment around them.

Why Yoga can be helpful:

The non-competition, being able to choose the level of the posture, and no need to speak during class, or even to look into anyone's eyes, along with the slow steady pace and deep breathing exercises can help a person with Autism feel more calm. The practice of meditation can help them know their thought patterns and understand themselves better. Finally, it can help people with Autism gain more agility and coordination, which can sometimes be a struggle.

Yoga helps people with autism a break from social anxiety, and a safe place to get used to being around other people. It can help people develop a sense of community and belonging when they may usually have difficulty creating social connections.

Tips for Teaching Students with Autism

Keep the room dimly lit.

People with autism are often sensitive to light, so it's best to keep the room dimly lit without bright lights that may be irritating.

Remove distractions.

Check the room for things that could be visually distracting, such as extra props or papers, and keep the room as simple and clean as possible.

Maintain a similar start to each class

Having consistency in parts of the class can be helpful, since most people with autism prefer consistency and routine.

Have any assistants be spread throughout the class

People with autism are usually excellent visual learners, so having assistants model postures near them can be helpful, especially in a big group.

Don't rush to correct

It's okay if students get the posture wrong. Don't rush to correct it right away. Often kids with autism have many people in their lives who are trying to "fix" them to get them to fit in better with society. Let yoga be a place where they can

be themselves and move as they like, as long as they are being safe and respectful of other's space.

Steer clear of hands on adjustments

Unexpected touch, even a pat on the back, can be disturbing to people with autism and may be unwelcome. If students don't get what you want them to do, say it another way or show it again, and then move on if they still don't get it. Don't worry as much about alignment as you might in other classes, and strive more to reduce student anxiety.

Make sure there's plenty of space

Make sure you have plenty of personal space between each student and each mat.

Take your time in your instruction

Cue a movement, then pause and wait for it to be done before introducing the next one. A string of fast moving commands can be difficult to process. Demonstrate and mirror postures when possible.

Include more Repetition. Repeat postures or short sequences

Repetition and familiarity can be comforting to people with autism. You may want to have a particular way you start class, and particular sequences that are done every time. Having more consistency in class can be helpful for someone with autism.

Include more grounding postures

Including postures, such as Warrior 1, Warrior 2, Chair, and other grounding postures, can be a way to help students feel more safe and less anxious in the class setting.

Focus on the process rather than the results

Yoga provides kids the opportunity to practice movement and mindfulness in a non-competitive, supportive environment. Because yoga is more focused on the process rather than specific results, kids can feel successful right away, simply by engaging in the activity, no matter their level of physical, social, or emotional ability.

Incorporate music and connect music with body movements

Music is an effective therapeutic tool for children with autism. It can stimulate both hemispheres of the brain at once, supporting cognitive ability and self-awareness while also encouraging communicative behavior and interaction with others. Combining movement and music with imagination can help connect awareness of the mind and body with the outside environment.

Sample Song

Crisscross apple sauce

Clap our hands together and sit up tall

Let's begin..take a deep breath in

Together (arms up)

Om (arms down)

Rub our hands together and sit up tall

Let's begin...take a deep breath in

Together (arms up)

Om (arms down)

Dalcroze Method

The Dalcroze method, also known as Dalcroze Eurhythmics, incorporates the basic elements of music—rhythm, melody, harmony—with body movement, to provide a multi-dimensional approach to music learning. Unlike most traditional methods, improvisation is a major component of the Dalcroze approach and one of its three aspects:

- Eurhythmics trains the body in rhythm and dynamics
- Solfege (sight singing) trains the ear, eye and voice in pitch, melody and harmony
- Improvisation brings all elements together according to the student's own invention, in movement, with voice, at an instrument. (Dalcroze Society of America)

Beyond musical intelligence, the Dalcroze approach engages and exercises several other aspects of intelligence. Musical games and experiments engage logical thinking. Eurhythmics appeals to kinesthetic and spatial types of learners. The social quality of music-making develops communication, feeling, and empathy.

Dalcroze is fun. It has the physicality of sports, aesthetic appeal of the arts, and is mentally challenging, for all ages.

The Dalcroze concept of improvisation is close to the nature of childhood play. Improvisation frees a child to relate directly and spontaneously to music within a range of musical knowledge. Improvising with full-body movement, singing or playing an instrument, helps the child internalize complex elements of rhythm, pitch, tone and dynamics without having to read a musical score. Through improvisation, composing becomes a personal and immediate creative act. A child enhances his creative spirit through improvisation and carries that spirit into his daily life.

Dalcroze-based activities include things such as singing with movement, quick reaction and follow exercises, movement improvisation, body percussion exercises, dances, and relaxation exercises. These activities have been shown to improve students' sense of agency, and change from being a passive outsider to being an active participant and leader. The change in agency was noticed in and outside the classroom. The study suggests that using music-and-movement offers possibilities for nonverbal embodied interaction and thereby opportunities for the development of students' agency and autonomy by developing their body and social skills. On a more general level, it acknowledges the significance of experience in learning music and in embodied interaction, where individuals interact and make sense of the world through nonverbal communication. In addition, studies highlight the strength of such education in supporting the development of the whole human being.

To see an example of Dalcroze method, go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yJk9eA_mL4