



YOGA BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

* *B. Nageshwar Rao* & ** *Dr. Pulla Lakshmi*,

* *Ph.D. Scholar, STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi.*

** *Assistant Professor, STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi*

Abstract:

Yoga is a Hindu philosophy that teaches people to control their body and mind in order to reach inner peace. Traditionally yoga was a way to unite the physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects of a person, thereby allowing them to reach a state of inner peace, or mindfulness. Yoga has three components: the emotional (breath), the physical (poses), and the spiritual (meditation). Yoga is one of the six schools of ancient Indian Philosophy that enables one to achieve higher levels of performance, helping manifest the potentials from within. Yoga is a great boon to civilized man having preventive, curative as well as rehabilitative potential. It is a spiritual science for the integrated and holistic development of physical, mental and spiritual aspects of our being. Yoga is a conventional long-established and time-tested art and therapeutic science that has positive contribution to make in maintenance of general well-being and happiness of all. "Yoga is a way of life", says Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, which can make a person rediscover his best in life. The practice is calming and provides a rare opportunity in our chaotic lives enabling one to focus inwards.

Key Words: *Yoga Sutras; Patanjali; special needs*

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Introduction:

According to Hathapradipika, a traditional Yoga text, Yoga is a safe and reliable practice that can be done at any age by anyone. Whether young, old or very old, sick or debilitated, one who is vigilant attains success in yoga, by means of practice, provided they abide to the rules and regulations properly). Yoga can also be performed by those with acute or chronic and painful disabilities, Yoga has never recognized any barriers of age, sex, religion or creed.

Children with special needs have various physical and mental disabilities which affect their mental attitude. They lack confidence and have a poor self-image. They develop feelings of inferiority from their awareness of their own abnormality and lack of success in all directions. They are frustrated due to the inability to do simple tasks, either unable to do it or do it with immense difficulty. Hence, they are highly tense and tire easily from physical exertion. The spine is stiff, thus producing much pain, which further limits movement, imbalances co-ordination of limbs. They also have difficulty in concentration.

Practice of Hatha Yoga begins by working with the body on a structural level, helping to align the spinal column, increase flexibility, and strengthen muscles, while internal organs are toned and rejuvenated; the digestive,



lymphatic, cardiovascular, and pulmonary systems are purified of toxins and waste matter; the nervous and endocrine systems are normalised and balanced and brain cells are nourished and refreshed. The end result is increased mental clarity, emotional stability and a greater sense of overall well-being.

Traditional Views:

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali reveals that we have at our disposal an excellent Yogic system which advocates a method of controlling the mind and the body. He depicts a crystallized picture of what constitutes the mind, its functions and impediments. Patanjali has also described the states of mind- *Mudha*, *Kshipta*, *Vikshipta*, *Ekagrata* and *Niruddha*– the dull, distracted, partially distracted, one pointed and controlled respectively. The mind of the disabled is classified under the *Mudha*, *Kshipta* or *Vikshipta* states.

Yoga for Special Children:

The children with disabilities who practice Yoga often surprise everyone with their quick mastery of various yoga techniques as well as tremendous improvement of basic motor, communicative and cognitive skills; they develop greater concentration, balance and control in their day-to-day activities. Yoga is beneficial to all but the only requirement is proper instruction and regular dedicated practice. It is highly recommended that the parents of the special children also enroll in with their children to experience the effects of Yoga for themselves. It also helps create better bonding and understanding between the parent and the child with special needs. We never really know what the outcome might be but we do know that yoga helps to recreate, refine and redefine the child, which lays foundation for positive improvement.

Yogic Techniques:

Basic *Jathis* and *Kriyas* may be given as a part of the warm up practices with *Surya Namaskar*. These helps improve the flexibility, create awareness of the body and enhances the energy circulation throughout the body.

ASANAS: ‘*Asanas*’ or ‘postures’ are psycho-physiological practices since they form the basis of Yoga’s mind-body integration activity. The greatest benefit from practicing asanas comes when we learn how to relax in a given pose resulting in a state of deep concentration in which mind is totally focused on a single object or on the incoming and outgoing breaths which helps harmonize mind and body.

Although the ‘differently-abled’ children might not be able to practice all of the poses, there are many postures that are especially beneficial to them. Even trying to attain a particular posture has the same benefit as attaining the final position. Depending upon the type of handicap, most of these postures can be modified for them. In fact, they can be taught to perform various postures without moving at all. There are instances of severely disabled persons who practice their yoga routine from their beds or wheelchairs. *Asanas* work on the muscles and the joints, creating space within the body’s structure to help increase circulation and improve flexibility. The physical functioning becomes more integrated and less stressful.

Demonstration of the asana is more effective than the explanation. (This holds good for all the Yogic Techniques). Postures are tailored as per the ability of the individual child.

Postures to improve blood flow to the head: Postures like *Viparitkarani*, (*topsy-turvy posture*) *Sarvangasana* (shoulder-stand), *Matsyasana* (fish posture), *Halasana* (plough posture), alternating with



standing postures such as *Padahastasana* (hand to foot posture), *Trikonasana* (triangle posture), *Padangushtasana* (clasping big toe like a hook) helps increasing blood flow to the head region and help activate the brain cells.

Postures to increase concentration: Balancing postures such as *Vrikshasana* (tree posture), *Ardhachakrasana* (half-wheel posture) and *Natarajasana* (posture of Lord Nataraja). Children have to be helped by the parent or the instructor to maintain these postures.

Postures to improve confidence and body stance: Back bending postures such as *Bhujangasana* (serpent posture), *Ushtrasana* (camel posture), *Chakrasana* (wheel posture), *Dhanurasana* (bow posture) that opens the shoulders and the chest region are useful for enhancing their vital capacity as well as improving their self confidence and their body stance.

Those affected by the impairment of the lower limbs can be taught the practice of hand balancing postures and they excel in that. *Simhasana* (lion posture) improves stammering, stuttering and some ear, nose and throat defects of the children. *Pavanamukta Asana* (wind-releasing posture) is an enjoyable practice too. Thus starting from simple movements and dynamic postures, they can be slowly led on to the static postures, the concept of *Sthira* and *Sukha*, thereby satisfied gradually.

PRANAYAMA: *Pranayama* controls and regulates breathing and is very beneficial for the disabled. This technique particularly improves the stamina, balance and strength, induces better sleep by the improved circulation of the vital energy. *Pranayama* helps in controlling epileptic-seizures which may be common among these children. Sounds of animals make it interesting for them to perform. *Kukkuriya Pranayama*, (dog panting breath) is an all time favorite with children. Practice of *Mathangi Pranayama*, *Vyagraha Pranayama* with *Cheeri* and *Sharabha Kriya* are also enjoyed. Others like *Kapalabhati* is also very useful (for the slow dull people and not the hyperactive ones). The *Shitali* and *Sitkari Pranayama* are useful for the people affected by the Down's syndrome as they have thickened tongue with difficulty in speech. *Nada Pranayama* such as *Pranava Pranayama* helps alleviate stress as well as sublimate suppressed and regressed emotions. *Mukha Bhastrika* is also known as the 'cleansing breath' helps remove old, stagnant air from the lungs and cleanses the bloodstream of excess carbon dioxide. Its practice also decreases response time and enhances memory and comprehension. Research also suggests that it is useful in combating learning disorders, A.D.D., and mental retardation. It may also be of value to train mentally retarded children who have prolonged Reaction Time.

Pranayama and *Asanas* work hand-in-hand to balance and integrate different physiological functions and to help dissolve emotional blockages and negative habitual patterns that can obstruct the flow of vital energy within the body.

SHATKARMAS: Some of the *Shatkarmas* such as *Trataka*, *Kapalabhati*, may be very useful for the developing concentration and also act as tranquillizers. The regular practices of *Kunjali Kriya* and *Dugda Neti* up to at least 40 days have been found to improve mental retardation. These children suffer from numerous eye related



problems and *Trataka* and the *Neti* are highly beneficial for such children along with a diet rich in Vitamin A and C.

MUDRAS: *Bhujangini Mudra* and *Brahma Mudra*, working with breath and sound vibration induces a sense of relaxation and reinvigorates the head and neck region reducing stress. *Hasta Mudras* and *Kaya Mudras* (*Yoga Mudra*, *Manduka Mudra*) helps drive away depression, bringing out a sense of joy and happiness. Avoid *Oli Mudras*, due to their powerful influence on the gonadal and other endocrine glands.

DHYANA: The practice of meditation in any form reduces the feeling of loneliness and promotes peace of mind. It is very beneficial for the physically disabled, but a difficult practice for the mentally challenged.

Yogic Relaxation: Unrealistic expectations at home and outside add powerful peer pressures on them driving them mad. *Shava Asana* (corpse posture) with *Kaya Kriya* and *Spanda-Nishpanda* relaxes all aspects of the musculoskeletal system thereby promoting complete relaxation and harmonisation of mind, body and emotions. Prayer and chanting of simple mantras makes them less aggressive, purifies the speech, calms the mind, and helps reduce distraction. Hence chanting the *Pranava Mantra AUM* can benefit these children. Helps maintaining their concentration and improves their alertness with rest and relaxation and aids them to get emotional and mental strength. Repetition of certain sound patterns can produce a calming and healing effect on the nervous system and psyche.

Benefits of Yoga for Special Children:

- Yoga helps coordinate the activities of mind, body and emotions
- Reduces distracted state of mind thereby building up focus and concentration
- Improves activities of day today living to the degree which could never otherwise be achieved
- Improves one's ability and helps one to rely on their own selves making them independent
- Helps develop social relationships, and reduces frequency of violent emotional upsets
- Reduces the negative traits and tendency to cause injuries to self and others
- Develops a positive outlook improving self-confidence, self-sufficiency and sociability
- Improves interpersonal relationships
- Improves their loco motor skills and psycho-motor coordination
- Reduces obesity
- Controls drooling
- Helps in disappearance of facial tics
- enhanced eye-hand coordination
- improved attention span
- Reduces hyperactivity
- Improves appetite and sleep
- Improves overall health
- Increases immunity
- Reduces aggression

- Reduces dependency of drugs
- Increases the efficiency of the nervous system and thus helps in their rehabilitation.

Here is a brief outline on how yoga can help some of the most common special needs conditions:

Cerebral palsy:

The key characteristic for children diagnosed with cerebral palsy is that they often have both high and low muscle tone which affects their movement. Learning a sequence of asanas builds greater strength, flexibility, and coordination in the limbs and body. Incorporating forward bends, backward bends, lateral bends, and twists the body moves in every direction working the bones, muscles, cartilage, and nerves within.

Of particular note is that yoga poses stretch and realign the spine, the telegraph pole of the body.

The Spinal Twist pose for example, will create space between the vertebrae, reduce pressure on the discs of cartilage, and relax the nerves that radiate out of the spine. This, in turn, releases muscular tension throughout the body and enhances overall nerve function. Over time, a child is able to develop an increased range of movement and coordination, meaning increased independence.

Down syndrome:

As yoga works holistically, the practice can improve strength, coordination, balance, respiration, eyesight, and many other key areas for children with Down syndrome.

The genetic condition categorizes with weak muscle tone, and since all the internal organs are themselves muscles, there is a tendency for children with Down syndrome to have weaker internal systems. Through regular practice of yoga this can be addressed and improved. This is one reason why yogic breathing exercises are so beneficial, as they not only improve the respiratory system but also strengthen the internal organs, improving general health and development.

Over time, these exercises will improve the central nervous system's functioning and impact motor and cognitive development—boosting body awareness, concentration, and memory to have a positive effect on the child's everyday life and learning abilities.

Joint dislocation is also quite commonly suffered by children with Down syndrome, so working on body strength and core strength is fundamental. Therefore, asanas such as plank pose are of great benefit in terms of strengthening the whole body.

Autism:

First and foremost with autism, yoga neutralizes and calms the sympathetic nervous system, bringing inner peacefulness. For the child, this means better sleep, better concentration, and better ability to self-regulate. Soft chanting and sitting postures at the beginning of class are important for children with autism; it supports their sensitivities to the external world by bringing inner balance so they can make the transition to do yoga, as well as other activities.



A key breathing technique for children with autism is deep belly breath. It is very beneficial as their natural breathing is often shallow and fast, and they are often mouth breathers. This means the quality of air is not the same as a child who breathes through the nose, which is designed to filter the air before it enters the lungs.

Building mutual trust and friendship with their yoga teachers is also a fantastic benefit for children with autism. A bond can be developed naturally in a yoga session precisely because the practice is free-flowing and flexible, rather than focused on achieving set positions or outcomes.

The teacher patiently enters the world of the children, meeting them on their own level rather than telling them their world is the wrong one.

ADD/ADHD - For children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the most valuable benefit of yoga is calming them down and improving their concentration and focus.

Again, yogic breathing exercises are highly important to this process. There is a fundamental link between the breath, the mind, and the emotions. All are intimately connected, so by bringing awareness to the breath and fostering calm, controlled breathing patterns, we automatically see a more peaceful and relaxed child.

Physically, yogic breathwork (pranayama) stimulates vital areas of the brain and central nervous system. Regular practice helps the child to relax and focus more and more, enabling the teacher to also bring in practice of deep relaxation, enhancing all the benefits of calmness, awareness, and concentration.

Deep relaxation is an essential part of yoga. In our modern lives of ongoing choice, stimulation, and distraction, real relaxation is often overlooked. This is where the spiritual element of yoga will first appear, as children are given an opportunity to be with their own silences and internal awareness.

For a child with ADD or ADHD, yoga practice can have significant results, increasing capacity for schoolwork and peaceful social interaction.

What makes yoga different?

It cannot be emphasized enough that a core aim of Sonia Sumar Method yoga practice is to promote a happy child. It is completely individually focused, and not condition focused. Often, as a child with special needs, physical needs are the primary focus and physical milestones become the measure of his/her health and identity—while essential tools for a happy life like self-esteem and self-acceptance are not considered.

With yoga, the emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of the child is given as much importance as the physical. This is what makes yoga so unique and life-affirming for children with special needs.

Conclusion:

Although modern medical approaches are being used to cure the disabilities, they have achieved only a small amount of success. In comparison to the treatment given to such children; yogic therapy has been found to be more beneficial, because the mode of action of many psychically active drugs is not fully clear.

Mostly major and minor tranquilizers, antidepressants and anti-convulsants are given to these children. It has been observed that many of these drugs have wide action and a considerable number of side effects, some bad and some very serious. Yoga is an experiential science (*Anubuthi Shastra*). The physiological, biochemical and

psychological benefits have been measured and well established. Research work is still in the toddler's level as far as the disabled and the disabilities are concerned. But it can be authentically said that these practices make them joyful and happy, making them jubilant, improving their quality of life, giving them a sense of well-being, apart from the other physical benefits. The sense of perception is tremendous in these children. They teach us a lot about the harsh realities of life. They live their life as God has given it to them; accepting it gracefully making no complaints about it. They are the Special Creations of the Divine's unfathomable play.

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